

# X-R-A-Y



# #9



**FEATURING !! Michael Seymour Blake !! Shannon McLeod !! Francine Witte !! Chris Campanioni !! Melissa Goode  
Carey Shook !! Patrick Reid !! Frankie McMillan !! Simon Henry Stein !! Caleb Echterling !! Christopher Gonzalez  
Edward Mullany !! Benjamin DeVos !! Michael Mungiello !! Zac Smith !! x-r-a-y-x-r-a-y-x-r-a-y-x-r-a-y-x-r-a-y-x-r-a-y**

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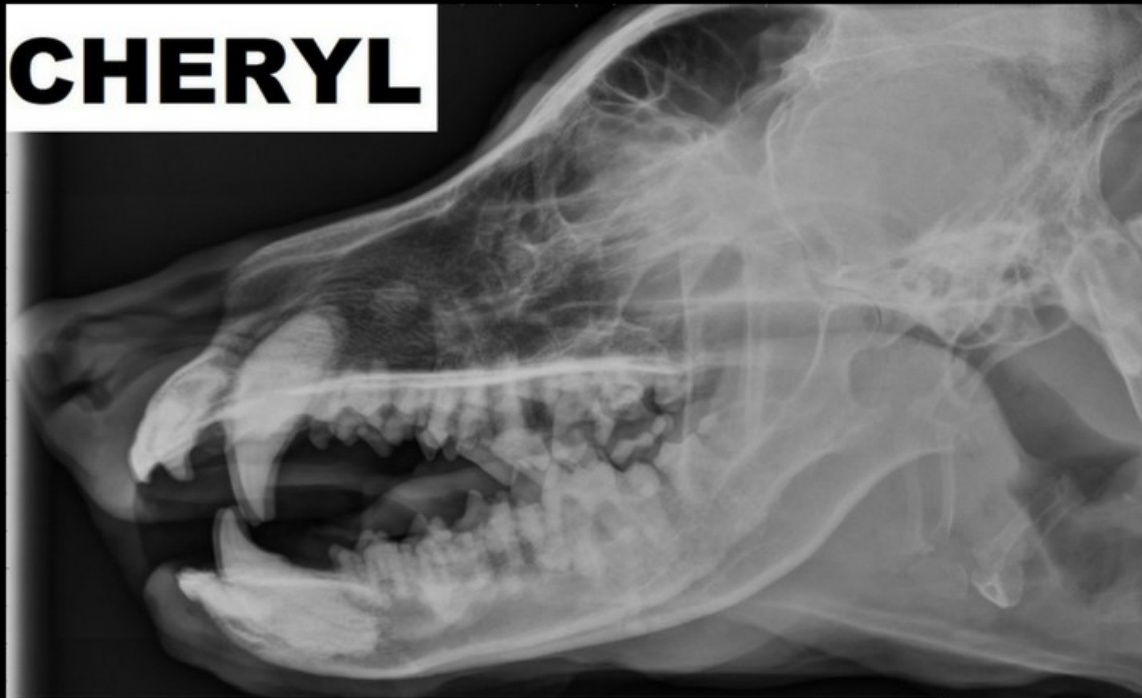
**FLIPPED**

**ZAC SMITH**

Brad flipped his car after hitting a fire hydrant, right downtown, right on Fifth Street, right near our old apartment, the prefurnished one with the broken window and the red wall and the kitchen that had bookshelves instead of cabinets, he was driving, something happened, who knows, he hit the hydrant and the car went upward, upward, from the height of the hydrant and the height of the curb, and the car veered upward and over the hydrant, and the hydrant's base cracked under the weight and pressure of the car and the angle of it, and the cracked base gave way so that the water could come out, and it came out, one huge spray into the underbelly of the car and out into the street below while car ascended into the air itself, at an angle, fast and strange, twisting, up and around, the body of the hydrant lifted, dislodged, entirely broken free, the water coming out as a geyser, up and out, the body of the hydrant rolling away, or more *tumbling* away, bouncing under the force of the impact, the force of the water, the car's wheels spun and the engine roared freely, the tired no longer struggling against the friction of the road but against nothing, free air, spinning madly, the engine just *bellowing* as the car veered upward, the clanging of the hydrant as loud as the screaming of the engine and the roar of the water, all three a unified cacophony on Fifth Street near our old apartment, right in front of the convenience store where people would gather to smoke and scratch off lottery tickets and ask for change and sell weed and catch up with the other people who lived on the block or around the corner, and who we would sometimes buy forties with and scratch off lottery tickets and talk about what the other people on the block were doing, who they were with, where they had been and what they planned on doing, who was leaving town, alone, or leaving with someone else, people we knew or didn't know or had only heard about, or people who we saw buying beer but who never hung out, and right next to the laundromat where someone died once in the bathroom, then they closed off the whole place with police tape, and everyone was crowded around trying to see who it was, if it was anyone we thought it would be, anyone we expected to die in a bathroom, or who always hung out in the laundromat for whatever reason, but it

was just some nobody that no one knew, it was right in front of that laundromat where he flipped the car, his foot still on the gas, the car in the air, the tires spinning, engine screaming, water spraying, hydrant rolling off, and when the car landed it was the loudest of everything, a real crashing down, the whole car coming down from the air with its full weight, just a huge crash, the windows crunching into a million tiny bits and the hood crumpling in and the engine letting up, finally, a big groan into nothing, but the water still spraying up and wide, less murky now that it was finished clearing out the old silty pipes in the neighborhood and pushing in fresh clean water, spraying all over the upside down car, all over the street, the curb, like the car, car half on the curb, half in the street, Brad pinned between the wheel and the seat and the roof of the car but able eventually to wrench himself out through the busted-out window, on his back, coming out like a baby covered in glass and blood and just staring at the water coming up and spraying out everywhere while the radio kept playing, louder than almost everything else except for the water spraying out and splashing down, louder than Brad muttering "shit, goddamn," over and over again, louder than him just muttering the same thing over and over again, wondering when the cops would come, whether anyone would call them, whether he would have to call them, wondering what would happen if they came, what would happen if they never came, all kinds of shit, over and over again, the same shit just over and over again in his head.

**CHERYL**



**MICHAEL SEYMOUR BLAKE**

There was a loud crash outside the apartment.

We were in bed talking about leaving the city just as we always had around ten p.m. every night for the past million years. I'd bring up a photo of some paradise with green grass and a nice big blue sky, no skyscrapers or office buildings in sight, and Terry would go, "Yep, that's the place for us," and then we'd settle back into our misery and forget all about it. I was delinquent with two of my loans, Terry took a pay cut to save her job, and we had a whopping fifty bucks in our savings account. We were sick of the city and sick of ourselves and sick of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, which is all we ate because who has the time and energy to make anything else?

"What was that," I said.

"Dunno," Terry said.

We stared at the wall for a minute. She nudged my ankle with her big toe.

"Guess I'll see what's going on," I said.

I looked through the cloudy peephole—flickering bulbs, slimy brown banister, a pile of smelly shoes outside 2B. I opened up to see a massive chunk of ceiling right in front of our door. Dust and debris everywhere.

"Holy shit, we got a roof out here."

Something moved in the pile of dust. I closed the door, leaving a crack open for peeking. The thing shook stuff off its fur. It was a damn coyote.

"We got a coyote too."

Terry shuffled over, all crusty-eyed. She glanced through the crack, then at me, then back through the crack.

"Wait, there's an actual coyote out there."

"Yeah."

She smiled. "Something's finally happening."

We named her Cheryl.

I built a home for her out of cardboard and reflectix and duct tape. She was a wild thing with green eyes and a burping problem. She burped like forty times a day. We fed her protein bars and baby formula, plus anything we could find in the neighborhood trash: pizza scraps, stale arepas, stuff in jars.

The landlord didn't allow cats let alone coyotes, so we decided to keep her permanently inside. I resented the landlord for being such a stereotypical landlord. If we were a day late with rent, he'd come by with his chest puffed out, eyes like black crescents. He wouldn't even say hello.

"Look at the hand," he'd say.

I'd play along and look. The hand was thick and tan. It would be open, palm up.

"What's wrong with the hand," he'd say.

"Let me get the checkbook."

"Answer me." The hand twitched.

"It's empty."

"That's right, empty. The hand hates being empty. Gets bored. Better give the hand something to hold, or the hand will busy itself by writing an eviction notice."

So we tried to toilet train Cheryl. We'd sit her on the bowl and say, "Go potty! Go potty, good girl!" She'd stare at us. "Come on, use that potty!" She'd stare. Then



we'd let her down and she'd pee on the floor.

Nights, Cheryl would sleep between our asses. It got harder than ever to leave for work in the morning. I just wanted to be home with the girls. Always. It was all I could think about. That, and the lioness.

I'd put up this image in my cubicle a while back—a lioness standing in a field of green grass with a cerulean sky up above. She had a desperate look in her eyes. Her lean muscles were covered in glistening, flaxen fur. Whenever my boss yelled at me for something, I stared at the lioness in a trance. Nodded and stared, unphased. Yes, *I'm sorry. Won't happen again. You're right, I am a waste.*

You learn these tricks after twelve years in data entry.

A week passed. There was a knock at the door. We were in bed with a burping coyote between our asses, which made things a little more bearable.

It was the landlord.

"Roof came down," he said.

I looked at the pile of roof sitting in a sunbeam. We'd just been walking over it.

"Whoa, crazy," I said.

"I have some people coming today, so don't bother complaining about it."

Cheryl came to the door. I tried to kick her away, but she bit my ankle.

"Get that thing out of here, no dogs allowed," said the landlord.

"Oh, her? She's a coyote."

The hand twitched. Cheryl growled.

"Pretty sure that's not allowed either. I'll get back to you." He squinted at Cheryl. "Don't get comfortable," he said.

I shut the door and thought about the lioness.

Next day, I let the cleanup crew in the building. Four sad looking guys in oversized overalls. "We're here to fix a ceiling," one of them said.

They brought a ladder to the top floor, scuffing up every wall they passed. After setting up the ladder, some brooms, spackle, paint buckets, brushes and stuff, they left, taping a note to the front door that read, '*Back in five days.*'

I went downstairs to get the mail and ran into 1B. We nodded at each other. She had the desperate lioness look, just like the rest of us. On my way back up, I saw a butterfly hanging out on the bannister. Bright yellow with tiny black spots. It lit up the hallway. I tried to save it, but it fluttered out of reach.

As I stepped back into our apartment, I heard a resounding *thwack* downstairs. 1B hated insects.

Terry was at the store getting some paper plates. Our sink was full of dishes, and neither one of us was going to clean them. We were happier now, but that last bit of lassitude clung to us like a bug to wet tile. I cornered Cheryl in the bathroom.

"No more going on the floor. Use the toilet like a normal person."

Cheryl peed on my feet while maintaining eye contact with me. I let her out, and stood in the warm urine thinking about the lioness.

When Terry got back, we all choked down some peanut butter and jellys.

Someone knocked on the door.

It was the landlord.

"Coyote's gotta go. You have until tomorrow night."

"That's not a lot of time to arrange something."

"Tomorrow night, or the hand will start writing that eviction notice." The hand twitched. "And get some air fresheners or something in here. Smells like hell."

"All right."

I shut the door and spied through the peephole. The landlord went upstairs and started inspecting the ladder. He peered up at the roof, mumbling.

I curled up on the floor, head resting on Terry's crossed ankles. "We need something to happen again," she said.

"Nothing's gonna happen."

"Then maybe we need to make something happen."

But we couldn't think of anything.

Cheryl burped.

The next night I got home from work and realized the ladder was gone, but the hole was still there. I went to investigate. Turned out the ladder wasn't gone, just knocked over. I lifted it upright and positioned it under the hole. Then I thought, "Hell, I'm gonna climb this thing."

And I did.

I climbed right up. I was heading towards the sun, but it was eight p.m. I popped my head through the dusty, crumbling roof and was met with a fresh breeze carrying the scents of soil and sage and summer. No offices or busted up apartment buildings in sight, just hills and grasses of all different kinds and lengths in shades of greens and golds. I ran my hand over some. My fingertips tingled. A yellow butterfly landed

on my chest, did a little spin, and flew away.

Paradise.

"I think we can make something happen," I yelled, bursting through the door.

I told Terry about the impossible world on the roof. We went to the grocery store and bought a few boxes of cherry Go-Gurt, fruit, water, and a big thing of trail mix, then I stuffed Cheryl under my arm and up we went.

We hoisted ourselves onto the grasslands. Cheryl ran circles around us, tongue wagging from her mouth. I picked a clover and handed it to Terry. She ran her fingers through the white, spikey flowers. Cheryl growled at something fifty feet away in a cluster of foxtails. We went over.

It was the landlord.

He was all eaten up, stomach torn wide open, bloody loafers resting in the grass. The hand sat separated off to the right, palm up.

"What could have done that?" Terry said.

"Don't know," I said. But looking at the landlord's remains, I did know. "We won't survive long here."

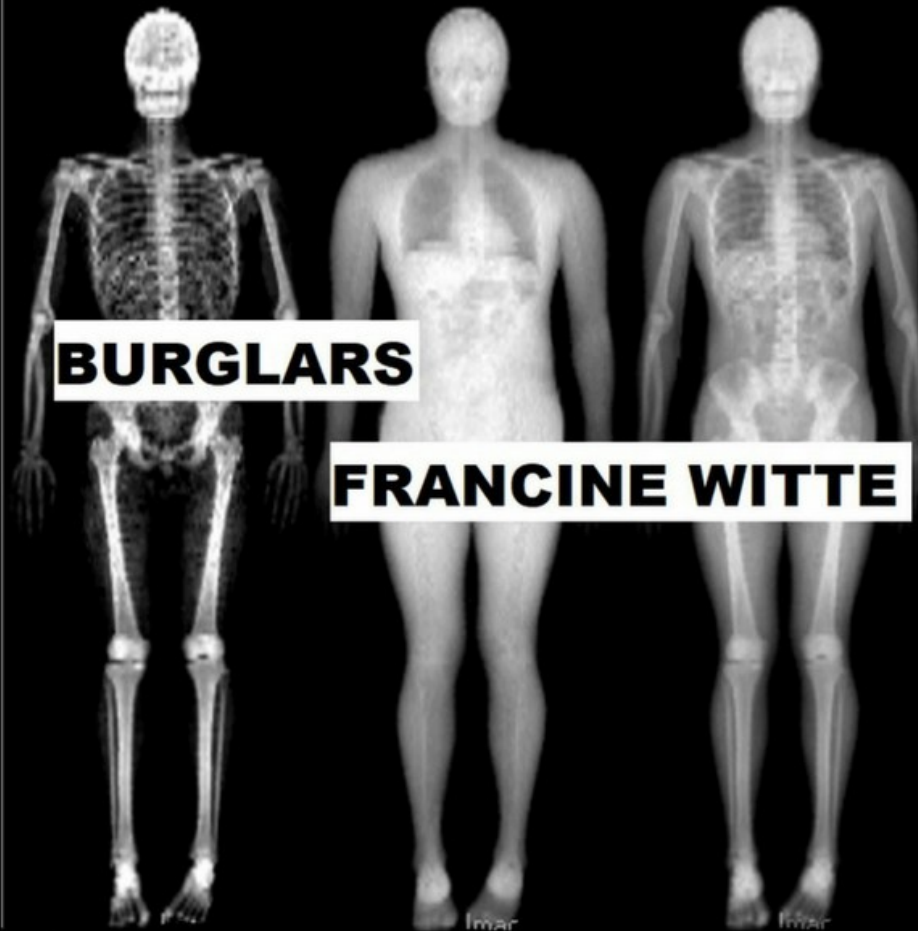
"Maybe not, but I don't want to go back." She tore open a Go-Gurt and started slurping it down.

I launched a defiant burp at the sky and Terry responded with a monster burp of her own, cherry yogurt dripping from her lips.

Cheryl trotted ahead and we followed. We could hear hammering and voices behind us. They must have been fixing the roof. Goodbye city, goodbye data entry, goodbye everything.

Cawing black birds flew in a V overhead. A cool breeze made the cream-colored shrubs dance and whisper. Silhouettes crept across the horizon. The lioness was waiting out there. We'd have to deal with her when the time came, but first we needed to find shelter. Terry grabbed my hand. It felt good to walk in the sun with my family, felt good to move, felt good to know something was happening.

We followed Cheryl towards some trees in the distance, all of us panting in the wonderful heat.



**BURGLARS**

**FRANCINE WITTE**

I used to wish my parents were burglars. That would have been more honest.

Instead, we had to live in a shadow. It looked like a house, but it was a shadow. All dark and hushed and Daddy about to lose it anyway.

Always about to lose everything on some bad business deal. Some neighbor or something would tell him a mountain of lies, and Daddy would climb it like a stupid goat.

One night, I woke up to my mother screaming. Daddy started pounding the piano keys. When that didn't stop her, he pulled the vacuum out of the hall closet. Ran it back and forth and back and forth.

And me upstairs, shushed up in pink curlers, transistor radio next to my ear. I was wearing the paper ring Daddy gave me from the cigar he bought that day to celebrate the money he had suddenly found. *Kiddo*, he had winked, *sometimes, the thing you need is right there for the taking.*

And now, later, much later, the vacuum roaring, looking to eat everything it saw. Then it stopped. Just like that. And my mother still screaming how he took the money from my Alzheimer uncle, and didn't he have a soul?

And that should have stopped everything right there, but it didn't, and Daddy yelled back how she was getting all wrinkled, and how would her boyfriend like it, and oh yeah, he knew about the boyfriend, and my mother screaming back that she had to take love wherever she could find it.

Next morning, my mother came in, panda mascara and hair like a scratchy tree , and told me that daddy lost us the house this time for real.

And I tore off Daddy's paper ring, and wished again they had been burglars like the ones on TV, who wore masks and jimmed windows on sleeping houses, maybe making off with rings made of diamonds and gold, and that way my parents wouldn't have to scrap for whatever money and love happened to be lying around.



**BORN UNDER  
PUNCHES**

**CHRIS CAMPANIONI**



## *Born Under Punches*

The things I recall, I recall in zip pan, POV, a pullback shot without mise-en-scène. Or in darting moments, a brief flash, a passing scent, transposing and unblinking, and utterly distinct. Yet the whole of history favors similarities and slight anachronisms. The schism of time is in a class all its own, and even now I am racing through hallways of my subconscious without taking notice of the hall itself. The lino. A railing. Reverse angles by which you see your own self speaking. Everyday details. Everything passes. As a rule, I strive for lucidity in loneliness, long takes in cover shots, covering myself with the candy of imagination, the sweet gaze of the mind's eye that seeks amusement and finds instead the truth. It strikes without warning. I am either writing it down, or scurrying for a pen. And of course, my palm as paper never does the trick. Too many callouses, rough spots or swollen joints makes for disjointed prose, words rising and falling on the flesh, out of frame, a chronic fear like a cough, or coughing fits in an elevator filled with mysophobics without relief of medicine. Time is relentless. All the memories I have of a certain age arrive with an eye for dissolves and split screens, ellipsis narration, the Kodak Junior camcorder above me, rising higher, slung across somebody's shoulder. The older I got, the more conflated I became: rapid cuts into a montage set to something serious by Radiohead or Kurt Cobain's hoarse voice asking to be raped. Again and again. Only every five seconds, three more images arrive in the form of bridging shots: a birthday party, Carvel cake, wrapping paper unfolding a gown and tassel. In the interest of time and patience, the camera skips the in-between phases, puberty, the Middle Ages, and suddenly time's up, or forever passing, the screen goes dim. Remove the reel and I don't exist, unfilled as an indecision, a figure shot from extreme distance, an unrequited gaze . . . The memories I have as a child, eyes agape in solicitous childhood, of five years and five months, or at nine, balloon mind, afraid of almost everything—;Tribilin!—every converging train and each

whistle and telephone ring and my mother's laugh and my dad's demands, and under tables all the faces I never knew from just their feet rising higher in the address of my dreams, conflated voices all talking separately at the same time around a dinner table, or at a cocktail party, or in my own mind, into and out of intuition... Readjust the lens to find emptiness, which is only thirty-three frames per second, a vast expanse of images, the darkness of the cinema, the places my mind goes when I stop to think, an isthmus for hermetic memories lost in the time it takes for perceiving anything. And time's passing.

**HERE WE  
ARE NOW**



**MELISSA  
GOODE**

We play this game. You say something nice. I say something nice. You say something mean. I say something mean. We fuck. You aren't so into it now. Your nice isn't that nice—*beautiful*, really? That sounds like a lazy lie to me, but it's my turn to say something nice. Your mean isn't that mean. Something about my driving, like I care.

You say, "Are we just trying to manufacture feeling here?"

"Yes."

"Let's keep it simple," you say and take hold of my ponytail and pull it hard.

"Better," I say. "Make it meaner."

You do, making it hurt—I try and hide my smile.

You drain your beer and you don't watch me over the bottle. You close your eyes and I tell myself it is against the glare of the fluorescent light in our kitchen, but there was a time when you wouldn't let me out of your sight.

#

Last Friday night. You opened the bottle of tequila, sniffed the triple sec, and pulled out the fancy margarita glasses that were a wedding gift from someone forgotten. I couldn't make the salt stick to the rim of the glass. You poured the salt into a saucer and left it on the table between us. We drank and put the salt to our mouths with a wet finger—my mouth, my finger. Your mouth, your finger. When did this happen?

The yard at the back of our house slopes downwards and has no fence, ending with a gully of trees. That night, it was a hill to be run down, full throttle, screaming all the way.

#

We don't go out anymore.

Sometimes, I say, "Oh, [insert band] is playing at [venue in the city where we used to go]."

"I don't even know who they fuck they are," you say.

I say, "Maybe if you stopped listening exclusively to your nineties playlist on your phone, you would know them."

This is your cue—Nirvana, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, early Pearl Jam and no one else has ever measured up.

#

We don't dance anymore, unless we are a bit drunk. Then it is in our front room, under the dim, yellow ceiling lamp littered with dead, gray bugs. It is slow. More like leaning against each other. You hold me close though, your mouth pressed against the top of my ear. I like that and I should tell you, while we still dance.

#

"Proud of you, babe." You used to say that all the time. I didn't have to do much—bake cookies, kill a spider, get you off.

#

"I don't want to become maudlin," I say now, when I've had three drinks, because that is my arbitrary point of no return and I don't get happy anymore when I drink and it has nothing to do with the gin.

I know alcohol is a depressant, but I didn't think it was until now.

You say, "Get drunk with me. Let's get fucked up."

I try. I do.

Every time, I come so close to saying it—can you believe that one day one of us will die first?

#

It isn't too late for us to be the hipster couple making coffee in that new way that takes forever. Drip, drip. We have the red plaid shirts. You've got the facial hair. We've got the cannot-give-a-fuck attitude, except we mean it. I don't know if they wear Converse.

#

Your appendix scar is a thin, silver-white line sewn near your hip when you were sixteen. We have been together for so long, but I want more. I want you from when you were sixteen and I was fifteen—as if we could run backwards into time.

I would have rushed to the hospital and brought you chocolates and a little teddy bear holding a helium balloon—GET WELL! And we would have made out, me lying along your uncut left side, until one of the nurses told me to leave your bed, this was a hospital not a hotel, and shouldn't I be at school? Or maybe she would have smiled and told us we had three more minutes, but that's all, swishing the curtain closed around us before she left, and we would have got it all done in three minutes in deathly silence, your hand covering my mouth.

#

This still works—you rising above me, lying down along the length of me, above my head, below my feet. Everywhere. Your mouth on mine tasting of our last meal and our last drink.

#

Sometimes you wash the dishes and you take your time with it, like you have all fucking night. You stare at the window above the sink, a mirror with the night behind it, and you sway and hum and sing every song from *Nevermind*, starting with "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and ending with "Something In The Way".

"Can't you mix it up?" I said last time.

You were elbow-deep in lemon-scented suds and looked over at me. I swear you didn't even see me when you sang, "*I'm not gonna crack*".

#

You went outside onto the deck and made a call.

"We used to do shit," I heard you say.

I didn't know who you were speaking to, but I knew it was about us.

I pulled out our box of photos—when photos were printed, stacked in envelopes with negatives. There are photos of us on our phones and on the computer—not many though. Most of us is in that box.

You came back inside, bringing the night-cold with you, tucking your phone into the back pocket of your jeans. I wanted to ask who you were speaking with. I didn't though.

#

"Nothing lasts forever," I heard you say. Or maybe I dreamt it. I dream about you all the time—me telling you not to leave. Know that. I don't want you to go.

**THE 11 SIGNS OF A BORDERLINE  
PERSONALITY DISORDER**



**CAREY CECELIA SHOOK**



(According to the National Institute of Mental Health, and also Me)

**1) Impulsive and often dangerous behaviors, such as spending sprees, unsafe sex, substance abuse, reckless driving, and binge eating.**

When I was five, I'd sneak sandwich meat, pudding, cereal—anything quick and easy to snack on—into my room and hide it so my parents wouldn't find out how much I was eating. I did this until I was nine when my mom cleaned my room and found moldy bologna under the bed. Since then, I mindlessly eat almost every time I eat. I can't control myself. I've been doing it for eighteen years.

**2) Distorted and unstable self-image or sense of self**

I was always the fat kid growing up. When I was twenty, I joined a gym and went six times a week, stopped eating like crap, and drank only water. I lost fifty pounds in three months. Everyone around me said I looked great—even skinny. It was the best compliment I had ever received. The only compliment that mattered. So, I kept losing weight. People told me I should stop working out so much because I was going to wither away. I still thought I was fat.

**3) Self-harming behavior, such as cutting**

I cut myself the day my brother attempted suicide in 2010. It was my first time. I was in ninth grade Earth Science, standing in the back of the room, running scissors across my left wrist. I wasn't breaking the skin. I wasn't bleeding. I couldn't control all the pain Andrew's attempt caused me; I wanted to control my own pain for once. When I got home from school and my parents were halfway to Charlotte to see Andrew, I tore apart my razor. I sliced my left forearm once, twice, three times. It worked much better than the scissors.

**4) Intense and highly changeable moods, with each episode lasting from a few hours to a few days**

One Thursday, I had a lot to do—homework, class, sending/reading e-mails, searching

for post-grad jobs—and I planned to get everything completed during my four-hour shift at work. I wasn't too worried. When I got to work, I looked at my color-coded planner and my inbox. I cried. I was so behind on everything. I did what work I could, but I was so depressed by the end of the shift. I thought about what it'd be like to dig through my secret hiding spot where I keep my razor blades and use them for the first time since August. I skipped my classes and meetings that day. I needed to cry in bed and sleep the emotions away. By the end of the night, I didn't feel depressed anymore, just stressed.

#### **5) Recurring thoughts of suicidal behaviors or threats**

I missed the last three months of my junior year of high school because of a back injury. When I returned for senior year, rumors said I had just been released from a mental hospital. My friends abandoned me. After not cutting for almost a year, I relapsed. Both my forearms looked like ladders. I thought it'd be better if I weren't here. I planned how I would kill myself. I was too afraid to actually swallow a bottle of Ambien, but it was always in the back of my mind in case I decided to.

#### **6) Feelings of dissociation, such as feeling cut off from oneself, seeing oneself from outside one's body, or feelings of unreality**

Last spring, an hour after a boy I was (practically) dating and I solidified our plans to watch *Mean Girls*, our favorite movie, I sat on the edge of my bed and stared at my closet door handle. I felt *off*. I couldn't stop crying. It was a drastic change from ten minutes earlier when I was excited and bubbly. I texted the boy, described the feeling to him: the front part of my brain knew what was going on, but the back part *just wasn't me*, and the back part was taking over. I didn't feel like I was part of my own body. I canceled the plans with him, despite the fact I'd been obsessing over going on another date with him just an hour earlier. I asked a friend to drive with me to Myrtle Beach for the day—I needed to get out of my apartment. I didn't trust myself. I hoped my friend would be able to bring me back to me. After half an hour of driving and talking, I finally felt like I was myself again: laughing, making sarcastic jokes, and having fun with my friend like always. All day, I thought about how I felt like I was watching my life happen from another point of view. I thought

about how I never wanted to go back to it.

**7) Chronic feelings of emptiness**

**8) Inappropriate, intense anger or problems controlling anger**

Three of our neighbors were with my parents outside as I yelled at my father the second I parked my car in the driveway.

*How could you get rid of Andrew's clothes? They were clearly marked. You knew we were going to have a quilt made out of his T-shirts. Mom told you, I told you. What's wrong with you? Is it 'cause your brain is fried from all the coke? The twelve beers you drink a day? The pain pills? What the fuck is wrong with you? I hate you. I fucking hate you. I can't believe you fucking threw the bins of his clothes away. Jesus fucking Christ. I can't believe you. Fuck you. Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.*

**9) A pattern of intense and unstable relationships with family, friends, and loved ones, often swinging from extreme closeness and love (idealization) to extreme**

**dislike or anger (devaluation)**

Blake

Alli

The marching band from freshman year

Tim

Gillian

Robert

Becca

Laney

William

Mariah

Jamison

Bry

Jared

Jamison (again)

Melissa

Adam

The 2018 Orientation Leader team

Krysta

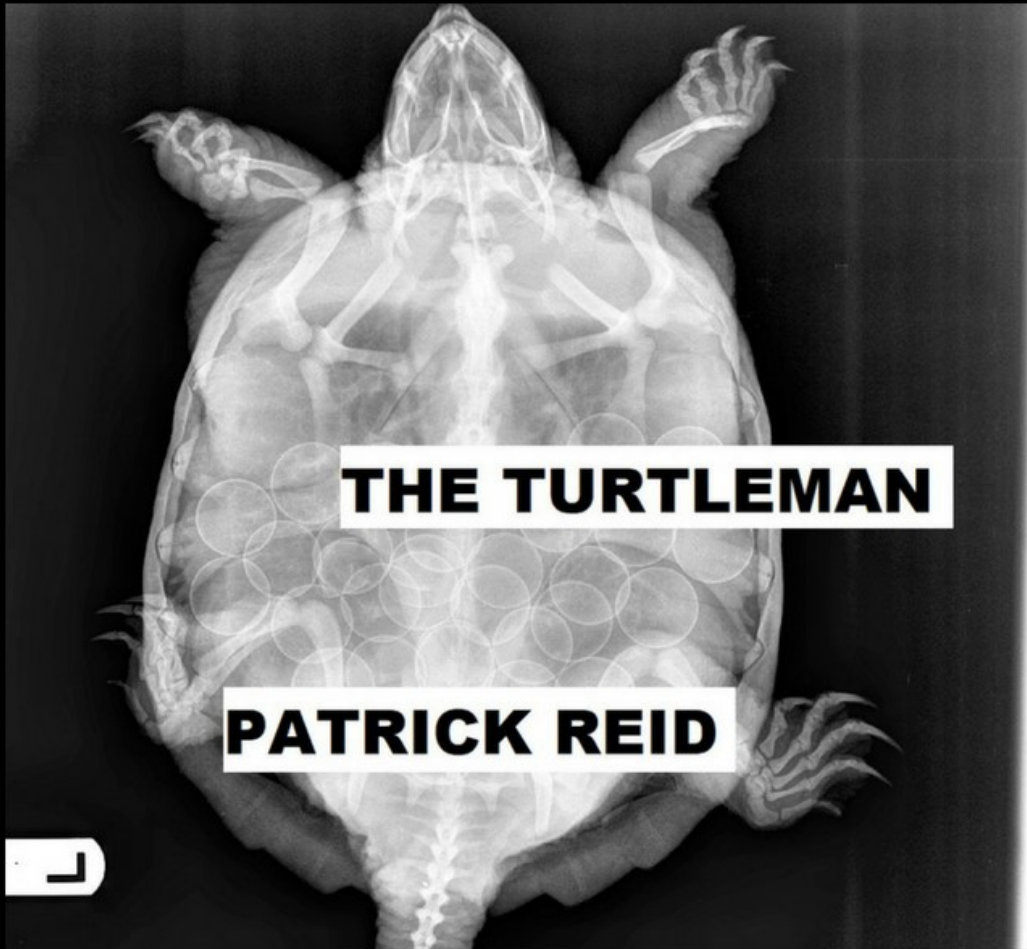
Jamison (again)

**10) Difficulty trusting, which is sometimes accompanied by irrational fear of other people's intentions**

I was drunk and crying when I told my best friend that I didn't trust her even though she hadn't done anything wrong. It slipped out as she sat with me on the ground outside my twenty-second birthday party. I saw the hurt in her eyes. She told me again how much she loved me and that she wished I could trust her. I told her I was trying but didn't know how. I didn't want to scare her away like I had all my past friends.

**11) Efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment, such as rapidly initiating intimate (physical or emotional) relationships or cutting off communication with someone in anticipation of being abandoned**

Three days before our four-month anniversary, I almost broke up with my boyfriend Alex. I wanted to break up with him before he could break up with me. I felt my random, deep depressions were too much for him. It didn't matter that he'd just spent the past three hours holding me as I cried, or that he'd told me dozens of times he loves me no matter what—everything in me screamed that he was going to end things with me, so I should do it first.



**THE TURTLEMAN**

**PATRICK REID**



The turtleman has dark green skin, a thick, spongy surface, like wet clay. The turtleman lives by the lake. The turtleman has long, smooth legs, and even longer, skinnier arms. The turtleman reads fiction. The turtleman writes screenplays, hoping he will eventually sell one to Hollywood, but he doesn't let his hopes get too high, because he knows a lot of depressed screenwriters who have long since lost their creative spark. The turtleman has a mere bump for a nose, slits for nostrils, and two large eyes, cartoonish, mostly white. The turtleman has a shell. The turtleman walks on two legs, like the teenage mutant ninja turtles, although he looks nothing like them, he thinks, being much taller and lankier, although, sometimes, out of fascination, late at night, looks up YouTube videos of the live-action ninja turtle films from the 1990s and watches, with fear and fascination and a grotesque, uncanny sensation, the same way a normal man might feel watching the puppet character in "Mr Meaty".

The turtleman tokes. The turtleman wakes and bakes, and then before breakfast, and then before driving to work, and then on the drive to work, and then at his first break at work. The turtleman has a job at Dunkin Donuts. The turtleman thinks the job is shitty, but he does not care what he thinks. The turtleman considers himself mindless and insignificant, and does not have a trace of self-interest, ambition, or ego. The turtleman is viewed by his coworkers as remarkably friendly and cooperative. The turtleman is responsive to people, like some kind of liquid moving around their solid, fuller existence. The turtleman steals white powdered munchkins throughout the shift, but only when he is working alone. The turtleman is nice to customers. The turtleman is never on his phone, but he does not correct coworkers who do use their phones, who read Twitter until customers grow visibly angry and shift or move something on the table to make a noise and get the coworkers attention, or say "hey" under their breath, because the turtleman understands why they would rather be on their phones than paying attention to their work.

The turtleman knows that his coworkers could give a shit about their work at Dunkin Donuts. The turtleman still does his job well. The turtleman is Dunkin' Donuts employee of the month. The turtleman freaks his boss out, because she said once he seems like "a fucking robot," although she apologized later, so the turtleman was confused, although he understood where she was coming from. The turtleman understands people really well, and has a lot of compassion, and understands human flaws.

The turtleman exercises 5 times a week, doing full body workouts, with an emphasis on back and legs. The turtleman plays basketball to cool down. The turtleman, after exercising, sits down in his apartment to write. The turtleman never finds it hard to be creative. The turtleman completed a screenplay last week about a woman who was raped, and sent it to Hollywood, fingers crossed. The turtleman, this week, is working on a screenplay about a man who was raped. The turtleman tokes while he writes, and feels it helps him think more clearly. The turtleman has many other ideas about many other kinds of people and creatures getting raped. The turtleman is always excited to get started on a screenplay.

The turtleman reads. The turtleman has read Infinite Jest and Ulysses many times. The turtleman has murdered exactly 15 people over the course of the last 3 years. The turtleman is cute. The turtleman is desired by many women, but he feels no sexual attraction. The turtleman pokes himself sometimes to see his spongy skin pressed on like a memory foam mattress. The turtleman kills for fun. The turtleman feels bad after he kills. The turtleman does not rape. The turtleman has a very peculiar taste in art. The turtleman only likes art that centers around the topic of rape. The turtleman has right wing political views.

The turtleman breathes. The turtleman tries to fall asleep. The turtleman thinks



"fuck I'm fuck retarded" as he tries to sleep. "I can't articulate myself for shit" he says out loud. The turtleman says "Fuck. I want to rape. I want to get raped. I want to rape. I don't want to rape." The turtleman begins to cry. The turtleman screams. The turtleman smiles. The turtleman thinks "I can't even begin to express how retarded I FUCKING AM!" The turtleman thinks "3am shift, fuck," even though his shift is 4am.

The turtleman wants to murder again. The turtleman is bloody thirsty. The turtleman, the turtleman, the turtleman. Then the dick slides off like butter.

**IN THE END DAYS  
YOUR FATHER  
COMES TO VISIT**



**FRANKIE MCMILLAN**

He wants a photograph of the baby in the bath. Or maybe lying on a sheepskin rug. You say you haven't got a sheepskin rug and the baby's already had a bath. Your father says, 'Well make up your mind, sweetheart.' He wants a photograph of his grandson before he gets back on the plane.

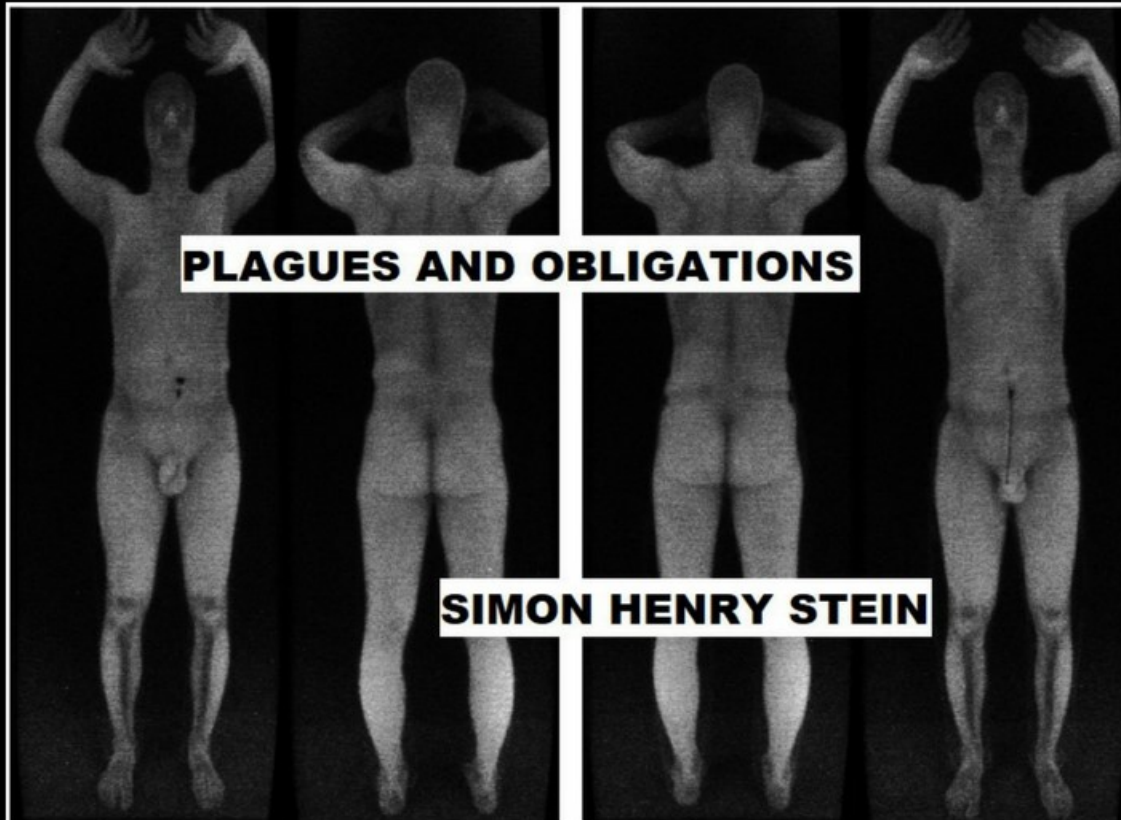
He picks the baby up, holds him by the window for a closer look. 'There's nothing wrong with him,' he says. You point to the baby's hairy legs.

'It's nothing,' your father snorts. He declares the baby perfectly normal. He unscrews the cap on the camera lens.

The baby, surprised by his own good fortune, kicks up a storm in the bath.

You lift him out, a soapy shawl of hair over his back. *Normal* you say, *perfectly normal* as you wrap him in a towel. You wipe soap off his developing moustache. Pat his legs and arms dry. You wonder whether a hair dryer would be better. But then you worry he might grab it, stick his little finger into the whirring head.

The baby's warm, fat body presses into your back as you jog with him into the living room. Your father has already gone. He has other grandchildren to photograph. Already they are developing faster than he can ever record them.



**PLAGUES AND OBLIGATIONS**

**SIMON HENRY STEIN**

After nine days of nights, I went. On each of those nights I hadn't gathered more than four hours of sleep, adrift still-dressed from the previous day on a bed that used to boast plural ownership. On three or four of those nights, I twisted toward the ceiling and tried to mumble a prayer or blessing so quiet it wouldn't bother anyone, not even me, but failed. *Baruch atah Adonai*--blessed are you, Lord. That's as far as I would get. There's even a prayer to wake up having slept without sleep greeting death halfway, the Hashkiveinu. I don't remember the words, only one of the melodies. I remember a lot of things from when I was young; words are not one of them. Failing to start the engine on a prayer, sometimes I'd twist to the side and whisper a fact: *two years and I still don't know if that's his real name*. I'd also sometimes try to decide whether shadows could be considered a subcategory of night, or the other way around. I never could.

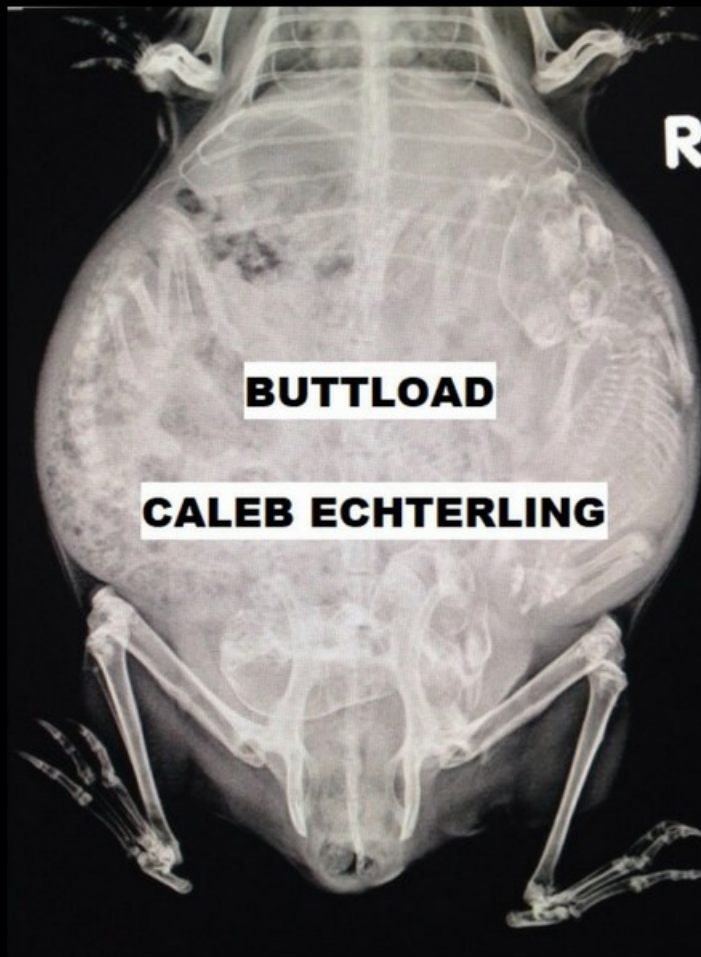
The days between the nights were crowded with various shadows, sometimes in the form of small refusals I could present to myself as if ceremonial offerings or in the form of translucent avoidance that gave my coworkers the gift of not having to ask, but mostly in the form of lessons in reluctance, alone in my office, door locked, shirt sleeves rolled up, braced against the desk lost in something between vertigo and nausea and tremors and unattached grief I was reluctant to give a name. When I was younger but not young I learned reluctance isn't just a vocabulary but an entire language, and that while speaking it fluently made me feel better, it wouldn't help me make myself understood. The recent past: I didn't learn much else. I learned how to manufacture importance (but was unsuccessful) and I learned the difference between hopes and expectations (I don't remember what it is) but I learned fewer names than I should know. Awake at night in a bed that isn't entirely mine and is sometimes partly a stranger's, bought by the stranger at an outlet down on 76th St., a store with big-enough windows to disguise its real identity as a warehouse, I would sometimes search for what it is that wasn't a name. Some important thing. Actions, maybe, I thought for a few days, until deciding even actions were names. Names could not be escaped.

I met him two years ago at a fundraiser. Met him and was introduced. He told me he admired my tie, a quiet, unironic bowtie. Wearing them helped me know how quickly I could ignore men who commented on them depending on the shape of their descriptions,

the hesitation or smugness slid beneath their queries, their explanations for bringing it up. "Met" is an action, not a name, though he never used the word when we used the bed for stage whispers. *Found*. "I'm so glad I finally found you," he said. I wanted to imagine a younger version of him roaming the Earth, using his thick hands to help describe an outline of who I might be. I wanted to imagine this but could not. I could imagine the plagues retold every spring, but couldn't recall all of them, or even how many. I remembered blood. I remembered a plague of complete darkness but couldn't remember how it had arrived. I remember the rabbi always pausing to ask us all why we thought God hardened Pharaoh's heart.

On the tenth day, thinking something soft about plagues and blood and children I'd never have to worry about providing names that would make them sound successful, I peeled a lunch hour away from my Tuesday early and walked seven blocks from the building where I worked to the building where he worked without bothering to button my coat in the January wind, and ask I walked my misgivings began to solidify into more reluctance, familiar and uncomfortable like a wool sweater worn because it was the gift of a person encountered often. I stood in his building's expensively empty gray lobby, hands in my pockets, thinking of whether one swipe of blood on the door would've been enough, back then, to be avoided, to be left unembraced, and readied myself to turn heel in order to paint my own door. When the elevator opened and he walked over to me, I forgot what my plan had been. I think I had wanted to ask him his name. Instead I told him I forgave him. I told him I almost forgave him. I want to forgive you, I told him, but I don't know who you are. He watched me wait, and all he said is this: *More than words*, he said. *More than words is how much*.

I let him kiss me and I told him *more than words* was close enough. I even believed it, at least for a few years. I believed it for long enough to maintain warmth momentum through a yearlong storm of illness the specialists could never name, all of them whispering "stress," I believed it until I was free to move west to a larger, less-icy city where I hoped no one had been searching for me but, when people did meet me, I'd say yes when they asked me if I tied the tie myself, and when they would ask my name and I would ask theirs, most of the time neither of us would lie.



The king's chief of staff flipped the display numbers. The occupants of the blandest room in the kingdom clutched their flimsy tickets, and sucked in a collective breath. Trumpets flared, and a crier bellowed, "Petition the King Day, now serving A377."

A group of well-dressed, barefoot gentlemen rose to their feet. "That's us, move aside," they said as they elbowed through the crowd into the throne room. "Your majesty, we are representatives of the Cloth-Sellers Guild. Look!" They each thrust one bare foot into the air. "We all have different sized feet."

King Rupert stroked his beard. "I'm afraid the absolute powers of the monarchy do not extend to ordering my subjects' feet to grow. If you wish, I could take a page from Solomon and trim the excess from the biggest ones, although I do not see what that would accomplish."

Guild members hopped about on one foot to let King Rupert take in the true scale of the difficulty before him. "Sire, perhaps we should explain the problem in more detail. You see, we sell our wares by the foot, which we measure by removing our shoes. Some of our less scrupulous competitors are hiring short-appendaged apprentices to cheat the public. Our guild is getting a bad reputation."

King Rupert nodded. "What you require is a standard measure. The one perfect foot, so that all across the kingdom, there is no question what is meant by 'a foot'. I, of course, nominate my own foot. Clerk, make it so."

Workers scurried to the throne, built a form around Rupert's foot, and took a plaster cast. Copies of the cast were distributed to the Cloth-Sellers' Guild, and sent to each corner of the kingdom. Guild members showered praise on the king, and rained kisses upon his royal appendages.

Trumpets flared, and a crier bellowed, "Petition the King Day, now serving D183."

A group of gentlemen with pants around their ankles entered the throne room. "Your majesty, our butts are all different sizes."



King Rupert covered his eyes. A wince rolled through the royal court like the wave at a football match. "If it's any consolation, they are all equally hairy."

"A thousand pardons, your majesty. Allow me to explain. We are from the Banana-Sellers Guild. According to local custom, our wares are sold by the buttload. A few unscrupulous banana sellers are hiring small-bottomed apprentices to swindle the public. We ask the royal court to order all small-bottomed purveyors of the banana trade put to death immediately." The Banana-Sellers Guild, as if executing a choreographed dance number after hours of practice, all scratched their respective right cheeks.

"What's wrong with selling bananas by the hogshead?" a royal courtier asked.

A representative of the Banana-Sellers Guild swished his hand about. "Hogsheads? We live in a modern, cosmopolitan kingdom, not some ignorant backwater. Now please kill all the banana merchants with small butts."

King Rupert thumped the floor with his mace. The room fell silent. "If I may interject, what you need is a standardized measure. The one perfect butt, so that across the length and breadth of my kingdom, there is no confusion about the quantity conveyed by 'a buttload'. I, of course, nominate my own butt."

Workers scurried to the throne, built a larger frame, and submerged King Rupert's hindquarters into wet plaster. The cast of the royal butt was, with much fanfare, distributed to all corners of the kingdom.

Trumpets flared, and a crier called the next number. A group cupping piles of excrement in their hands entered the throne room. "Your majesty, we are the Useless Junk Merchants, and our poops are all different sizes. It's complete chaos. No one knows how big a crapload is."



**CHRISTOPHER GONZALEZ**

**MINOR GRIEVANCES**

Adam tells me no one else will be by the water after such a bad snowfall. Edgewater Park should be deserted: just us and the lake, frozen into solid hills. It would be quiet, which I preferred—I kept quiet about a lot. Like the Grindr app I downloaded onto my phone as soon as I turned eighteen. How I've scrolled down that wall of guys, those photos of abs and round bellies, and the few faces concealed beneath the bill of a trucker's camouflage snapback. I've tap-tap-tap-tapped the flame icon on a number of profiles, hoping to create a breadcrumb trail to the man of my dreams.

At least today, it's led me to Adam.

There are no other cars around, so Adam drives onto the beach, parks close to the water. "Maybe when we finish, we can climb the waves and walk across them all the way to Canada." I don't laugh but sense that I should. He squeezes the steering wheel. The entire ride up I hadn't said a word. "Come on, that was funny," he says. "Picture it: you, me, and Justin Trudeau, frolicking."

"Sorry, sorry, I'm having a moment." I point out the window. There is still some sunlight over the lake; I want to thaw out under its burning glow.

"Yeah, it's beautiful, huh? Almost as pretty as you." He moves his hand from the wheel to my thigh, begins sliding it closer to my crotch. I've been here many times before. All those Friday nights spent following Siri's voice across Northeast Ohio, spider-webbing down back roads and alleyways, to meet some random guy in the black mouth of night.

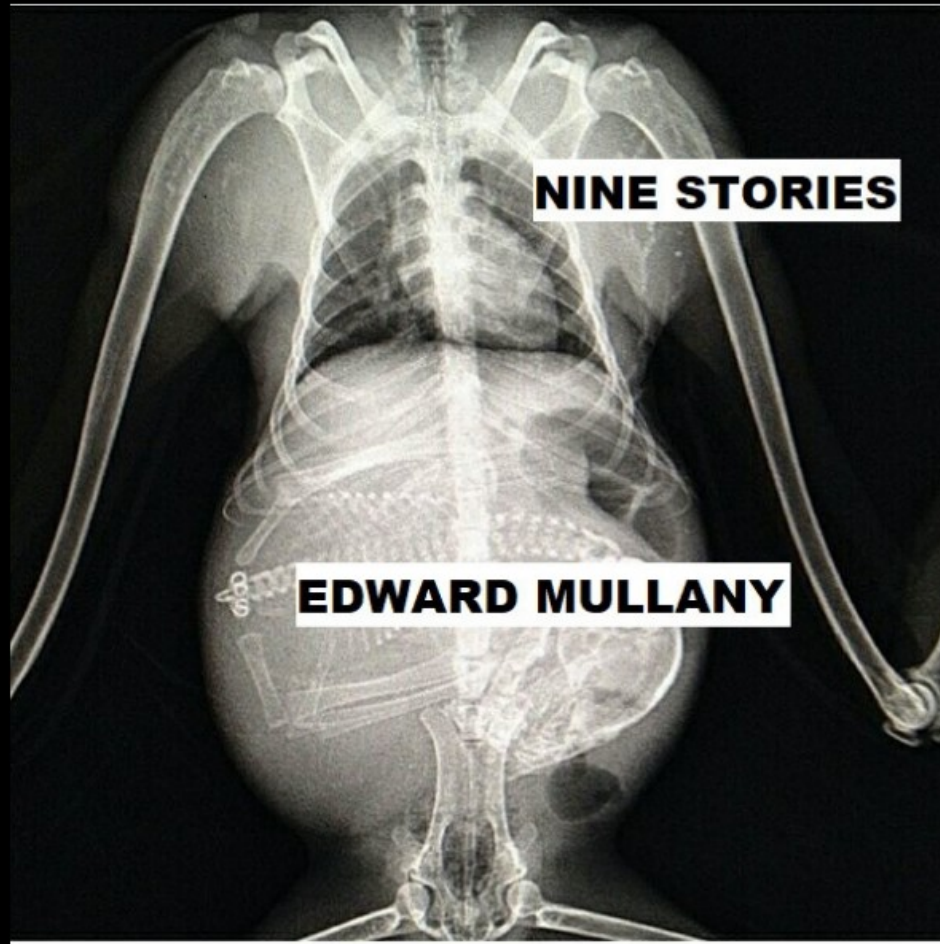
I place my hand over Adam's, try to absorb all of its heat in my palm. Then his mouth is on mine and I wince at his cold tongue. My lips crack and sting at the edges, and his beard scrapes too roughly along my chin—but these are minor grievances. I keep quiet and lean back in the passenger seat, familiarize myself with the sensation of his body pressed against mine.

The guys I connect with are always older, sometimes by decades. They're white men, mean men, greedy men. They live in dark houses, keep to themselves. On occasion, they own a dog. They shoot guns and kill fish and salute the flag and pretend they fit

into the idea of a nation that wants very little to do with them and nothing to do with me. And still I slide beneath these men, risk disappearing altogether. Perhaps I'm already gone.

Neither Adam nor I make any sounds of pleasure, then it ends.

After, we walk along the edge of the lake where the ice meets untouched snow. He climbs onto the lake and reaches down to help me up. It's eerie—the waves are so still. I can almost hear them crashing into one another, can't stop imagining all that movement, exactly as they should be.



## Bay Ridge

I'd fallen off my barstool and had been helped back up onto it by the man who'd been sitting next to me and who was laughing at me, or with me, as I was laughing at myself, though this man wasn't someone I'd known before I'd entered the bar that afternoon, several hours earlier, when I'd found myself on the street on which it was located, having walked a long way, without much purpose or direction, from the neighborhood in which my apartment was, and in which I'd been arguing with the person with whom I'd been living and with whom I was in a relationship, and who, in fact, I had been and still was in love with, though it had become clear to me that this person was no longer in love with me, and maybe never had been, though this person did not want to admit it.

## Translated from the French

I'd been reading a novel about a woman who is haunted by the ghost of her husband, though she does not at first realize she is being haunted by anything, and though, even after she does realize, she does not know that the ghost who is haunting her is her husband's ghost, though after a while she begins to sense that maybe it is his, for it interacts with her in a way she begins to recognize, or remember, so that by the close of the novel she knows for certain that it is her husband's ghost, though after she arrives at this certainty, and is relieved of the sadness with which she till then had been living, his ghost no longer haunts her, and her life proceeds without incident until it ends, many years later, one night when she is peacefully asleep.

## Orpheus at Rest

When the old man who was sitting on a stool beside mine at the bar discovered I was a writer, after I'd told him as much, after he'd started talking to me after I'd come

in from the rain and had sat down and had ordered a beer and had drank it and had ordered another, he told me he had a story about his life that he himself would've written if he was a writer, but that he was going to relate to me now, as a favor, so that I myself could write it, as if it had happened to me, though I would have to promise him, he added, that if I became famous from it, and made a lot of money, that I'd return to this bar and buy him a beer and thank him for the inspiration.

Paulette

After I'd finished what I'd said was going to be my last drink, and had headed toward the door of the bar in the company of a woman who was my friend and who was trying to get me to leave with her, so that she could make sure I got home safely, though she had not come to the bar with me, but had only arrived after she'd realized, from the texts we'd been exchanging, that she was worried about me, and had thus left her apartment, in her neighborhood, and had gone down to the street and had hailed a cab and had gotten in it and had told the driver to take her here...yes, after all this, when we were almost to the door of the bar, which was open onto the sidewalk, where one could see that it had been raining, I wheeled around and went back in and tried to order another drink, so that the woman who was my friend felt compelled to remain there with me, by my side, though at this point the bartender had seen what was happening and had decided not to serve me anymore, so that now I really did leave with the woman who'd come to retrieve me, although I did so in a belligerent way.

Almost Over

On the sidewalk out front of the bar we'd only now come out of, having spent several hours inside it with a number of friends who'd all now departed, either in pairs or by themselves, so that you and I were the only two people remaining, though even we were not so much remaining as we were waiting in the vicinity of that place we would've been remaining had we not gotten up and gone outside and begun looking at

our phones and watching the vehicles on the street for the next available cab, so that one might have said that we were no longer conscious of our present surroundings, or happy to inhabit them, but rather were anxious or impatient for what we hoped those surroundings could provide us with, or for how they might imminently change...yes, while we were standing out on the sidewalk like this, outside the bar, both of us in possession of our phones, but not very much aware of one another, or how one another was feeling, or what one another was thinking, if we'd been thinking anything at all, I realized we hadn't said a word to each other since we'd found ourselves alone, after the last of our friends had said goodbye to us, and something about the knowledge that this realization imparted to me scared me.

### The Glitch in Reality

One morning, on my way to work, I found no one on the platform in the subway, waiting for a train, though when I'd been up on the street, walking toward the corner, I'd seen many people, as I always did, crossing in front of me, or going past me, or alongside me, entering stores or coming out of them, waiting at the stoplight as traffic went by, standing and talking, or yelling, in a word, doing many things, so that it seemed to me now as if everyone had disappeared, or as if they'd decided that day not to commute into the city. Though when I went back through the turnstiles and up the stairwell and out onto the sidewalk, so strange had I found the sight of the empty station, I saw everyone again, doing all the things that they were doing. And when I went back down again, slowly this time, with an awareness or consciousness of every action I was engaged in, or was undertaking, I saw that people were now where I'd expected them to be, on the platform, looking at their phones, or standing with idle expressions on their faces.

### Gowanus

We get in an argument on the sidewalk outside the bar where we've spent the afternoon



drinking, though we do not finish the argument there, but continue it as we walk down the block in what we think is the direction of the nearest subway, though because you are ahead of me, and won't let me walk beside you, and are not, in fact, responding anymore to any of the things that I say to you or ask you, I eventually lapse into silence, and can imagine that we must appear, to anyone who might pass us or observe us, not as two people who are walking together, but rather as two people who happen to be near each other, heading the same way, but who may or may not even know each other.

Thursday

The bottle that I'd finished the night before, when I'd come home from work after a day on which many things had gone wrong, or, anyway, had transpired in a way that was not to my liking, though they may have transpired in a way that was to the liking of some of the people with whom I worked...yes, the bottle that I'd finished when I'd come home that night, after such a day, and had decided to have a drink or two, but had ended up having more than I'd intended to, was the first thing I saw the next morning when, waking on the floor in the shirt and tie and pants I hadn't changed out of, I groggily and painfully, and somewhat unwillingly, opened my eyes, though the bottle itself, which was near enough to me that I could've reached out and touched it had I wanted to, though just then I did not want to, and in fact wished that it was not there at all, even to be seen, let alone touched, was no longer upright but had been tipped over onto its side.

Carbon Prevails

I'd decided to quit drinking, and had done so, and had stuck by the decision for many months, so that, with every passing day, the sense of accomplishment and resolve that had come to me, upon making that decision, was increasing, though so was, strangely

enough, a sense of precipitousness or danger that I had not anticipated, and that seemed to be inversely related to that sense which I'd first felt, and which had caused in me a feeling of tranquility, or well-being, but which now I understood was at risk of being undermined, at any given time, by some part of me that wished to return to that life I'd had prior to making the decision that I'd made, and that was not a happy life, but rather an unhappy and dissolute one; or, if not return to that life, merely to find pleasure in ruining the life I now was attempting to build, as if I was not constituted solely of one volition, or will, but rather of two of those things, or, at any rate, more than one, though however many volitions or wills *did* comprise me, if that was the case, I couldn't have said.



**THE LOBSTER**

**BENJAMIN DEVOS**

I clock in at Pirate Cove and try to find a good place to hide.

I stay in the bathroom as long as possible.

Until my boss barges into the stall and tells me to get my ass in gear.

The shift's starting.

The first table is always the worst because I'm not ready to act like a pirate.

I'm never ready to act like a pirate.

My first table is a father with his daughter.

"We are ready to order," the father says.

"I want to get the best of the best."

He's young, but his hair is already starting to gray.

He's wearing khaki pants with a shirt that has sweat stains forming on the armpits.

I want his life, to have something worth stressing for.

He orders lobster for himself and his daughter.

I write down his order on a pad of paper then stop.

"Arr sorry me matey," I say. "There's been no lobster for a wee fortnight."

And I know this because we only get lobster at the beginning of the month.

Sometimes I serve the scraps from the back of the freezer, but I don't want to ruin this family's day.

"Lobster is our favorite," he says, looking at his daughter.

"We're out, me hearty," I say, watching the daughter sink with disappointment.

"Darn," he says, looking at the menu with intense focus.

"My apologies, wee lass," I say, hobbling on my wooden peg leg to gain sympathy.

I imagine the man and me on a pirate ship together, and the man unable to cope with disappointing his daughter, jumping overboard with an anchor strapped to his waist, letting the weight carry him down until he sinks to the bottom of the ocean.

He's still looking at the menu.

He says, "Well how about the crab, I bet that'd be as good," trying to convince himself and his daughter.

He hands me their menus with a smile on his face.

"This meal should be excellent; we are a seafood-loving family."

I want to tell him about the quality of the food, how most of it is frozen and reheated.

I don't tell him about all of the complaints we get, how much food gets sent back for being sub-par.

Because he's doing his best to give his daughter a great meal and I respect that.

"We love lobster," he says looking at his daughter, "So we'll come in next time it's available."

"Crab is good," I say, taking the menus from him.

"It's the best," he says.

I say, "Lobster freaks me out; they're like, the cockroaches of the sea. Every time I go to the beach, I try to avoid the lobsters."

The father takes a long gulp of water.

"Yeah, we like our lobsters. They're so delicious. It doesn't matter what they look like; they're good eating."

"But they're undeniably freaky looking," I say, "Just like so weird."

"Sure, but what animal isn't weird when you truly think about it."

He rubs his brow and looks at his daughter, whose posture is wilting like a dehydrated puppy.

"Well, monkeys look pretty normal," I say, scratching the hairy area between my two pectoral muscles.

"True, they kind of look like people," he says.

"Well, evolutionarily they are people," I say, "They just haven't become them yet."

"We're Christian," he says.

"Oh, cool," I say, "Does that mean you don't believe people originated from monkeys?"

He says, "We believe people were born from Adam and Eve, and that humans have always existed."

I cough.

I say, "I wonder if the first people were freaked out by all the different animals. Like they probably saw lobsters and were like, whoa, what are those things?"

"I don't know," he says.

"Probably," I say. "And crab is pretty close to lobster, but they're more like the spiders of the sea."

I think about the man going to church and bowing down to a bloody cross on the wall, holding his palms together in a praying position, lifting them toward the ceiling and shouting something about how God has not provided enough lobsters, begging, pleading, for more lobsters to be born so that he and his daughter can eat them, rip them apart limb by limb, chewing on their flesh for sustenance, knowing that the Bible says that man has dominion over all creatures, so he can do whatever the fuck he wants, killing and consuming, tearing them apart with his teeth.

"Yeah, well we're really hungry," he says, sending a covert message with his eyes that he wants me to leave them alone.

I take a few steps backward before turning and wobbling on my prosthetic toward the kitchen.

The chef once told me that I take too long to bring him orders and that the customers become annoyed if they have to wait too long for their food.

I imagine myself with lobster claws for hands, pinching the chef's jacket, and telling him that we all have to wait our turn in this life.

It feels good to be assertive.

I take a smoke break even though I don't smoke.

I stand outside and let the wind hit me in the face.

Maybe I need to start smoking cigarettes again so that I can relax.

I used to smoke cigarettes with my older sister when she was sixteen and I was nine.

She would come home from school to babysit me, and I would ask her for a smoke, and

she would give it to me.

It was fun.

Not the best, but still fun.

Just me and my big sis smoking.

The two of us would sit on the front porch in old rocking chairs looking at each other and rocking back and forth, with smiles on our faces and cigarettes between our lips.

For five minutes at least.

Then no more smiles.

Which is how I feel when I'm serving a table.

Five minutes, then no more smiles.

Just doing my job.

After serving my table their crab, which was just chunks of imitation meat over unseasoned pasta, I go over to the busser's station to fold napkins.

I fold napkins whenever service is slow.

It's my favorite thing to do at the restaurant.

I fold the napkins to be shaped like pyramids and place them in a row.

Sometimes I try new shapes, like a lotus, or a star.

I can do a swan, but it takes a lot of time, and I can only do one before continuing my pyramids.



I imagine starting a business with the sole purpose of folding napkins like origami and selling them back to restaurants for ten times the price of the actual napkin.

I examine the pyramid-shaped napkin and each unique fold that brings it together.

I feel like more of an architect than an artist.

I picture myself with a construction helmet on, watching as a group of laborers erect a giant pyramid out of a million napkins.

I think about the customer who will eventually use the pyramid napkin, and how enjoying the intricacies for more than a moment would be impossible, because the rules of society state that one must unfold the napkin, flatten it, then place it on one's lap.

And how the flattening, the disassembly of the folds, is just another example of how humans destroy everything that they come in contact with.

Folding napkins helps me understand the world, makes me feel better about all of the destruction I've caused in my own life.

I look around at the customers in the restaurant and think about how in the end, we're all the same.

We're the destroyers.

My boss comes up to me from behind and says, "The little girl at your table just asked me why we're out of lobster. We have too much lobster as it is. God, you are such a dipshit."



**NO THANK YOU**

**MIKE CORRAO**

**becomingplateaubecomingmachinebecomingplacebecomingbodybecomingbirdsongbecomingdirectionbecomingstasisbecomingmattressbecomingthinbecomingessencebecomingmaterialbecomingpersonbecomingurnbecominganimal (or No Thank You)**

There are a thousand plateaus spanning across this plane. Each occupied by strange machines eating each other, who stare at the remains for as long as they can bear to. "What kind of fucking place" is this: somewhere locked within itself.

A body that crawls out of stasis, so tired of its previous immobility that it stretches out in every direction until it is so thin that it cannot see itself. It feels like there is a jackhammer at the face of my chestplate. And it's telling me that I'm late for whatever I'm supposed to be doing / that I'm supposed to have done by now (jesus christ).

What kind of person finds themselves in a place like this, where the sky is made out of static and echoing birdsongs. But this is not the point (there is a reason) (geographical purpose)

yy told me that ff used to live under a stranger's mattress. I couldn't imagine occupying a space like that, or spreading myself out so thin as to disappear from myself. (I want to materialize)

which means finding myself in a space. Wolf-man locked in the urn-shape (stasis again) (unmaterialized)

It feels like the echoes are crawling out of my bones (unmaterialized)

How should a person be? (materialized) (unmaterialized)

Someone caught in the act of becoming (materialized) (materialized)

then caught in the act of fully forming, then caught in the act of watching the

essence fall out of their head like liquid. And then they don't seem like Someone anymore (unmaterialized) (becoming)

Their head looks hollow and weightless, it floats over their body. (I want to materialize)

but I'm lost in the midst of these plateaus, lingering under cannibalizing mechanisms and gears soaked in blood and oil. I don't feel like I contain anything anymore, more like I am a part of the contents, and our coagulation forms something unstable and loud (materialized)

I'm worried that I can be heard and found (not hiding)

but incapable if I wanted to hide / when I need to start hiding (because there is always a reason to be disappeared)

No sun / No moon / No sky / No ground / No way to orient myself

Sounds so deafeningly loud (how should a person be)

physically speaking, should I be made organismally, or would you allow me to build myself out of new parts? Could a larger Someone remain stable for longer? (materialized) (unmaterialized) (return)

This will be a fleeting shape, that reveals itself in my death throes. Form me out of the sea foam and watch as the air slowly returns into the atmosphere, bear witness, examine what this container is made out of (materialized)

**MILK**



**MICHAEL  
MUNGIELLO**

I'm on my way to mom's apartment.

\*

I'm at mom's apartment.

Wow, nice. She's really spruced up the place.

Mom?

**I'm in here!**

Down the hallway, wood floor, wood walls, wood doors, wood frames around photos (of me as a baby, me at my wedding, none in between); plants.

Mom?

Kitchen. Mom's cluttered kitchen, Tchotchke salt shakers, detergent blue water sitting in the sink, a mini-TV in the corner and a little man saying in the Voice of Concern

**A Storm Is Coming.**

I look at the whole scene through the linty light coming through mom's drawn translucent curtains.

Hey, Mom! Came to check up on you before the big storm. Do you need anything?

**Oh, how neglected I am!**

**No one takes care of me!**

**For all you care, I could die!**

Woah woah woah—what?

And she does the aftercry sigh and shiver and explains: last night she fell; couldn't get up; called me but I didn't answer (my phone was dead and I was out and she calls me once a day so sometimes, you know what, maybe I'm entitled to ignore a call, maybe it feels *good*); she called dad; he picked up; came over; helped her up; left; mom fell again; and couldn't get up until early this morning, she had to move around on the floor and leverage several equidistant pieces of furniture.

Jesus, that sounds terrible, mom! Why didn't you call dad again?

She doesn't say, exactly, but talks about pride, pride, pride. Dignity; couldn't I have called back? And dad, she didn't want to *steal him away again* from whatever he'd been doing *at that hour...*

Yikes, mom.

But it's nice to be with her. Why? She asks about my job (I'm a pharmacist) and roasts me about the stupid things I say and she roasts me in a way that confirms that *those things* are stupid but that *I'm* not. Critiquing is how she connects. She has long grey thick hair like she could be a famous poet with a black-and-white headshot but she's not a poet.

She points to my belly.

I'm pregnant, by the way, 4 months.

**You look fat.**

Yeah, mom, I just found out it's twins.

(This is a lie. It's not twins.)

I'm worried though. What will the baby's life be like, Lorenzo is on another business trip, left with no notice. Things between us? *Not good*. And I know he'd always provide for the kid with money but as Lorenzo would say in business-talk:

**I'm afraid I've written a check I can't cash, emotionally.**

The phone rings.

Mom answers.

**Hello...Completely?...Okay.**

**Yes. Soon. Thank you.**

I decide not to ask, it'd just give her an excuse to talk about how nobody cares about her, again. Mom's quiet. She gets a tall glass and fills it with water and drinks it in a swig. Then she gets a gallon of milk from the fridge (I spot her like she's lifting weights, which is ridiculous because someone should be spotting me! I'm lifting weights) and she has a tall glass of milk.

Ah, milk. I have milk memories, like how in college I used to put vodka in my half-full gallon of milk so I could drink during the day without roommates noticing. (Milk gets rid of the smell.)

Ah, memories.

Mom makes the ahhh sound and puts down her glass.

Wow, what thirst!

She turns to me, panting with slaked satisfaction.

**That was Cheryl. Dad's dead.**

\*

Dad and I once went to a baseball game. He bought me a pretzel and looked very tall, very strong. I told mom the truth, he and I had a good time. Later she hurt her back and I connected the dots and didn't speak highly of dad ever again. Her back didn't



improve, and hasn't.

\*

Outside birds and worms, pedestrians and rats, everybody scurries to a place where they'll be safe. Meanwhile I'm on my way to dad's, alone. Big clouds darkly hover over me. I feel ashamed. Was it something I did that made dad die? Or is this some kind of joke?

\*

I take a cab and despite myself relish the opportunity to spend money like that. If not now, when?

\*

Hi Cheryl.

She opens the door and is sad. Paramedics already there have given up and logged time place cause.

**Hi Karen. Is your mother...?**

Mom isn't feeling well, she needed to go lie down after the shock. (That's what mom told me to tell Cheryl.)

To me it all feels autocompleted. Of course dad died. Of course I'm here. Of course I'm consoling Cheryl, perfectly adequate stepmother. Of course of course.

**You sure you're okay?**

**You're not even crying!**

Yes, Cheryl. Thank you, Cheryl.

**You have to feel your feelings!**

Yes, Cheryl. Thank you, Cheryl.

I sincerely try to earnestly sniffle.

Cheryl grew up on a farm in Vermont and is into energies.

The difference between mom's place and dad's place is that dad's place has an upstairs and a basement: three levels total. Mom? Just one floor. I guess that's just the difference between a house and an apartment.

Photos here too, above granite countertops and under mini-chandeliers. Dad and Cheryl on their honeymoon and on fun vacations to Greece (I like these). Me and mom and dad—my communion, graduation, wedding. I wear a version of the same dress in all three.

Dad won't meet his grandkid.

That's sad.

It makes me angry.

Their cat is on the ground. He shows me his belly.

Cheryl, what did they say? Oh I see. Heart attack.

The phone rings. Cheryl goes but the person hangs up as soon as Cheryl says hi.

**So difficult to believe.**

I know, Cheryl.

**He was the best man I knew.**

And it's stupid but I agree. He was actually nice. When he asked if I liked a movie or a book or a song on the radio that played while we were in the car (he'd ask after every song when it was just the two of us in the car)—he cared about my answer.

He was curious about me, fascinated. When he was around.

He'd also do this thing where he didn't visit for a long time, even though he was a subway away.

(Dad: Park Slope. Mom: Upper East Side.)

Oh.

He's dead.

Actually dead.

The paramedics are leaving with the body. Cheryl follows and I'm going to get mom.

The storm speaks!

### **Rumble Rumble**

I look out the wide windows in dad's study. Little rain sounds on the windowpane, steady then faster like—sorry—heartbeats.

I'm feeling sensitive.

I want to be with mom.

I clutch a photo of us all and take it with me when I leave, I don't really look at it.

I'm in a cab to mom's and now I look at it. It's us at the Grand Canyon, the trip we all took, even Cheryl.

Mom looks *pissed*.

Dad doesn't seem to notice she's pissed.

I realize, if I was mom, that would only make me *more* pissed.

(Cheryl, nervously cheery.)

### **Thunder Rumble**

Lorenzo calls but I decline.

I get to mom's.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

Freak out, get the landlord to let me in.

Mom's dead.

On the ground, on her back, hand on her belly.

She looks vulnerable but she's not vulnerable she's just dead.

The landlord says

**Oh no.**

**Your mom's dead.**

\*

The rain is coming down not in sheets nor in blankets but in beds, California Queen.

Like the weather is furious at the windows.

I don't call Cheryl because I know mom would kill me. The landlord calls an ambulance but the streets are already flooding.

The other tenants are calling him—leaks!—and he has to check on his own room.

**They'll be here soon.**

**Everything'll be handled.**

**I have to leave.**

It's okay, thanks for unlocking the door.

Well mom, you and me.

I hear a beeping sound over the rain brigade. What the hell?

The smoke alarm in the living room is going. I glance up and get a whopping drop of water right in my eye. Then a bunch of other drops on the back of my head when I turn away to wipe my eye. Then a torrent, a pillar, a fire hydrant's worth of water. It's like a whale is upside down on the roof and its blowhole is lined up exactly with the alarm. The alarm is blown right off, I'm drenched, I put a bucket under the hole and it doesn't do much.

**Crrrrack**

I look outside and a tree comes down at one end of mom's street. The tree blocks the road.

**Crrrrrack**

Another tree! Blocks off the *other* end of mom's road.

Then ambulance sounds. But they can't get past the trees. I see them pull up to the first one and then back out and swing around the block and try the other end of the street. It's pathetic, futile. They know mom's dead. No rush, guys. No worries.

I'm suddenly starving. I go into the kitchen and make a cold cut sandwich with Italian bread, mortadella, and mozzarella. A wayward branch bandied about by the wind smashes through mom's window. Some glass comes dangerously close to getting in her hair. For propriety's sake I drag mom into the kitchen with me, which I know I'm not supposed to do with the baby, and draw the curtain that was functionally the kitchen door, so nothing will mess up mom's face, no broken glass or whatever.

Her eyes are still kind of open.

I want to close her eyes but I don't want to touch her so I put the family photo from dad's house over her face. It helps. It feels respectful.

I think I hear her try to talk. Garble. She's not dead.

Mom?

But she doesn't answer.

\*

The storm is hard to describe.

Like, "I look at the storm and see myself."

Like, "I feel I'll die due to storm-related head trauma."

Like, "And what about the people who aren't me? What's the storm like for them, where are they? It's useless to wonder this but do nothing. I think I'm bad."

Like, "I actually make a dark and stormy. In my mind I raise a toast with mom's ghost."

Like, "The thunder is dad, the lightning mom, the raindrops Cheryl. The baby?"

Like, "Thinking of my baby as the storm rages, I feel badly about the environment: specifically, climate change."

Like, "I don't hear the knocks at the door over the storm sounds so the paramedics have to break mom's wood door."

Like, "The paramedics' ponchos seem used up and the paramedics themselves are still soaked all the way through. I'm swept into my old bedroom like dust while they work on mom. No windows in my old room. Safe."

Like, "The paramedics come in to tell me that mom's not dead but that she has overdosed on her back pain meds. They are taking her to the hospital now. They will try to brave the storm conditions. They ask if I will be riding in the ambulance—they understand if I don't want to risk it."

Like, "I decline another call from Lorenzo. I text and tell him I'm okay, just bad reception because of the storm. He responds with a thumbs up emoji."

Like, "The back doors of the ambulance close and the rain's hit me so hard even the baby feels wet. The ambulance wades in our race against time."

Like, "There should never be a season for things like this."

Like, "The storm is just a device. Like mom or dad or Cheryl or Lorenzo or the baby."

Like, "I look at the storm and ask, Why can't you be other, better weather?"

The storm stops.

The storm starts.

The storm says, What storm?

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**SHE HAS DISCOVERED COSTCO**

**SHANNON MCLEOD**



It's Friday the thirteenth and day number four of your leave. You're taking some time off work since "the incident." You're at the DMV because you've been meaning to go for months but you're always working when it's open. You're afraid of seeing your students' parents in the waiting area. You're wearing the same Alf T-shirt and stretched-out underwear you've had on for the past two days. You're pretty sure you stink. You glance at the people sitting beside you and determine they are too old or too young to have children in middle school. You may never return to work. All these years you've prided yourself on flying under the radar. If you return there will undoubtedly be meetings, performance analyses, watchlists. Maybe it's time for you to switch careers. They call the number on your ticket. The woman behind the counter tells you to back up against a grey screen. "They let you smile in these pictures now, you know?" she says. Your face may have changed shape in response, but if it has you can't feel it.

The last you saw of work was the hallway ceiling. Your co-workers, Margaret and Anita, carried you out to your car after you couldn't get up from the floor yourself and you couldn't stop sobbing. You hadn't had much of an opportunity to talk to Anita, who was new to the district. After this, you are certain, she'll only ever think of you as the lunatic. You're pretty sure you broke some things - school property - but you can't remember what. Margaret, the more maternal of the two women, made you promise not to drive until you were ready. You assured her you didn't need someone to pick you up. (There wasn't anyone to pick you up.)

When you were down there, intimate with the linoleum, the other teachers locked your classroom door. You heard a knock and a whiny voice calling, "Ms. Winn?" It was Ethan, the kid who visits your room each week to argue about his grade. Margaret opened the door a crack, stuck her head out and replied, "She's busy right now," as you sat merely two feet behind her, your face in your hands. You contemplated telling them you're suicidal. But you were hesitant, knowing it'd land you in the hospital. It wasn't so much that you wanted to kill yourself as it was that you couldn't stop fantasizing about how you'd do it. And was that suicidal?

Either way, teaching had become difficult. You used to be confident. You were the ever-grinning entertainer for your daily audience of twelve-year-olds. Lately, your

hands shook, you could barely speak. When a student asked you whether 64 was a root number, the only thought you could summon was leaning back in your Buick, listening to Sinead O'Connor while your garage filled with carbon monoxide.

You went home. You turned off your phone. When you finally turned it back on, six hours later, you had a voicemail from your supervising administrator and several text messages from your co-workers, who all seemed to think that what was happening in your brain could be fixed with enough wine.

After the DMV, you visit your grandmother. She has discovered Costco. Grandma is excited for you to stop by so she can fill shopping bags with her overflow of products for you to bring home. Today she has extra grapefruit and broccoli, tiny cups of microwaveable soup, frozen sausage patties filled with cheese. She dumps half a bag of kettle corn into a gallon ziplock and throws it on top of the pile of food. You come here now instead of grocery shopping. You sit with her in the living room after she's offered you an individual bottle of iced tea from the pallets stored under the dining room table. It's room temperature, but it tastes good. You realize you must be severely dehydrated. You remember one of your cousins telling you Grandma had depression too. When your mothers were young, Grandma would spend weeks in bed. By the time she got up, the whole back of her head would be matted. Your aunt would spend hours with her in front of the television, brushing the tangles out of her hair. Your cousin said, "Back then, Grandma called them 'headaches.'" It seems a good euphemism, you think. Your head hasn't stopped pounding from all the crying.

Grandma asks you how your sister, Trisha, is doing and you say, "She's good," even though you suspect the fights with her boyfriend get physical. They're both covered with bruises when you see them. You worry about Trisha. You think she will open up, seek out your support, when she's ready. For now, you call her on the phone but avoid seeing her in person. Your grandmother looks at you expectantly. You guzzle down the bottle to avoid saying more about Trisha.

"You like that?" Grandma asks.

You nod.

"Well, I'll give you some to take home, then." she smiles. It's hard to picture her in a week-long nap while her children cried from heavy diapers. Your grandmother seems so happy now. You reach into the second shopping bag she brings you and open another iced tea. You drink it, and the pounding seems to ease a bit.

You're about to ask her what it was like for her, when it started, how she made it stop. You're staring at the hall closet while you try to form the words in your head. The words should be gentle. She is eighty-three. Grandma notices your stare and gets up. She opens the closet, yanks at the vacuum that's too heavy for her to maneuver.

"I suppose you want to get to it," she says.

You stand up to begin the chores she can't manage on her own anymore. You catch a whiff of rotting fruit and remind yourself to take out the garbage before you leave. It's a good sign, your sense of smell returning.

# X-R-A-Y

LITERARY MAGAZINE



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# SUBMISSIONS