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License and Application: Examining Truth in Gray Area Fiction

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License and Application: Examining Truth in Gray Area Fiction

by

Nathaniel R. Parker

A thesis submission to the Department of English of the State University of New
York College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

May 13, 2014

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Advisor



Date



Reader

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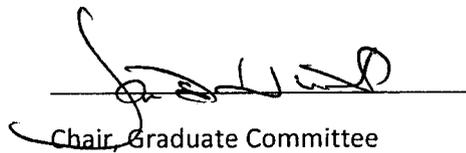
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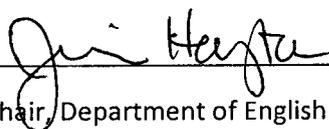
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Chair, Graduate Committee

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Date



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Date

I would like to thank my wife Colleen, and my children Roman Gabriel and Kennedy

Mae for giving me the strength and support to keep on truckin'.

And to my parents, Gary and Pattie, for not putting the younger me out with the trash.

Abstract

The following collection of short stories, while built upon a foundation of real personal experiences, purport to examine the world through a lens that fuses the genres of fiction and nonfiction. Less about the *me* and more about the *we*, the stories collected here examine the world through a narrative voice not easily categorized into the traditional genres of literature. The narrative perspective is always oscillating and instable, wavering at times between tightly focused introspective characters, and seemingly mundane objects otherwise buried in the background, the result of which is often unsettling and humorous. The introduction to the collection examines the author's influences concerning this vacillating perspective, as well as it critically analyzes the ways other writers have influenced his mode of developing characters, employment of dialog, and interpretation and conveyance of what he refers to as the *gray* truth. The collection ranges in its depictions of truth – beginning with more traditionally pure fiction in “The Butcher Shop” to the largely autobiographical “Fred and Adam.”

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Little slices of life is how Dr. Jerome Denno, my undergraduate advisor and mentor at Nazareth College, described writing to me several years ago. I have since adopted this metaphor as the primary purpose for the writer's craft – to capture and communicate little universal and relatable slices of life in unique ways for readers. In *Handling the Truth*, Beth Kephart refers to a letter she received from a memoirist she admires, in which says, "Writers are in the business of attempting to expose the human condition in such a way that our description resonates in the souls of other humans..." (110). Through the collective influences of writers like Hunter Thompson, Edgar Allan Poe, Franz Kafka, and others, I have developed my own unique voice through which I have, and will continue to deliver slices of life in new and resonant ways. *How, though, do we as writers expose the universal human experience?*

Some writers capture those slices of life through traditional nonfiction, reliving their own experiences (or the experiences of others) in matter-of-fact ways, connecting real situations and people to universal human experiences. Good traditional fiction writers achieve the same ends using different means, creating stories from the ground up, using imagined characters and events to illuminate real life experiences. Finally, there are the writers – to which I subscribe – who convey their truths by communicating with readers from the gray areas where truth and fiction overlap.

I define the gray area as the location between, or perhaps *spanning*, traditional genres of fiction and nonfiction, including biography, journalism, memoir, diary, and cookie-cutter fiction. The gray area, as I define it, is usually comprised of a combination of supportable factual elements, often adhering to the *who's*, *what's*, *where's*, *when's*, *why's*, and *how's* of journalism, with particular emphasis on personal interpretation, subjectivity, and artiness, all in the quest for the larger societal and cultural truth. Gray area writers purport to infuse the more “tone-deaf recitation...that’s [typical] autobiography” with the “trumped-up idealism [of] fiction” (Kephart 6-7). A good example of this is in Tom Wolfe’s depiction of an outlaw biker gang bang in *The Electric Kool Aid Acid Test*. The incident is described in the following way:

Pretty soon all the Angels knew about the “new mama” out in the backhouse and a lot of them piled in there, hooking down beer, laughing, taking their turns, making various critiques. The girl had her red and white dress pushed up around her chest, and two or three would be on her at once, between her legs, sitting on her face in the sick ochre light of the shack with much lapping and leering and bubbling and gulping through furzes of pubic hair while sweat and semen glistened on the highlights of her belly...but that is her movie, it truly is, and we have gone with the flow. (176-177)

In this passage there is an undeniable acuteness of the senses evidenced by the almost gory detail Wolfe provides, as well as there is an underlying ridiculousness.

Through the marriage of these elements – accuracy of detail and absurdity – Wolfe is able to offer cultural introspection unattainable through traditional genre. A traditional journalistic report highlighting a similar event could not get away with the “and we have gone with the flow” ending statement. The subjectivity of this statement, as well as its generalization concerning the first person plural pronoun *we*, would stand in contrast to the *who, what, where* accuracy of the rest of the passage.

Likewise, a purely fictional account of such an event would likely lose its realistic, detail-specific potency, and might skew its ultimate effect (cultural introspection) with perspective. As it stands, the majority of the section is perspective neutral, with no clear victim, and no identifiable crime, the result of which has a unique effect on the reader, forcing us to reconsider our own notions of what is right and what is wrong, as well as the notions concerning society, as a whole. This account stands in contrast to the depiction of gang rape in *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, by Hubert Selby, which is as follows:

Tralala’s back was streaked with dirt and sweat and her ankles stung from the sweat and the dirt in the scrapes...and more came 40 maybe 50 and they screwed her and went back on line...soon she passed out and they slapped her a few times and she mumbled and turned her head but couldn’t revive her so they continued to fuck her as she lay unconscious.... (78-79)

This scene, essentially similar to Wolfe's, inevitably depicts Tralala as the victim, and the perpetrators as the criminals – a more traditional, albeit jarring perspective of gang rape. The identification of a victim and her violators create a narrower scope through which the incident is read. The narrower scope, although effective in its own way, does not allow the general societal inspection that Wolfe's passage creates.

My own roots in this gray area are exemplified best in “Fred and Adam.” Specifically in the section detailing our taking Adam to Canada on his nineteenth birthday. This account, while rich in detail, achieves its potency from the subtlety of the self-deprecating voice of the narrator. It contains journalistic attention to detail in “the purple velvet curtain,” “the thirty-one bruises,” and “the sinking of his thumbs deep into her chest muscle” (“Fred and Adam” 39). The details are somewhat reminiscent of Wolfe's in *The Acid Test*.

At the same time there are certain solid details provided, there is also a condemnatory undertow for the narrator's own role in this fiasco. The narrator's concession that Adam's actions were “just part of the game they were playing” is also an acknowledgement of the failed responsibilities of the others in protecting him (39). This subtle introspective element borders on memoir.

Lastly, there is the event as a whole. There is a fictional taste to the section, even though nothing about it can be disproven. I think the absurdity of Adam's having been caught by the desk clerks masturbating by the pool suspends the

nonfiction qualities of the section in an air of fiction, forcing the reader to re-examine the victim/perpetrator relationship much the same way as Wolfe's writing does. I think this lingering idea that the whole story borders on, but doesn't quite cross into the *completely* unbelievable is where the potency of gray area nonfiction is rooted. This is an advantage of writing out of the gray area.

Not all topics are appropriate for the gray areas. I see this as a disadvantage of the genre. Gray areas work best for writers attempting to unify opposing ideals or highlight profound social and political change. In *The Acid Test*, Tom Wolfe examines the hippie counterculture, presenting them simultaneously with the conservative 'forgotten' generation from which they were born. He describes them, saying, "The straight world outside, it seems, is made up of millions of people involved, trapped, in games they aren't even aware of" (19). The two groups, although fundamentally and philosophically at odds, are unified on some level not only by their overlapping in history, but also by the fact that they coexist together throughout the novel.

Hunter Thompson's entire body of work was essentially dedicated to the social and political triumph of good "over the forces of old and evil," and back again (*Fear and Loathing* 68). In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson examines the transition that occurred as the energy and optimism of the nineteen sixties gave way to the harsh reality of the succeeding generation, who came to realize there was, in fact, no "force tending the light at the end of the tunnel" (*Fear and Loathing* 179).

In “Adam and Frank,” I try to reconcile the recklessness and anti-establishment attitude that has come to define the millennial generation (my generation) with the effect it has had on many of us in the end. It is a story I have been trying to write since I was in my early twenties. Every time I put the proverbial pen to the paper however, I have struggled to express the experience in effective ways for my audience. As time has passed between the present and the events in my story, I have found that writing the piece has become slightly less difficult. Although I did not compose the story in a drug-haze, as Thompson so often claimed to have done in his own *Gonzo* journalism, enough time has passed since the events in this story occurred, leaving some of the details in my mind distorted – missing even – akin to the effects drugs might have on one’s memory.

When I was younger, every detail surrounding the events in the story were still fresh in my mind. All of them seemed crucial and necessary to include. Capturing them all in what Dr. Denno referred to as a little slice of life always seemed an impossible task to me. As time has blurred some of those details I find myself able to view this period in my life as a more singular, comprehensive event. The distortions that distant memories afford has made the timeline of events more malleable and workable as I translate them onto the paper. Many of the memories I once saw as necessary to the story have faded, leaving me with enough to communicate my truths without being bogged down by the facts.

A recurring criticism that I have received concerning my own writings is that at times my narrative voice can be too technical sounding. I used to read a lot of early

detective fiction when I was young (okay, I still do), for which Poe's 1841 "Murder in the Rue Morgue" set the standard. Early detective fiction on its own is cerebral. Poe, aside from becoming one of the great American writers, was also an established literary critic by profession. His work, as well as the nature of the detective fiction genre, resulted in Poe's writing style sounding very technical. In "Rue Morgue," when describing the personality of the detective, Poe says, "In draughts, on the contrary, where the moves are unique and have but little variation, the probabilities of inadvertence are diminished, and the mere attention being left comparatively what advantages are obtained by either party are obtained by superior acumen" (2). Poe uses complex, professional sounding language in describing the process of how a detective sniffs out a suspect. He does this in his other short stories, as well. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe says, "Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation" (6). It is Poe's unique style that chooses *minute fungi* instead of small mushrooms – *extraordinary dilapidation* instead of advanced disrepair.

I *do* frequently use a technical voice in my own writing. For example, in "Fred and Adam," I used clinical terms for Adam's disability when describing him on page one: "He had Autism Spectrum Disorder, and was diagnosed with adult onset schizophrenia when he was seventeen" ("Fred and Adam" 35). I find that sometimes there is a musicality in writing with a technical style that cannot be obtained through layman's speech. I am aware that there are times when it works and times when it

feels out of place, and this is the difficulty of it. I always count on a portion of my editing process being dedicated to re-thinking words and my use of technical sounding jargon. Often times, I will employ an outside eye to assist me in making the final decision in these matters. In the case of Adam, although I have received some feedback that the clinical description is not necessary, and even unfitting, I have chosen to keep most of this section true to how I originally wrote it because I feel his character needs to be developed with accuracy and explicitness. I feel the clinical words take up a small amount of space, but evoke a certain compassion for what turns out to be a tragic character.

I tend to concentrate my writing on small spaces, be it a character, or an object, or an event. Often, the things I choose to focus on tend to be ironic and peripheral. These choices are the result of the influence Franz Kafka has had on me as a writer. Kafka has the unique ability to, in the midst of incredible situations, focus his attention on seemingly unimportant details, which results in a surreal feeling when we read it. The dialogue he chooses is often not reflective of the enormity of the situation the characters are in. The details Kafka provides concerning the setting often seem random and unrelated, spiraling as opposed to being presented linearly. In the introduction of *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, Jason Baker goes as far as to say that, “Kafka’s fiction doesn’t make sense,” and “Kafka’s writing is on the one hand specific and realistic, and on the other incomprehensible” (Baker XV). The result is a fantastic absurdity that entertains and demands the reader think about the familiar in unfamiliar (and uncomfortable) ways.

In *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa wakes in his bed to find himself transformed into a giant insect. One might think that this realization would leave Gregor in a state of panic, perhaps even unable to speak at all (given that his mouth is now that of a roach). Instead, however, Gregor's thoughts are perfectly rational and unrelated to his current predicament. He thinks to himself in the midst of his realization of what he has become, "Oh God, what a grueling profession I picked! Traveling day in, day out" (Kafka 7). Then, "This getting up so early makes you totally stupid. A man needs sleep" (8). What kinds of thoughts are these to be running through the head of a person who has just woken up as a beetle? They are so rational they are ridiculous.

I find myself infusing and, at times, over-focusing on mundane things during the central events in the stories I write. I think this is where the elements of humor in my writing are most noticeable. These unexpected digressions are ironic and I think the result is humorous. One example is the table in "Butcher Shop." I dedicate a significant amount of page space (on page 19) to the description and ultimate fate of the table Marianthi discards following her husband's death. An item of such little significance to the story ends up taking on an unexpected personality of its own, eventually resurfacing unexpectedly at the end. Following the tale of Marianthi's obscure life of abuse and belittlement, the tale ends with, "The light, she sees, is a reflection from the eyeglasses worn by one of two filthy and unshaven street people staring at her penetratingly from the raised window... She wants to let them in, and wonders to herself what they must be standing on" ("Butcher Shop" 24).

In “Fred and Adam,” as well, there are detours which I hope lend it a level of absurdity and humor. I focus, from time to time, on the absurd, aiming to force readers to look twice at what is being said, hopefully forcing the reality of the situation to be viewed from a different perspective. “‘I’m gonna’ wear something suede to your funeral,” I had told him, “and scuff black marks all over the restroom floor.” These were conversations we had throughout the years’ (“Fred and Adam” 41). Digressions such as these are unexpected, demanding that the reader take notice. “Paralyzing was the thought of ending up naked on some poor family’s coffee table with the complete text of *Red Fish, Blue Fish* tattooed in a shaky hand across parts of my body I had never been able to reach by myself” (“Fred and Adam” 42). My aim is *not* to not make sense, as Baker suggests is Kafka’s ultimate effect, but to associate feelings to events in non-traditional ways, which is how I interpret the effects of Kafka’s digressions.

Dialogue is perhaps the most difficult thing to convey when it balances in the gray area. They say that on any given day, one says things – combinations of words and sounds – that have never been uttered before in the history of man. I believe that this is the main responsibility of dialogue in writing: to capture words and combinations of words that are unique, but also strive to capture something *more* – irony or essence or insight or truth.

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Hunter Thompson uses dialog to expose the interactions that can only occur between two people in the midst of a drug frenzy. Thompson says, “Mace! You want *this*? You’ll *like* it. Shit, there’s nothing in the

world like a Mace high – forty-five minutes on your knees with the dry heavens, gasping for breath. It'll calm you right down" (61). Like many of Thompson's dialogues, it exposes the essence of the character he is creating. It is simultaneously funny and profound, lending the reader insight about characters that can only be achieved through dialogue.

When I choose to use a lot of dialogue in a piece, which I will not always do, I prefer Kafkaesque dialogue – matter-of-fact back and forth chatter between characters, often in the midst of some mind-numbingly momentous event, whose significance stands in stark contrast to the flatness of the dialog, or vice versa. In *The Metamorphosis*, after awakening to find himself transformed into a beadle-like insect, the following conversation occurs between Gregor and his mother:

“Gregor,” – it was the mother – “it’s a quarter to seven. Didn’t you want to get going?”(9).

“Yes, yes, thank you Mother, I’m just getting up” (9).

This being said, dialogue is often difficult to play with, especially when a piece is being constructed under the category of non-fiction. A non-fiction writer has a responsibility to report accurately, especially when it comes to the words of real people. I think this is one of the freedoms the gray affords its writers. Although journalistic integrity does not allow an author to put words in a character's mouth, gray area writing allows for *some* flexibility. When asked in an interview about his recurring fictional character Raoul Duke (in journalistic pieces, as well as in his

novels), Hunter Thompson says, “I think that started in *Hell's Angels* when I knew that I had to have something said exactly right and I couldn't get any of the fucking Angels to *say* it right. So I would attribute it to Raoul Duke” (Brinkley). Thompson saw the necessity of dialogue in order to communicate essential truths, but had to create a fictional character through whose mouth he could say it.

I think the dialogue I use in this collection does a bit of all these things. In “Relics,” the conversation the narrator has with his father during the office scene suggests sadness, misplaced pride, and the unrealized potential of both characters. The narrator’s father says, “It’s always been here. It’s my favorite thing you ever did” (“Relics” 29). It’s a perfect statement to summarize the complex relationship between the father and his son, and could not be expressed better through any other medium besides dialogue. In “Fred and Adam,” in addition to the unfitting Kafkaesque-like dialog mentioned already, we also get a better understanding of the narrator’s character through his interactions and dialog with his old friend at Fred’s funeral. Although there is a lot of *inner* dialog throughout the piece, it is through the funeral dialog that we get new insight concerning the narrator. This insight comes from the way other character approaches and addresses the narrator.

“It’s Andrew now, man,” he explained, “Nobody calls me *that* anymore” (“Fred and Adam” 44). Then, without making eye contact, Andrew walks away.

Through this interaction, the narrator's inability to navigate through elements in his own past are exposed, resulting in a level of sympathy in the eyes of the reader, and contempt on the part of Andrew.

There are countless ways in which writers' influences are evidenced in their own works. I would be honored if certain elements of my own voice were viewed as originating from somewhere within the shadows of my most prominent influences, including Hunter Thompson, Edgar Allan Poe, Tom Wolfe, and Franz Kafka. The pieces I have compiled for this portfolio echo these influences in more ways than I have explained here. The experiences I choose to write about, the methods by which I incorporate dialog into stories, the ways I attempt to marry subjectivity and journalistic integrity, and the style in which my voice is delivered has resulted in a confident foundation that will propel me into my future search for universal and resonant slices of life. I hope that my voice, although influenced by these great writers, will be seen as having developed a uniqueness all its own.

“Butcher Shop”

Marianthi Leonis uses a stiff and blood-crusting dish towel to wipe rainwater from the butcher shop floor. Her hands work slow and calm beneath the screaming of a torrential lightning storm outside. Beneath the fluorescent lighting of the butcher shop, she looks younger than she is. The dim, rhythmic illuminative quality of the butcher shop lights mask the scars around her eyes, on her lips and forehead. George always said she looked older than she was, and under incandescent lighting, he was right. For this reason, she’s developed a trust in her existence beneath the droning fluorescent lights. Over the course of her forty year marriage to George, she grew to rely on those lights to hide things – like the black eyes, the swollen lips, the bruises from pans and pens and stems on wooden pieces of fruit.

“That’s a beautiful dressing,” the customers would say, thinking the scarf she was wearing over her head on any particular day was some sort of cultural attire, surely not being used to hide the bloody patches of scalp from where George had torn out her thick black hair. “*Think yew, Huh-nee,*” she would respond in bad English. When George had found out that she had spent seven dollars on that scarf, he had struck her in the mouth with the stainless steel handle of their new electric sausage caser, chipping an eye-tooth and piercing a hole clean through her upper lip. He didn’t speak to her for a month for having missed work the next day.

After George died, Maria's days became her nights; her nights became her days. The emergence of the *Price Chopper* and the *Wegmans* supermarket ten years ago suffocated the business almost to death. George had been furious. He petitioned the city and picketed each building site as workers erected the monolithic structures. The saving grace for the shop was the sausage contracts brought to them by the same *Wegmans* and *Price Chopper* that stole their customer base in the first place. It had taken Maria almost two months to convince George to accept the contracts, and ultimately, to keep their business. The money from the contracts kept the butcher shop afloat, but pedestrian business died. After George died, Maria decided that closing the shop during the day would save money, and she decided to process the sausage for the contracts by herself in the night.

Because people didn't buy lamb and pork in the middle of the night, Maria pulled the meats from beneath the glass display case, grounded them into a stew, and sold the display case to a florist on the other side of town. The shop is vast and barren now, and she prefers it this way. It is easier to keep clean. She orders her supplies and towels from a hospital wholesaler downtown, and uses them every morning after the sausages have been made and put away in the cooler.

Before she leaves, she scrubs the walls raw and the scarred wooden countertops, and soaks and folds the bloodied towels, hanging them to dry on the sink well in the back of the store. Maria scours the floor with industrial solvent, waiting for it to dry completely before she leaves. Once she is gone, the shop looks something more like a hospital delivery room.

She only comes to the shop in the loneliest parts of the night. Sometimes the street people watch Maria fumble with her keys in the pre-morning darkness in front of the store. Although she is aged, she maintains a feminine figure, with thick, shapely legs and a large bust. She sees them, too, but either doesn't think about the harm they might want to do her or just doesn't care. Or something else.

The street people notice the display cases are gone. The tables, too. There had been some ado about those tables when Maria put them out by the dumpster in back. Street people have no real need for glass serving platters, or red-and-white checkered tablecloths, or several dozen framed black and white photos of the Leonis family and the small village in Northwest Greece from which they came. They don't desire weighty metal registers once used to monitor no-longer-existent business transactions. Street people do, however, value furniture. To street people a table is advantageous. A table can be place to hide; or, a place to seek refuge from the rain; or, a pedestal on which to stand to reach what might be otherwise unattainable; or, a table can be a piece of wood to burn for warmth on a frozen night. She would have felt guilty had she seen with her own eyes the violence that that table had summoned from the souls and stained hands of the neighborhood homeless that night. To Maria, the table was merely the place she had set the bag of ice she had used to stop the swelling in her jaw after George had punched her in the face on more than one occasion.

Her knees creak and whine as she struggles to her feet, wringing the muddy, bloody water from the towel into the sink at the back of the shop. She turns the heat up high because the meat always makes her fingers cold. She pulls the cured meats

from the cooler, the pork and beef and lamb. She opens a supermarket bag full of Havarti cheese, parsley and wine, and hones her knife to an absurd sharpness. She cuts foot-long strips of meat from the bones of the barely frozen carcasses, massaging the meat after each cut with firm strokes of her ungloved hand. The smell of cold blood and metal excites her, and she sings a soft song she knew as a girl.

Days salt as the sea

With the Macedonian birds that lost their course.

Ever lurking in ambush, the shark

The black fish – His circles tightening

A hundred thousand waves.

When George died, Maria brought the new electric machines to the basement, preferring to prepare the sausage pulp by hand. The calluses on her palms are tougher now from shredding months of cheese with an old steel hand-grater; her forearm muscles taut from pumping the hand grinder, and from wrestling the blade of her knife through impossibly tough pork and lamb fat in order to achieve precise lean-to-fat ratios.

The trimming of the meat has to be done swiftly, for the first run through the grind must be done while the meat is coldest. Before the second grind, after the

curing salts and sodium nitrate are rinsed off the ground medley, Maria will add a menagerie of spices.

Marianthi's mind is distant as she stuffs the wet casings with ground meat pulp. She thinks of her first experience in love; how he had taken her in a field behind the buildings that lined the streets where the festival had been held in the old country. He sang to her beneath the whitewood trees.

After hours we brought her under the spell with the strings

Of the lyre.

Tied up with her hands behind her back –

To the mast

The woman from Crete,

The blind singer.

The baker's son took her, and broke something loose inside of her when he did. She whimpered excitedly under his paternal violent thrusts. She cried softly. Her blood puddling in the cotton grass beneath them.

At thirteen she had loved Evangelos, that night and forever. He had been older than her; older even than George. The baby he had put inside of her – that they had created together and she alone had quietly destroyed, was her eternal reminder of that

love. A year later her father would give her, as promised, to the eldest son of a butcher from the town in which they lived.

George was unable to give her another child, a condition he had always blamed her for. A condition she had always blamed herself for, as well.



Her work ends on most mornings just as the sun begins searching for puddles that lay in morning shadows behind buildings and beneath the trees. Maria finishes packaging her night's work, and cleans and oils her hatchet and tools. She places the fruits of her labors neatly on a shelf in the giant cooler, ready for the morning deliveryman who will relieve her of the fresh gnashed meat in the earliest hours of the morning.

Maria squints her eyes as she enters what was once George's office, now an empty room save for the desk that has grown too wide and too heavy to move. After George died, Maria pushed the desk snugly into a corner like a whitewood coffin. Atop the desk a blanket is strewn, upon which rests an olive tree sent to her from home, flourishing and young. The specialized grow lights she has installed hum a muffled ultrasound. Thin leaves branch like God's reeds off of the plant's thick stalk. Maria smells the oil and home.

"Moro," she whispers. Baby.

She pierces the dark soil with her fingers, burrowing a hole for her offering. On the desk beside the pot, she unrolls a sheet of wax paper like a swaddle, exposing a small chunk of lukewarm lamb, soft – wet with blood and fat. She pushes the meat into the soil and folds the dirt over it, remembering the way her mother used to fold the phyllo dough before Christmas dinner. Marianthi taps the soil with her palm until she is satisfied that the evidence of her offering has been erased.

She closes her eyes in meditation, refusing to pray. Pressing her soiled hand beneath her apron, she pinches herself until her eyes water from the pain. She misses George; the way they suffered together. Without him, she alone suffers. Without him, her connections to home and family are gone, and she is left with nothing but the stainless steel tools in the shop, and the smells of the chemicals she uses to clean them. The bell warbles from what used to be the shop lobby, and Marianthi scrambles to get herself together to greet the morning deliveryman.

His visits are short. He has come to her store twice a week for more than a year now, and she is unsure what his name is. He enters the store with a familiar scowl that reminds her of George, and hands her an envelope. He tells her something about the sun this morning and she blushes as he heads for the cooler door. She removes her apron and blouse, and stands naked when the familiar stranger comes out from the cooler. She walks past him slowly, without a word, opening the door to her husband's old office and letting it slowly shut behind her. She wants him to follow her. She longs for him to fold her over the desk upon which the olive tree sits, and to make her young again.

She stands in the dark alone, excited and waiting, and hears the muffled thump of the front door closing. He has left her, too. She cries softly, embarrassed, and turns the grow-lights on low. A sharp glimmer catches her eye and she looks across the room. The light, she sees, is a reflection from the eyeglasses worn by one of two filthy and unshaven street people staring at her penetratingly from the raised window. She wipes the tears with the back of her wrist and turns to them, staring; allowing them to stare back at her. She is pink, and seductive, and alive. She feels like an exotic bird, fluffing feathers through a glass cage. Beautiful. She wants to let them in, and wonders to herself what they must be standing on.

“Relics”

Cement impressions of a six-year-old’s hands – my hands – are frozen in time like the wings of a new bird. A red wooden frame, delicate and dry, clutches the white room wall like a memory. The grandmother I remember was broken, gurgling from her wheelchair in the other room at Christmas and Thanksgiving, and at birthday parties for great-grandchildren whose names she couldn’t remember. I never saw her make an independent, lucid decision except fingering frosting from birthday cakes and shoveling it sloppily into her mouth before my mom could stop her. *The sugar will kill her*, my mother used to say.

I look at the handprints on the wall like they belong to someone else. It’s all wrong. The lines across the palms are too long and angled; the middle finger is short, not like mine; there is an indentation on the palm heel – a mole or wart that I don’t have. The writing at the top – *Nathaniel and Grandma October 4, 1983*, it says – is carefully engraved in cursive, but I never remember my grandmother writing anything. I’m not even sure she *could* write.

The most expensive thing my grandfather ever owned was his wallet. There is no possibility he would have funded this project of my grandmother’s. The frame wood is raw, unstained and crudely sanded, but beautiful. Dark. My mother calls it Brazilian Walnut, and claims my grandmother built it from scratch using my grandfather’s tools. She says she even went as far as to cut the glass face by hand

with a diamond-tipped saw. Here, displayed on the wall of my father's house, is a cement impression of a stranger's hands, engraved and created by a stranger's tools, displaying a love that existed somewhere else. I ask my mother about *back then*. Nothing she says helps me understand the memorial.

I remember staying with her in the end. It had been seventy-two hours since my mom and aunt had gotten any sleep outside the chairs in the hospital waiting room, and I told them to go home that night. I would stay with Grandma. Her kidneys had become ineffective, and humming dialysis machines filtered her blood for her, buying the other organs time to reach the same level of ineffectiveness. The hum was soothing, I thought. It reminded me of distant trains passing in the night. I'd seen enough people die to know it's easier for them to let go without being watched, so I sat outside of the curtain watching *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolfe* without sound.

Movies are different now. They give me headaches. It's like the cameras have ADHD or something; and are unable to sustain a frame for more than a couple seconds. But not *Virginia Wolfe*, though, where each scene feels like a lifetime, following Liz Taylor and Richard Burton through their home and through their failures through their lives. The camera is an unblinking eye gazing into George and Martha's souls. It's uncomfortable – impossible to turn away from. Like watching converging trains on a track, their whistles blowing in a flat line pitch – and then just like that, *Pow! You're dead*.

My father was proud of his work. He was a computer systems operator, or drafter, or something like that for thirty-five years. When my brother and I were young, he would always try to get us to go to the office with him if, for whatever reason, he had to go back at night or on weekends. Maybe he forgot his coffee mug; or, maybe his hat. I think sometimes it was just an excuse to bring us there. He liked to show off his work, even though neither my brother nor I were capable of understanding his work at such young ages. I'm still not, really. Although I have learned the usefulness of a drafting table: space and whatever. I never stayed awake for the drive to the office. To this day, I can't say for sure exactly where his office was. I always nodded off on the way into those dark old buildings in those scary old city neighborhoods that nobody wanted to wake up.

That was then. As my father's skills have gradually become obsolete, he has lost many jobs. The last time he settled into a new office, a new job, we were all older. He asked for my help with the heavier things he had to move. He didn't have to beg. With a dolly and an elevator, we moved in an old desk and chair, three steel filing cabinets, some computer equipment, and an illuminated drafting table.

As I was taking pains to situate his office as neatly and efficiently as possible – as the cubicle was quite small – I noticed he had begun to prepare his area, pulling items out of a cardboard box and situating them atop his desk. Between his LaserJet printer and an archaic manual three-hole punch was a picture frame made from Popsicle sticks. At the top of the handwriting-lined paper beneath the frame was a

typical grammar school heading. Name. Date. Teacher. Subject. *My Name. October 1987. Mrs. Baker. Handwriting.*

Scrawled across the page, looping from each baseline to each topline, and hooked in the front from the dashed red midline while tailing off at the baseline once again, were the most precisely written cursive *h*'s you've ever seen – perfectly spaced facsimile *h*'s, hypnotic, somehow, on the fading paper. My gaze became affixed, as if the letters were somehow out of focus and my being able to bring them into focus was the key to some reckoning of the past.

Lower-case *h*'s, exciting in their quivering height, like tilted red carpets at the entrance of what comes next: the *I*. I wonder for a second what might have happened to the next day's notes on handwriting. Were they in the folder, or binder, or cabinet from where my dad had pulled this relic? Was the *I* in there too, tucked neatly beneath the *h*? I am uncomfortable with the possibility. I think if it were the *I* behind that Popsicle frame on my father's desk it might be too much to bear.

“I made the frame with popsicle sticks from popsicles you actually ate,” my dad said as he traced his finger along the corner of the home-made frame. “Cool, huh?”

“How long have you had this?”

“It's always been here,” he said. “It's my favorite thing you ever did.”

“Hmm,” is all I could muster as I pondered this statement. It was only a second grade cursive handwriting practice ditto – absent of opinion, creativity, research, or personal residue whatsoever – just letters. Not even *letters*, but one single letter written in dull pencil, over and over and over again. Essential, but forgotten.

“Look,” he said, pointing toward one of the margins. In the margins beneath the pencil smudges and dirt were the most distinct fingerprints of the child I once was. They are larger than they should have been. I felt unsteady, like I had just been indicted on fraud and was being processed in an art museum where every exhibit had a hand-made frame.

The only item of his that I owned was a cotton tie he gave me before an elementary school skating party. I skated with one of my friend’s moms. His tie, hanging alone in the back of my closet, brings me back to that auditorium. For that reason, I have kept it. I guess an object has no value if you are unable to see it. We saw things differently, he and I. My sight was obstructed. It needed to change.

Since I can remember, I’ve had intermittent insomnia; and, only two prescriptions have ever been effective in helping me get to sleep when the ailment arises: writing and marijuana. I stopped smoking pot when I got married, but my crusted old white jade pipe still sits waiting in the deepest corner of my bedside table.

“Just get rid of the nasty old thing,” my wife has said of it on more than one occasion, “before your son finds it.”

“I will,” I say. But never do. Something about that old pipe helps me remember how I got here. Throwing it away, to me, seems as infeasible as trying to remove a single ring from the cross section of a sycamore tree. In another corner is an old retainer I never used, half chewed by the Basset Hound we had growing up.

In another corner is a mechanical butane lighter. It is the last piece of a vast collection of lighting utensils I once had. I didn’t get rid of the collection voluntarily, but time always takes back what’s his.

In another corner is a journal, suede covered, brown, and beaten. In it are rough drafts of love letters I gave my wife years ago. The blank pages are bookmarked with a folded program from a childhood friend’s funeral service. Whenever I am sleepless, and having trouble thinking about what I should be writing, I unfold the program and remember my friend: **Peter Lee, 1978 - 1995.**

Pages ensue. Candid mementos revived through ink and hand. Where once I had simply to touch the old piece of paper to jar loose a memory, now I find myself having to read and re-read the entire card in order just to remember, and I feel – something. I’m not quite sure what it is. I know what it isn’t. It isn’t guilt, exactly. It isn’t sadness, really. It isn’t anger. It’s that feeling I had seeing that Popsicle frame on my father’s desk years ago, like remnants of the unconscious awareness of slipping time. Like sensing traces of ourselves we’ve left in places we’ve never been, and can never go.

“Who Am I?” This was the title of the poem I had published when I was a senior in high school. *Celebrate*, the book was called, *New York’s Young Poets Speak Out*. A few weeks after I was notified that my poem had been chosen for the book, the publishing company sent my fifty wallet sized copies of my poem to distribute to my friends and family. I have one copy in my wallet to this day; and, if I looked in the right box above the hutch back home, I bet I could find the other forty-nine, still half-bound in cellophane.

At the bank yesterday, when I was fumbling to get my ID out of my wallet in order to make a withdrawal from the teller, the poem card fell out onto the counter between us. I was paralyzed. It was as if the stranger behind the counter had extracted from me a piece of my dreams. I wanted her to vanish, but I played it cool like it was nothing. I put the card back into my wallet and handed the stranger the ID. She smiled nicely, thanked me, and turned away. My back hurt after I left. I think it was the weight of that card, sitting in my wallet – heavy as one single brass bookend, holding empty volumes of unwritten books in my back pocket.

On the way back to my house that day, I thought about throwing my wallet into the canal. Truth told, I thought about driving my car right into the canal. Instead, however, I pulled over on the side of the road, took a pen from the middle console of my car, and an expired insurance card from the glove box, like writers sometimes do. I walked down to where the canal path meets the muddied grass beside the retaining wall, and I wrote. I wrote about the grandmother I don’t remember well, my father’s

misplaced pride, my dead friend, Pete, and tomorrow. And as I walked back to my car in the fleeting light of dusk, my wallet somehow felt much lighter.

“The Merchant and the Buyer” (Fiction)

Tucking the package carefully into the bottom of his bag, the Merchant fastens the canvas straps. “Buyers of things I sell are so impatient,” he thinks and sighs. “They just don’t appreciate.” He harnesses the bag on his shoulder before unlocking and exiting his office door. The brass handle is almost too cold in the crux of his palm.

He never used to take the time, but he figures at *his* age, what else is there? The way he packages his items is immaculate to a neurotic level. He buys the soft pastel paper in bulk – ribbon by the kilometer, and electrical tape. The neighborhood children fold and wrap and tape perfect little packages. He pays them in candy – bubblegum cigarettes and Mary Janes.

He is mindful about his affect when he pulls one of the packages out from the bottom of his bag to present to a client. They don’t know this about him, but he needs them to notice the detail without *his* own excitement serving as a catalyst. If just with a smile – he needs that. It keeps him on the job; it reminds him he is alive. And on the rare occasion that a young man laughs audibly, or a young girl shrieks in a spontaneous outpouring of surprised joy, the Merchant will happily take the rest of the day off.

The Merchant is old now. His steps, while as unwavering as ever, have slowed. The cracks in the skin of his thinly-veiled knuckles have become more

noticeable even than his finely manicured nails. His suits smell more now of the staleness of time than of the fine pipe tobacco he once used to suffuse them.

The Buyer is up early this morning, taking the time to press a suit and find the perfect knot for his tie. The tradition of the exchange dictates a certain formality, but this young buyer has other motives. He aims to impress upon the old Merchant – who was his father’s merchant, and his father’s before his – appreciation for his services to the family.

In the elevator on the way to the lobby, the attendant makes polite conversation, asking the Buyer about his plans for the afternoon. “It’s supposed to rain,” he says.

The elevator stops for passengers on the third floor; and, for no reason in particular, the Buyer gets off, walking the last two flights of stairs to the lobby. His shoes tap-tap the brown marble before the Buyer exits the hotel through revolving doors.

They meet in the back of an arcade, in a corner behind the *Skeeball* machines. The air smells like plastic, and cake, and birthday-candle smoke. Here, the exchange will be masked beneath the excitement of young Earnest’s seventh birthday celebration.

The men exchange a handshake and speak in tones more festive than the situation would typically call for. The Buyer hands the Merchant the payment, tied

neatly in a clean white tube sock without so much as asking to inspect the product. A chorus of children singing in loose harmony resounds from what seems like a choral platform above their heads.

Haaaaappy Biirrrrrthday toooo yooooou...

The Merchant slides the bag off his shoulder and down his arm, placing it on the floor at their feet. He slowly unlatches the canvas strap and reaches inside.

Haaaaappy Biirrrrrthday toooo yooooou...

The Merchant lifts the immaculate gift box from the deepest corner of his sack, exposing it in the electric arcade light.

“Fantastic again, sir,” smiling.

“And thank you.”

Haaaaappy Biirrrrrthday deeeeeeeeeearr Earrrrrrnniiist...

Somewhere bells ring, and strobe lights pulse red and blue and white.

Someone has hit a jackpot, and tickets which can be redeemed for prizes at the front desk are pouring out of a strange machine. The children are jubilant. The cake is delicious and moist. Parents are laughing.

As the Merchant and Buyer satisfy.

Haaaaappy Biirrrrrthday toooo yooooou...

Earnest blows out all the candles using only half his breath.

“Fred and Adam: A Glass House Saga”

This is how I remember it.

One time Adam ate mushrooms he found under a tree in the woods behind his house. They were white and brown, growing on an exposed root of a weeping willow. He ate a couple fistfuls, and washed it down with brown water puddled in the crux of the aforementioned root. It was all he could find. He got real sick, but not sick enough. Churchville paramedics found him out back in the shed writhing. It had been locked from the inside.

Adam was Fred’s little brother. He had Autism spectrum disorder, and was diagnosed with schizophrenia when he was seventeen. He lived in a house his father won in a poker game when he was twenty-six. I use the term *house* loosely. Adam and Fred’s parents were hoarders, and owned multiple cats and dogs. If there were litter boxes, I never saw them. If it was once, it was a hundred times I had taken it upon myself to throw a newspaper over a puddle of urine on the sticky linoleum in the kitchen. The walls, originally plaster with some newer plywood patches, had never been painted. The molding at the floor was simply pushed up against the base of each wall, and haphazardly at that, having never been attached. Although the building had four walls and a roof that leaked badly, it was not what one would typically refer to as *home*. Adam and Fred never accepted it, either, I think.

Adam's dad, a chain-smoking alcoholic American Indian, drank himself to death when we were in high school. Adam was in fifth grade. He found his dad dead on the couch one morning before the bus came, the bottle stuck to the palm of a hand stiffened with rigor mortis. I remember being on the school bus passing his house that morning. Three paramedics were smiling at something as they lifted the covered body of Adam's dead father into the ambulance. Fred Jr., fifteen at the time, smoking cigarettes in the driveway – Adam, ten, sitting Indian-style on the wet grass beneath him, staring forebodingly a million miles past us.

Adam spent a lot of time thinking. He kept a pocket-sized journal where he wrote down his thoughts and ideas so that he might someday revisit them. I remember a theory he had outlined on one page that said a person's height is directly related to the height their parents carry them as infants (i.e. waist verses above the shoulder). He said it provided a kind of physiological expectation for the grower, which they would eventually come to realize in adulthood. He had colored illustrations and citations for all his ideas. There was nothing else to do, after all.

In a room brimming head-high with the decaying pulp of wet documents (deeds, marriage licenses, birth certificates, old grammar school handwriting activities. etc.), Adam stored his collection of 1982 local newspapers. His collection was complete. Ritualistically before school every morning, he would find that day's newspaper from the year of his birth and read it in its entirety. Reading his own birth announcement every June 15th was more often than not how he was reminded that his birthday had come – and by that time, passed.

Adam was younger than us in age and, in addition to his autism classification, had significant cognitive delays. We watched out for him when we could, though. Before opening the shed to our teenaged experiments, we would always stop in Fred's mom's house to play Nintendo with Adam, or to ask him about the latest Ultimate Fights, with which he was obsessed. He enjoyed talking with us, with anybody, and always had to shake our hands before we left. He had a vice-grip handshake that made me feel uncomfortable.

Adam dug massive holes all day in the back yard of his parent's house with an edging shovel – holes eight feet deep and ten feet wide. As soon as he finished one, he would start another twenty yards away, refilling each previous hole with the soil from his newest hole. His work made him a physical marvel. On a fitness and endurance test given to him by his doctor to assess his cardio health – among other things – Adam scored among the first percentile for professional athletes. He had nothing else to do, really.

The other kids at school used to steal Adam's clothes when he changed for gym. They would throw them into the urinal and piss and defecate on them. They pushed him in the halls and spit at him, and hated him because he was strange to them. He was strange to me, too. They would invite him to sit with them at lunch, and laugh with the other kids at the joke. Adam *was* the joke. He would laugh, too, though. He didn't know what else to do.

When Adam turned nineteen, Fred wanted to bring his brother to Canada, and give him an experience as if he were a *normal* teenager. Frank paid a dancer two hundred dollars to give Adam a special kind of lap dance in the Champagne Room behind the purple velvet curtain in the back of *Club 19*. Seven minutes later, the dancer – Zelda was her stage name, I think – stumbled out from behind the curtain, visibly shaken. She walked up to Fred, insisting that we retrieve our friend and leave immediately.

When we finally did get Adam through the curtain, we noticed dark welts on his neck and forearms. After some interrogation, Adam said that he had become uncontrollably aroused when Zelda removed and began striking him with his own black leather belt. She hit him hard enough to leave much of his upper body velvet-curtain purple and black. We counted thirty-one bruises later that night at the hotel.

Thinking it was just part of the game they were playing, he grabbed her. Adam was absurdly strong, remember, and she yelped when he gripped her arms and sank his thumbs deep into her chest muscles. The combination of his strength and the flat affect lunatic excitement she saw in his eyes caused her to panic and flee. She offered Fred no refund.

At five the next morning, the desk attendants pounded on the door in an angry panic, demanding that we get our friend and go. Adam had left the room after we had all fallen asleep, and was found masturbating in the dark next to the hotel pool. Zelda,

the stripper from the club, was with him. We gave her a ride back to her apartment before making our run for home.

It terrified me when the parking attendant held up his hands in a gesture to stop, horizontal behind two vertically parked Honda sedans. *The thought of blocking someone in at a funeral.* I had every intention of communicating my concerns to the suit-clad attendant, but as I stepped from my car, he was gone. Moved on, I guess.

I removed my suit coat from the hanger inside the rear hatch of the black Escalade I named Dolan, stuffing myself into it. I remember this suit fit more comfortably the last time I wore it. I couldn't help but see the irony of it all. I acquired this very suit from one of the original owners of Hickey Freeman. He had been a customer of my mother's barbershop for more than thirty years. He died a few years ago, and happened to have the same measurements I have. His widow gifted me with six suits at his funeral. I had them dry cleaned three times before I felt they were clean enough to wear. Even then, I have only worn them to funerals. I call them my death suits. I expect I will be buried in one when the time comes.

Was it Adam's funeral I wore this suit to last? I wasn't sure. I was younger then, and it had been a closed casket affair. An open casket, the family had been told, was not an option. The soft lead of the bolt-action, Polish issued late model Kbk Wz 1898 made quite a mess I was told. I remember the tone of the receiving line was festive, almost. It all seemed wrong to me.

I straightened my tie, adjusted the lapel, and checked the inside pocket, making sure I had my papers before entering the building. I was terrified when I couldn't find them, but then they were there – a list of names of the old friends I was sure to find inside. Time has worn those details of the past, the names and faces, into soft nubs hiding scared in the knots of my brain. I hate when people approach me and call me by name, and I can't put their faces on theirs. I have found that a small piece of paper wrapped up on the inside of a pile of tissues makes for a good cheat sheet for remembering names at funerals. I've been to enough by now to have mastered the casual glance down when I see an old friend approaching.

The walk in was slow. Deliberate. The heels of my loafers were too hard, and the resulting click-clacking seemed deafening in my own ears. I wanted to flee. But I couldn't. Would not. I once told Fred I would be sure to be in attendance at his funeral, just to make sure he wasn't fucking with me. And here I was, wishing like hell that he *was* fucking with me.

“I'm gonna' wear something suede to your funeral,” I had told him, “and scuff black marks all over the restroom floor.” Fred did not think this was a weird thing to hear. He nodded appreciatively and dragged his Lucky Strike, exhaling a plume of thick smoke that hung between us like a priest. These were conversations we had through the years. It was our way of acknowledging a mortality we knew was inevitable, but seemed, at the time, more like a distant impossibility. We were replacing broken drywall in the shed this particular time.

“I need you to do something for me,” I said in a state of drunkenness bordering on unconsciousness. “When I die, I need you to tattoo the complete text of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in Comic Sans font, over the entirety of my shaved corpse, and drop me out of a helicopter into a moderately populated city neighborhood.”

“Why not Seuss?”

Slipping into an alcohol-induced sleep on the couch in the corner of the shed, I remember thinking *Why not, indeed. Oh, Jesus Christ, Almig...*

Having not been able to see this conversation through always stayed with me. It made me nervous. Fred, always true to his word, left the next day for Arizona. I never saw him alive after that. From that day on, whenever I was traveling in a car, or on a rollercoaster, or walking across the road to get the mail out of the box, I had a genuine fear that I would be killed. Paralyzing was the thought of ending up naked on some poor family’s coffee table with the complete text of *Red Fish, Blue Fish* tattooed in a shaky hand across parts of my body I had never been able to reach by myself. The fear was especially crippling at Christmastime.

Fortunately, Fred died first. He blew the top of his skull out in his mom’s bed out in Mesa, where he had relocated. Since our time together, he had acquired a wife and three children. I heard he had been hospitalized several times in the last two years of his life for paranoia-type behaviors.

In a small Native American town just outside of Phoenix, it is a punishable offense to not have an air conditioner in a house with small children. When Fred's air went out, the county sent workers to repair the problem. I was told Fred refused to let them in, shaking his fist and telling them he would not let them place recording devices inside his home. A man's voice, emanating from behind the snow of a dead channel, had apparently informed him about the men's *real* intentions. And the *television* wouldn't lie. Ultimately, the men did enter – once Fred had been removed by hospital orderlies. He was placed in a strait jacket in the back of a caged van. He called me a few weeks later, but I was at the DMV and didn't answer. Two months after that, his body was shipped back home to be buried next to his father and brother.

The foyer was impossibly long. My plan had been to stand quietly inside the entrance door in order to buy time to scan the room and place the names I had forgotten with the faces I couldn't escape. Incandescent lighting and the vastness of the hallway squelched the plan, however. Inside, faces were indistinguishable and distant. There was a veil of discomfort that can only be observed at death ceremonies for those with unrealized potential. It's that unique mix of disappointment, sadness, and relief – in combination with a gathering of people whose only lasting connection to one another lay in a shiny box in the corner of the room down the hallway. In these ways, funerals are like snowflakes. No two are the same.

A tall figure emerges from the crowd, and I see a face I knew once, only sadder. He's got a girl I don't recognize on his arm and it is clear that I am his destination. We were friends once. Then, I fractured his orbital bone in the parking lot

of our hometown greasy spoon because I thought he'd sold me a book of bad acid. I found out later that he hadn't, and the batch, which he'd made in his parent's basement with some chemicals he'd ordered online, was quite pure and powerful. We didn't talk much after that. His approaching me made me uncomfortable. There was a very real possibility that he would make a scene.

"Hey fetus," I said, extending the hand without my tissue notes. He took it. I was relieved.

"It's Andrew now, man," he explained, "Nobody calls me *that* anymore. This is my wife, Colleen. This is Gabriel."

"Hell of a thing, huh?" I said.

"Yea," he said, "When did you talk to him last?"

"A couple weeks ago," I lied, almost feeling as if I had to justify my being there.

"A damn shame."

Then there was that uncomfortable nod of mutual understanding about something deeper, as if we were affording each other the time to let Fred's death sink in – as if it were unfair, or too soon, or some other horrible cliché that I thought was bullshit. He was dead, and I was fine with that. I knew him, and for one ripple in time, actually thought of him as a friend. But, he was psychologically defunct, and legitimately dangerous. Who knows if he would have even recognized me walking by

him in the dank alley in the corner of which he was hiding from air conditioning repair men?

When we were in high school, Fred had won a bet and the other party couldn't come up with the money to pay. Fred gave the kid two choices: first, he could literally pay him in blood, and Fred would tie him down and strike him the face once for every dollar he owed; or, he could snort three grams of powdered Ketamine off the toilet seat of a bar of his choosing. I think Fred would have rather had him opt for the beating, but that wasn't the case.

The kid ended up with hepatitis – not from the toilet seat, but from the dirty straw Fred had given him to blow the lines with. It was a straw from the container where Fred's mom kept Adam's milk straws. The thought of that poor bastard who had lost that bet was rolling around in my head as we nodded at each other like morons.

"A shame, yes," I said, hoping to God that he would just walk away with his wife without another word. I almost got my wish. He did turn toward the door, and reached up to grab my arm in a gesture of goodbye. And without making eye contact, instead turning away, perhaps for the last time, he said, "Nice fucking suit, man." And he was gone. Moved on, I guess.

I'm not sure how the police were notified, but when they got to Adam, he was unconscious in the shed behind his house. Fred said they pumped his stomach before

getting him into the ambulance. It must have been quite a shock. After kicking in the door Adam had locked from the inside, they entered to find evidence of our incomprehensible depravity. Like a Willy Wonka meth factory.

We were drug communists. Every dime we stole, earned, or won went to our cache. We had over two hundred water pipes and bowls, of all sizes and materials, stacked in cabinets lined in chicken wire. There were rolling paper dispensers, like paper towel machines in middle school bathrooms, mounted to the walls. There was a kettle of honey on a wood burning stove we used to lather our joints. There was a fifty gallon garbage can brimming with discarded tobacco from the cigars we used to roll our pot. Interspersed with the tobacco were rusted needles and razor blades, and bloody gauze. There were scales, digital and triple beam, covered in cocaine dust and smeared with opium residue. The orange shag carpet was stiff with dried vomit and blood. There were holes, like forehead fingerprints left after what came to me known as the Night of the Fifteen Gallon Supermarket Wine.

There were guns, too. When Fred Sr. died two years earlier, Junior emptied out his basement bomb shelter of all the guns and canned goods he had accumulated over a paranoid lifetime. It must have come as quite a shock to the officers who found the half dozen WWII-era semi-automatic rifles, magazines, and canned red kidney beans stuffed down into a hole in the drywall. I wonder how the conversation went when they started pulling them out, only to find twenty-five and a half pounds of marijuana, two and a half pounds of mushrooms, eighteen thousand dollars, and a case of mason jars full of stolen jewelry. There was, after all, nothing else to do.

Fred called me when he came home and found the shed door off its hinges. I had just stashed the loot from a recent heist in that shed, and most of the hard drugs that the police found that day were mine. It was only right that I go with Fred to the hospital to check on Adam. Besides, I felt obligated. At the time, Fred had no one else. And with their mother having just left for the casino, Adam only had Fred.

I think I was looking for some sort of consolation when I stopped by the house on Shrubbery Lane on the way to the hospital that night. In hindsight, I wish I hadn't.

They took Fred into custody at the hospital before he could even speak to his brother.

It was just as I feared it would be. There had already been one service in Arizona eleven days ago. Then Fred had been flown back to Rochester to be buried with Adam and their father. The show room at the funeral home smelled like an old trash can buried in lilies out in the summer sun, where although the decomposing meat and blood had been hosed clean, the unrelenting heat continued to bake whatever remnants remained. It smelled like you put that kind of garbage can in the back of a dry cleaning establishment. It wasn't overtly offensive; but, it made it hard to think right.

Walking through the door was like walking into the past. They were all there: ex-girlfriends, old friends and enemies, teachers I recognized but didn't remember. Beside the casket were those in Freddy's family still living. It was only his sister and

mother, so I am not sure if that even qualified as a family, anymore. But there they were. And they looked fantastic.

The last time I had seen either of them was shortly after Fred Sr. had died. Adam was still alive. He had been his mother's full time job then. Well, he and the pissing, shitting dogs in the decomposing house of horrors. And there was the gambling. Sometimes she would leave for weeks at a time, spending away the meager allowance that her husband's death had left for her. She would return in the middle of the night sometime, looking like she hadn't left the slots even to take a shower. Fred and his older sister would be left to take care of their disabled sibling. With Adam gone, when Fred moved, she eventually followed him to Arizona. Apparently, removing her from Fred and Adam's childhood home had done great things for her. Her hair was clean and straight. Her dress and makeup made her look ten years younger than she ever looked ten years ago. She was smiling and light.

The sister Marya had a similar transformation. She was fit looking and wore knee-high boots and black leggings beneath a dark red sweater dress with an exaggerated orange paisley lapel. Her hair was a fantastic red. They were holding hands and laughing with those who were, I imagine, closest with Fred in the end. People I had never met, but looked like me.

I figured I could keep familiar faces away if I pretended to be shaken up. I put on my best serious face and stepped directly toward the casket. No one grabbed me, and I took a knee in front of my dead friend.

I've never been clear on what you're supposed to say or think or do at a thing like that. Are you supposed to *remember* things? If so, are they supposed to be good things or the truth? Are you supposed to speak to the dead? To God? I didn't do any of that. I just stared at Fred's head, trying to see the indentation beneath his hair where the bullet exited his brain. I just stared, not blinking. Just stared.

His face looked like clay. Somehow, his head seemed unnaturally wide. I thought I could see a ripple in his lip where the thread they used to keep his mouth closed was a little too tight, causing a wrinkle like his face were a pleat in a pair of khakis. His hands were swollen, too. As muscular as he always was, Fred was skinny and white-knuckled. Laying there dead in a box, he had rubbery hands.

"Hey, fatty," I thought. He would have thought that was funny. A desire to touch him came over me. I reached over the edge of the casket, wondering where my hand would go. I extended my arm toward his rubbery gray hands, crossed peacefully on his stomach, but something stopped me before I can touch them. Instead, I pinched the fabric on the cuff of his suit sleeve, rolling it between my thumb and index finger until it was hot.

Three childhood friends were living together in the house on Shrubbery Lane. Being neighborhood kids, we all grew up in and out of each other's parent's houses, playing football in the street and hide-and-seek after dark. We stole our first kisses from the same neighborhood girls and waited together each morning in the weird

German neighbor's driveway for the elementary school bus to pick us up. Mr. Boeger would stand in his yard in the fall, video recording us kids burrowing through the piles of brittle leaves. We had sleepovers and fights, Indian Guides and snowmen. I was a couple years the younger, and they'd watch out for me.

One of these friends changed when drugs became the thing in our town. Anthony used to ask us to go with him when he would take his trips into Ontario, Canada to pick up duffle bags full of pot. The border made him uneasy, he used to say. This was before 9/11 of course. We'd help him weigh, bag, and stack money. He'd break us off a gram or two here, spring for a communal bag of psilocybin mushrooms there. He bought the house on Shrubbery Lane when he was nineteen, and asked some of us to be his roommates. I would stay with them, but knew that moving in would mean dropping out of high school.

As his drug dealings became more lucrative, Anthony began to see himself as superior to the rest of them. He travelled to Canada a few times a month to re-up on dope, now significantly more felonious in variety than pot, and had a hotel room on retainer near the airport where he would often stay with underage girls looking for free fixes from their dealer. People he sold drugs to began calling him *Chill*. Later on, many of them didn't even know his real name. He would give the same salutation with every transaction: "Drugs Lie."

As his perception of himself became more inflated his treatment toward his roommates, one of which was my best childhood friend Jeff, became an issue for me.

Jeff was tough. He fell off of the monkey bars when he was in first grade, and the bone pierced clean through his forearm. He calmly walked up to the teacher and held out his arm, asking if he should see the nurse. The teacher managed to choke out a “Yes, Jeffrey, go” before vomiting into her hand and sobbing like a toddler.

When we were in middle school, Jeff’s brother got hit by a train. A woman washing dishes in her kitchen saw the whole thing. She looked up through her window and saw Jeff’s brother walking with his head down and his headphones on. She said he looked back over his shoulder only a few seconds before the train hit him, but the official report said that it had been an accident. I didn’t know Jeff’s brother that well. They had different fathers so he didn’t come over when our parents would drink. They were close, though. Like brothers. Jeff wasn’t as strong after that.

I spent one night on the couch in the living room on Shrubbery. On this particular morning, I was attempting to sleep off the end of a night of blotter acid and Irish Car Bombs, fluttering in and out of a fuzzy sort of half-consciousness. I heard *Chill* and Jeff arguing somewhere in the house. They could have been in the attic, or in the shower, or standing on top of me, I’m still not sure. *Chill* was yelling, though. And Jeff sounded wounded.

We were all sitting around the coffee table in the living room the night before, drooling inebriatedly and listening to *Rage against the Machine*, playing *Mario Kart* on Super Nintendo. Jeff was pouring shots and Anthony had rolled a massive joint from the inlay to Cheech and Chong’s *Up in Smoke* LP. That night, Anthony even

sprung for a little rock, which he sprinkled on top of the green herb like salt. In return, he had us count and roll his cash, and bag his dope for him. It never *used* to be a service/payment process. We obliged anyway. Twenty-seven thousand dollars in small bills. Twenty-five pounds of marijuana, separated into half, quarter, and eighth-ounce Ziploc baggies. Anthony would leave the room every fifteen minutes or so to field calls from underage girls. The thought of being stolen from never crossed his mind, I am sure. He had nothing to worry about with us. We had all been friends since we were kids, after all.

That next morning, Chill kept yelling, and Jeff was quietly taking it. I sat up to listen, eyes still closed. He kept yelling, getting angrier by the word. He said he fronted Jeff two pills of *X* two weeks ago and Jeff had not paid him back. Over and over again Chill called him *Fucking Dirt Bag Fuck*, demanding that Jeff pay him his money by the end of that day. *You fuckin' asshole fuck. You piece of fuckin' shit. Even from hell, your father thinks you're a fuckin' waste.*

My head was swimming. Jeff could hardly sleep those days, let alone work. He hadn't been right since his dad's accident. He'd changed; become – softer. Every month, his mother gave him enough money to pay the rent and to buy groceries for the house, just so he could contribute *something*. He was barely able to socialize with *us* unless he was high or cross-eyed drunk. He hadn't held a job longer than a few weeks, and he would go months without so much as leaving the house. Anthony knew all this. *Chill* doesn't seem to remember. *Why won't he fucking back off*, I remember thinking.

“Should I call you mom and let her know you can’t pay for your fucking pills,” Chill said. Something inside of me moved. I needed to make it right.

And I did. After I paid the driver and the lookout guy, I cleared just under eighteen pounds of assorted drugs in a duffle bag lined with hundred dollar bills. There was also what looked like old family jewelry, traceable, stuffed in the side zipper pockets, which I buried in the woods behind an abandoned barn in Riga. The rest went in the walls of the chicken-shed behind Fred’s house.

I hung around so it didn’t look suspicious, but they all knew. Anthony, Jeff, and the others – they all knew. When the call came in about Adam having eaten the mushrooms, Fred and I both understand the seriousness of the situation. If there were police in the shed, we were surely being pursued. We knew that, under the circumstances, the hospital was the last place we should be, but Adam wouldn’t understand that. He would want to see us. He needed to see us. So we went, anyway. And they were waiting for us inside the elevator doors. I turned seventeen in jail.

That part of my life was amputated after that. The money I took from Chill was money he owed to his drug dealer in Canada. He disappeared when his tab came due. Jeff and the others – they approached me not too long after it all went down, explaining that they knew what had happened and understood why they felt I had to do it. I never saw any of them again. I hear Jeff is now a high ranking Navy man in San Diego. *Chill* is just Anthony again, I guess.

Fred was unable to leave Monroe County for five years as part of his probation sentence following our arrest. I did a month in a cell with a guy resembling Dee Snyder before they let me out of county. It wasn't the loot they exhumed from Fred's shed that landed me there, but the fact that I got busted on camera at the Galleria mall with Anthony's credit card. They called it fraud. I thought of it more as *Fuck Him*.

Part of the agreement for both Fred and I was that we had to maintain full time jobs. And, we were to live with our parents for the duration of our probation. Neither of us were able to so much as leave our parent's houses unless we were going to or from work or school. As a result, we both made it a point to be at work or school every available moment. Our parents didn't much care for us. Shit, we didn't much care for ourselves.

I think Fred blamed me for not being there when his brother eventually did kill himself – in his mother's bed with a .22 caliber, muzzle loader rifle. He was at work when it happened – a place he resigned himself to as much as possible having gotten probation for harboring the shit that I had stolen from Anthony. He never actually said it, but the way he seemed to look past me when we shook hands at Adam's funeral said enough. We spent time together after that, but it always felt hollow and habit-like to me. The last time I saw him alive, his car was packed unbeknownst to me and he knew he was leaving the next morning. He didn't say so much as bye. A little piece of me still cares.

Leaving the house for the hospital the night Adam ate the mushrooms, there was already trouble looming on the horizon. I had been on house arrest that week, having been caught mid-coitus with a neighborhood girl by my dear dead Grandparents. I don't think my Grandfather minded so much – judging by the look on his face when I finally noticed they were standing there and looked up – but the *colored girl*, as my Grandmother referred to her, riding my bare lap like an epileptic, was too much for Nana to bear. She hadn't had enough time to fully process the Civil Rights movement of the nineteen sixties. It came as quite a shock to her.

When Fred came to my window that night, and told me the cops had been through the shed, I understood he needed me there to shoulder some of the shit that was sure to fall once we got to Adam and the hospital. My mother, already resigned to the fact that her son was a Presidential-class fuck up, split my lip as I blew past her in the hall and bolted out the front door for Fred's car. I knew I wouldn't be coming back home anytime soon when I left that night. I think I asked Fred to stop by the house on Shrubbery Lane before heading to the hospital in order to check to see if my current standing with the house would allow me to crash there after the cops were through with me. As soon as I walked in the door, my standing was quite clear.

“Sure you can stay here, man,” Anthony said, smiling through a grimace of overt hatred, “You're always welcome among *friends*.” The word hung in the air like gas. Jeff and the other eyes I could see pleading for me to go and to not come back.

Would he cut my throat in the night, I remember thinking. Considering where Fred and I were going, I strongly considered that as being a reasonable way out.

The growing crowd between Fred's coffin and the Exit doors seemed to be closing in on me like I was small game. Red hair can be a bitch in an enclosed place when you're trying to stay under the radar. I felt like a fox in a field on opening day of hunting season. People must have thought I was inconsolable judging by the amount of time I had my face buried in my tissue cue cards. And what do people do for the inconsolable, without fail? Reach out and console them more, of course. How compassionate they can be.

One of those I remembered was an ex-girlfriend, Melissa, of whom the lasting memories I have were her rolling joints on my chest, humping me in a cottage we'd broken into along the Black Creek. She hugged me and introduced me to her husband.

Another was an Asian kid, Yong, I used to live with in a halfway house. We once robbed a crack dealer behind the Jamaican spice shop downtown. The shotgun I used accidentally went off when I hit him in the face with the barrel. We ran so quickly, neither of us were really sure if we had killed the guy or not. We shook hands like gangsters and I asked him why he wasn't dead yet. He laughed, misinterpreting what I had said as a joke.

Other faces are still blurry.

“You should have been a politician, Gabe,” someone said from behind the crowd gathering to meet with me.

“I’d vie for your votes,” I said, “but I can hardly stomach talking with you fucking people.” I took advantage of the awkward laughs that statement evoked and headed for the Exit. On the way, a woman with three little girls caught my eye. I had never seen her before, I was sure of that; but, there was no denying that the faces the children wore were Fred’s. The middle one held onto a book I knew only too well. *Red Fish, Blue Fish*. I stopped to introduce myself to his Mesa family.

I took her hand before either of us spoke. “Unfortunate we have to share *this* moment in time,” I told her. We stared at each other. She looked into my eyes, but no questions lingered there, as I had expected they might. She didn’t introduce herself or ask so much as my name. In another time, we would have been great friends, I was sure.

“This is Mallory,” she said, “and Lilly, and baby Addya.”

“Adam and Marya,” I might have said. And without breaking eye contact with the widow, I said, “Get your mom home soon, girls. It’s safer back there.” She smiled softly as if she had some sort of deep insight about this truth.

“I’m gonna stick around for a while,” she said, “at least until this crowd thins out. Besides, the funeral home manager is all pissed off because some asshole marked up the bathroom floors or some shit. I’m gonna stay and help him clean up the mess. What kind of asshole would do something like that, anyway, at a funeral?” I wanted

to tell her things, but nodded sympathetically instead. “And where’d you get that wonderful suit, anyway?”

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