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Unfinished Beliefs: Three Stories and an Essay

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Kane, Adam, "Unfinished Beliefs: Three Stories and an Essay" (2017). *WWU Honors Program Senior Projects*. 36.
http://cedar.wwu.edu/wwu_honors/36

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Unfinished Beliefs

Three Stories and an Essay

by

Adam Kane

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Preface

I. Process

A place, an anecdote, a person—a mere personal quirk, a memory: one or a combination of these, when I am looking for them or when they are looking for me, nonetheless make themselves known, and I take them in images and cohere them into a plot. First I form this idea, chew on it, put lines and possible plot points down, chew on those, start to write or type the actual story, chew on that, type the rest (all the while chewing on it), and then I edit it, and—still chewing on it—I give it to people, get chewed out, then I chew on it some more, then edit it again with a few final chews until at last the jaw is too tired and the printer spits it out.

The images come easiest, and these are the buds of my stories. I do not start by wanting to lecture the reader. I do not think of an audience, or a moral. I used to, but I have learned from years of practice, and careful reading, that this is no good. The significance of the piece develops as images work together. **A** alone means nothing. But **A** to **B**, or **A** to **C** and then eventually to **B** and back to **A**—*what effect is created?* This is the grand question that, as a writer, I am learning to answer. I learned this question not from my time in creative writing classes, but from literature classes. The sense the piece creates comes from a mixture of chemicals—images, characters, sequences—that should be refined and refined again. It is through its moving parts that the story speaks.[1]

[1] To speak broadly of each of my stories, here might be their patterns: "Lightweight" is a plain **AB**, (but this structure is complicated by its self-awareness); "My Stall" has an **ABA** structure; and "Spiro's Mountain" might be said to have an **ABAC** structure. Note the progression in complexity as I worked on these.

Characters, like images, provide the dramatic effects of the story by their clash or isolation. Characters have a slow cooking time, and every time I write a story I forget this and become impatient—"Why are they not dimensional yet?" But, the subconscious needs to take time to figure the person out, in the way we normally take time to pick up people's mannerisms and true attitudes. It requires, also, seeing a person in multiple contexts, and how that person handles them—which, in a story, requires some imagination, not all of which is put on the page or at least the final draft. The narrator to "My Stall," Damien, is very real to me now, to the point that his mannerisms and words seem natural to me, as opposed to his chunkier primordial state from six months ago. I am convinced I have met Melissa, from "Spiro's Mountain," sometime in my life, though I could not tell you where.

To speak broadly, the writer must give the reader a piece that appears chiseled to the finest point. Michelangelo talks about finding the sculpture in the marble—the process is the same for any artist. To be a good artist is to develop a keen intuition as to where to chisel, and when to stop chiseling—to recognize what possibilities the piece presents to you. This is a collaboration between the art and artist. I am as surprised by the ending of "Spiro" as anyone might be. I did not think of it until I reached the last sentence. I typed it, and as I looked through what I had written I realized this epiphany was slowly building underneath the rest of the story—and so it was my job to let it come through. I am only beginning to develop this instinct.

II. The Stories

I have found that my inspiration for these stories would emblaze on the first few pages and then suddenly struggle to stay alight. My first story, "Lightweight," was a painless write for the first semi-autobiographical half—and then, when I had to interweave my own memories with

complete fabrications, the process became an unreasonable grind. I started that draft in the fall of 2015, and scrapped it in the summer. I did not complete it until this past fall, 2016. “My Stall” proved to be more difficult, as I had to find a balance between the joke of the scant plot and the oomph underneath, so the reader would not feel cheated. Begun in the summer of 2016, this one finished in January. “Spiro’s Mountain” was the problem child. This story was started and trashed in the same summer, and only resurrected from scratch this past December. It was “finished” in March. It, even as it is presented here, is certainly not complete. The final section is not fully developed, as the reader will see. This was an ambitious and hearty piece, and it is still being chewed on.

As I said, I never wrote these with any plan for a unifying theme. But I did notice some commonalities among them. My stories, if you want to give them any connecting value, might extend from that hackneyed word “stagnation”–paralysis and monotony. I try to assert something more interesting from this base theme: stagnation is diagnosed as a symptom of distraction and the passive expectation of a grand self-narrative. It is the inability to move, and as Gertrude Stein says: moving is existing. The characters do not always recognize it. The reader may not always recognize it. I myself did not recognize it until I put my own artistic ontology together (which is the final piece), but these stories all depict a central character’s struggle to exist as they believe they should. The stories are not about pinpointing this theme, but rather conveying it. The fact I never planned this theme, but I see it at the forefront of each story, stands as a personal proof that art tells us more about ourselves when we do not write our own messages.[2]

“Lightweight,” concerns Patrick, a first-year college student coming home, and attempting, in menial ways, to fulfill the shadow of a bildungsroman narrative with his friends.

[2] The essay “Spiritus Mundi” figuratively describes these ideas. The stories exercise them.

This one, if we need to fish for other themes, could also be said to explore the artistic perspective clashing with the non-artistic.

"My Stall," is like the first story in that a young man recognizes the padded room around him, but fails to reach far enough for a solution. However, it is more concerned with the struggle for communication—featuring a snarky, comedic tone and a public bathroom setting. The caging influence of genre in art plays an interesting role in the story.

"Spiro's Mountain," the most complex story, is about middle-aged Dave Spiro cheating on his morbidly obese wife Melissa with her nurse, Lisa, and what happens when Melissa finds out. Dave's home is full of junk, as is his mind, and in his passive quest for clarity, he finds more junk. This story uses maximalism to hide its spiritual undercurrent.

My stories, I regret to say, never really play with reality—which is something I do often in my music and drawings. I suppose I am learning to present things how they are before I learn to distort them in any meaningful way. With these pieces one can certainly see a progression toward more ambitious and carnivalesque themes, but they have not yet reached the high shelf of a signature distortion. I sense I am headed in the right direction.

III. Influences

These influences have come from classes and my own reading.

Nabokov, light of my literature, fire of my letters. By now he must pervade every sentence I piece together. He has nurtured my aesthetic better than anyone else, without telling me a thing. He writes in *Speak, Memory,* "while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time," an observation I grip tightly. In *The Gift* and *Pale Fire* he taught me the use of deception and puzzle as narrative

pattern. His complex, lyric sentence structures and polished metaphors are an example of the finest modern writing. He also taught me to ax the notion of utilitarian fiction—the story should not concern itself with social issues, but with a soulful resonance. In terms of narrative structure, the best example of his influence can be seen in "Spiro's Mountain." In a relatively small story, I try to utilize deception and clue to let the reader squirm a bit. I withhold information to simulate a sense of wading through filth, in anticipation of clarity. The imposition of the narrator in that story was also inspired by *Pnin*, and the sardonic, distanced tone of this narrator has that Nabokovian flair as well.

Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* embodies all the weightless freedom in writing that I am still relearning. After this monster volume, I placed a permanent plaque over my creative faculty and staff, which reads: "The best books are written joyously." He is one of my most important influences, not only because his work is delightfully clever and simultaneously ribald, but also because he clearly wrote without inhibition. Rabelais is a continual reminder that joviality belongs in literature if it is to be engaging—and this sense is certainly lost today. More specifically, Rabelais's maximalism and use of lists can be found in "Spiro," and his humor can be found in the story's carnivalesque and biblically parodic ending. Rabelaisian goofiness can be found in the penultimate image of the "sideways smile" at the end of "My Stall," and other moments of that story's puns and gasworks.

J.D. Salinger's oddly underappreciated short fiction has its place somewhere in these pages. His subtle style and astounding sense of character will always leave a distinct mark of inspiration. Namely I have been affected by *Franny and Zooey*, "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period," "A Perfect Day for Banana Fish," and "Teddy." He tackles the displacement of spiritual

matters in the modern world via complex, un-moralizing techniques—which I attempt to do in these stories as well.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is a noticeable and yet humorously unconscious inspiration for "My Stall."

The repetition of Damien's reflection, "I can't place it," is based on the Gertrude-Steinian aesthetic of repetition with changing emphasis.

Though Samuel Beckett was never much of a stylistic influence, *Endgame's* Hamm was an inspiration for Dave's sleeping body at the opening of "Spiro," suggesting his passive paralysis in opposition to the sunlight trying to reach him through the window.

Also, in this story, there is a brief note about "dust faintly falling," which is a wink at the famous ending to James Joyce's "The Dead."

Briefly, for inspiration of conservative language in the midriff of this bloated story, I pulled Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* from my shelf.

To Hemingway I owe some of the sparsity and detachedness of "Lightweight."

To Philip Roth, along with Rabelais and Nabokov, I owe yet another lending hand in the destruction of writing taboos found in *Portnoy's Complaint,* and *The Breast*. This bathroom talk certainly shows itself in "My Stall."

And who knows how many cartoons and comics during all my years of upbringing affected my sense of humor.

IV. Briefly, On the Essay

"Spiritus Mundi," the closing note, is a small speech on art's sorry condition in the modern world, and why it might be so. This was not part of the original project plan, but I was

moved to write it from personal observations and from class discussions, and saw that it fit the undertones of my stories. I drew from Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and Gertrude Stein's "Portraits and Repetition." The former describes the spiritual environments in which art can thrive, and the latter describes how to move in a motionless culture. These were direct influences, but I was moved to write the piece because I saw these ideas everywhere, in every bit of news, class discussion, and book. "Spiritus" is written in a style inspired by Tolstoy's axiomatic "Wise Thoughts for Every Day," though it certainly departs from that. The title is not Latin pretension, but a reference to W.B. Yeats's concept of a collective, universal soul—a spiritual realm from which artists derive their images.

Lightweight

A garland of brake lights climbs the highway up ahead and Andrew starts to pump the brakes of his station wagon.

"Goddamn rush hour lasts three hours," Andrew says.

The sky is lavender, the sun a dull red ball, duller than the brake lights. A recent series of fires in the eastern forests has warped the colors of the western sky, wearing the landscapes of Maple Valley down to a matte texture. The trees and mountains are the stuff out of faded polaroids. I'm sitting passenger, the air conditioning breathing on my chin—Andrew eats the fries from the bag between his spider legs, one hand on the wheel. We are at a complete stop.

"Well," he says. "Text em we'll be late."

"How late?"

"I don't know. Half an hour? We're really close."

I type the message and send it—the music quietly rumbles, Andrew turns it up. Hunching forward, he mimics the polyrhythms of prog rock, drumming esoterically, precisely. He takes a break from his drum show to eat a handful of fries; a true musician.

"Nothing makes you feel as deadbeat as rush hour does. You ever want to make someone feel purposeless you sit them down for rush hour."

"But—hey," I say. "Look. *Look.* We can stare at the sun! How often—*how often*—do you get to *do* that." I keep my tone dry, falsely rehearsed.

"Oh but I stare at it—all the time." His voice adopts the theatrical monotone I have set. "I—love the sun."

I laugh but I wish I hadn't—it throws me out of the scene, the weird play of broken-brainness we have going. But then he joins, it doesn't matter. The car smells like fried oil. The air conditioning is like bad breath. We are at a complete stop.

"But, really though," I say. "How often do you get to stare at the sun?"

"Yeah. It's apocalyptic-looking. This is weird."

"The sun?"

"No the rush hour. It's like seven o'clock, why is this happening? This road is never this bad at *five* o'clock."

"I don't know."

The cars begin to crawl.

"We're moving now," I say.

"It'll probably stop again."

The cars creep along.

I haven't seen Andrew since winter; we're having a mini reunion between us and a couple other friends who have all split up to attend various colleges in Washington and the rest of the country. We're all freshman. Andrew goes to a music school in Michigan.

Traffic continues to slow and stop and slow. Around a bend we slowly progress, and in the distance blue and red lights blink.

"You've got to be kidding," he says. "An *accident* is what slows people down. They can't just drive past it?"

"Well, they slow down for safety don't they?"

"I mean maybe," he says. "Mostly I think people just want to see it."

We begin to drive past the scene. There is a white Mini Cooper with its trunk smashed inward and a galaxy of glass spilled on the ground beneath. A blue van behind it has a crumpled nose and brown fluids spitting out of it. The police officers are talking to an older blonde woman in white, who seems more frustrated than shocked, and over by the shoulder an old man holds a trembling cigarette.

"You know," I say. "I don't think I've actually ever seen a car accident actually happen."

After a pause: "Me neither." Andrew drums on his knees as we drift by, sometimes touching the wheel. "They're always aftermaths."

"It's terrible but—I would like to, at least once—I mean, if that makes sense," I say. That seems wrong to say.

"No, it does. I kinda do too."

As we pass, traffic begins to pick up again. In the rearview mirror I see the woman pointing at the man with the cigarette. I turn and there's the burnt eye of the sun.

Andrew's house smells as though it has been ironed, like a big dress shirt. It is completely dark—all of the shades are down because the rest of the family is on a day trip to his grandparent's. The light from the doorway ignites two little yellow candles: his cat is sitting under the dining room table. Our legs chase her away as we sit down and eat our Wendy's.

"So Patrick," Andrew says, through a burger, "When Kenny and Carson get here we're probably going to smoke."

I expected that.

"Mm-kay."

I must have a look on my face.

“You don’t have to,” he says. His expression is decidedly straight. He must be imagining all kinds of PSA-like mantras whining in my head. He knows I’ve been the good kid since high school when everyone started doing it. He thinks that I think I’ll become a tweaked-up junkie, or that I will get lung cancer and die, or I’ll mess up my brain, or that I’ll become impotent, or that I’ll smell bad and my family will know what’s up, and lecture me when it’s no big deal, Mom, or any of that. Though if my mom or dad knew they would never look at me the same. What with the thing with my cousin, growing his own stuff and never leaving his shack of a house.

“You’re free to try. But we’re going to.”

“Okay,” I say. “I might, I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I know.”

I might.

After dinner we sit in the living room and watch videos until the doorbell rings once, twice, and then the third time is interrupted by a fourth as Andrew runs to open the door. He opens it to Kenny’s dopey smile under a flat rimmed red hat (a fifth bell rings). His stature reminds me of a weeping willow—a skinny, slumped stature with clothes hanging off his limbs, and Carson, big and humdrum with an evasive hair problem, behind, says “Hi Patrick.”

“Hi,” I say from across the room.

“We should get going,” Andrew says. “It’s already getting dark.”

“Well you can thank Captain Slumberpants for that,” Kenny says. “I had to call him three times to wake him.”

Carson's expression does not change—he still stares into middle space. He's smart, casually encyclopedic—one of the smartest people I've met. Behind him the folds of the purple sky are much darker than earlier.

"Great well are you ready to go?"

"Yeah, we are."

I get up to put my shoes on. Andrew grabs his backpack with the bong inside.

"Captain Slumberpants…"

We make our way through Andrew's neighborhood, past all the new houses, the lawns have that trim and prim crispness—lush and silvery blue at dusk, the dandelions glowing along the property lines and in the creases of the sidewalks, kids running and riding on bikes trailing across lawns and past all the closed garage doors, the parents hiding inside or in the backyard. That haze from the fires is only visible in distant trees and houses drained of color in the neighborhood up the hill.

Andrew reaches into his backpack and pulls out a box of cigarettes and a lighter. He taps the box and a cigarette falls into his hand. It slides between his fingers and meets his lips and lights it. You can tell by the way Andrew looks about with the thing hanging loose out of the corner of his mouth, that he feels old, gritty, asymmetric and chaotic and, maybe, unlikeable. We are in a square formation—Kenny is up ahead with Andrew, Carson is walking with me behind.

"Hey Patrick, you know what's fun," Carson leans to me, face unchanging, looking at Kenny galloping in front. "Well, just something to look forward to—when Kenny's high, he acts casebook stoner. Cheech and Chong grade."

"Really? How?"

“Dancing, long laughs, over-sentimental digressions. All of that.”

“Dancing?”

“Yeah.”

“Well I’ll look forward to that then.”

“You should. Being sober around high people is not as boring as being sober around drunk people.”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’ll do it.”

“It isn’t a big deal, Patrick,” Andrew says without turning around. “It won’t do much to you. It just makes things slow down, makes you look at everything a little differently.”

My parents’ judgement leers, somehow, through a window upon my harmless independence. No Big Deal, depending on your preference, means you might as well or you might as well not. I look out at the box houses and the kids, and tell myself I’ll do it already.

We stop by Seven Eleven because Andrew forgot to bring a bottle of water for the bong. We sit on the curb with the backpack while he kills his cigarette and goes inside. We watch the gas station. An SUV pulls up and a toad-like woman in bellbottom jeans and feathered red hair gets out and slides her card down the machine once, and after a bewildered pause, a second time.

No one says anything for a while. I look at the beige walled stores and parking lots across the road. As always, dads and tweens walk in and out and stand around outside of the Safeway with heads hanging down at phones or looking around at people like me, all waiting for people. Cars move in and out of the gas station in a clockwork fashion—it’s hypnotic, having the effect of a time-lapse video in real time. Toad Woman is still there.

“Being in a college town makes you see how boring Maple Valley is,” Kenny says. “Nothing to do here unless you’re hungry or need gas.”

“They’ve had that empty strip mall there since I was home last Christmas,” Carson says. He’s pointing to the strand of empty shops with red FOR LEASE signs in each of the windows. He goes to school in California at some place I can’t remember but it might be Cal Poly.

“That woman’s been fidgeting with the buttons on that machine for like a minute now,” I say.

“But going to Pullman, there’s at least a movie theater, bowling,” Kenny says. “Some bars.”

“You can’t drink yet,” Carson says.

“But when I *can*—look out.”

That woman finally gets her card swiped and now she’s filling the tank.

“Do you like California, Carson?”

“It’s good—everything is twenty minutes away—but it’s good.”

“She’s picking her nose.’

“I would like California.”

“Mhm.”

“Pullman’s alright but it’s surrounded by nothing. Just flat nothing.”

“What about the bars and the bowling?”

“She’s still going.”

“You kind of wear those places out after a bit too.”

“Well you can be bored in California, trust me.”

“I’ve never seen such shameless picking.”

The automatic doors slide open: “Alright,” says Andrew with a half-liter of Aquafina, “’sgo.”

The sound of traffic lightens. We pass by an old playground and descend into an unkempt field with a thin dirt trail between dry foothills of sharp grass. Above, the skeletal poses of transmission towers match the height of the forest we are walking towards, backlit by the afterglow of the purple dusk—and everything else is small.

We follow the dirt path into the woods. It is already dark by the time we reach the spot—an open glade with the stream hushing somewhere nearby.

Andrew takes the bong, the lighter, some little cylinder, and the weed out of a gallon sized Ziploc in the backpack. That woody smell is released and brushes my eyes with a brambly scent. Seeing pot smokers only on TV and in movies and all, and only smelling it on Friday nights passing by college apartments, the little green flakes in front of me have an unreal, climactic quality. Stupid as it sounds, I think to myself that this is how the passage into adulthood feels—no bravery to be had, like in all those bildungsroman books. You have to wait to feel older. I might feel older.

Andrew pours the water down the bong’s throat-like opening. He stops filling it and a precise point, adding a few drops here and there. He sits it between his legs and he leans over it. The bong neck looks cartoonishly phallic, and so Andrew looks like one of those excitedly well-endowed fertility god statues. He puts his mouth in the bong’s mouth (I laugh only in my head) and inhales as the bubbles start their glassy laugh.

“Just making sure I don’t have too much,” he says to me. It’s for my uneducated benefit but I don’t know what that means. It’s getting darker; everything is blue.

He takes the weed and puts it in the little cylinder and twists it around and around.

"Is this the God Gas?" Kenny says with a searching smile.

"Yeah. That's what the guy called it."

"It's not gas," Carson says.

Andrew is still grinding the little cylinder.

"That's enough, Andy," Kenny says.

"No, you're supposed to grind it a lot," Andrew says.

When he finishes he opens the cylinder and taps the green stuff into the little tube funnel thing on the bong. It falls into the water and he says God Dammit.

"Oop, you snapped the bowl," Kenny says.

"I know," Andrew says.

"Wait is it broken?" I ask.

"No he just snapped the bowl."

"'Snapped the bowl?'" I ask.

"The pot's too powdery and it gets sucked through the bowl into the water and you lose it," Carson says.

"How does it fall *through* the bowl?"

"That thing there—" he points to the little tube. "That's the bowl."

"Not the big round part? that's not the bowl?"

"No, that's the chamber not the bowl."

"Oh, looks like a bowl."

"Yeah."

“Fuck,” Andrew says. “I’ve ground it that much before and it’s been fine but whatever.” He pulls out more weed, grinds less, and this time it stays in *the bowl*. He takes out his lighter and holds it up to the bottom of *the bowl*.

The throat of the bong fogs up. Andrew inhales, his features shrinking—he pulls the little bowl out of the bong—and he removes his face from the mouth, refusing still to breathe, his lips shrunk and his chest inflated, keeping it in, and then finally, he lets go and a milky smoke tumbles out.

In the dark, it has an apparitional quality, a lethargic ghost climbing up and up, at odds with the night coming on, bleeding into the blue.

Beautiful, except—it smells like a cat soaked in pee, tossed into a tire fire. I’m a lightweight, I know from times my dad has given me half-finished beers before. I am anxious I’ll get high without trying. I shouldn’t do it—I have to drive tonight, drive home tonight. It smells awful.

Andrew gives the bong to Carson. He takes a hit and upward rolls the smoke. I feel it on my eyes. I breathe in.

“Good,” Carson nods to the bong.

“You alright, Pat?” Andrew asks me. He never calls me Pat.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Sorry,” he says, in kind of a laugh.

I must have a look on my face.

So we sit, and we talk, and once in a while a puff goes up, and I breathe it in. It’s dark to the point that everyone is a silhouette and the only light is the dark blue between the trees. I hear

rustling once in a while and I'm worried the animals are coming out. No one else seems to notice either because they don't hear it or they don't care. I don't want to care. They each affirm they start to feel it. Kenny was first but his hit was longer and then Andrew and then Carson does. Carson says Patrick, it does something to your perspective and that's why it's nice because he's looking up at the trees right now but he's seeing all the shapes made by the space in between the trees. I don't have to be high to see what he means; I can see the space between the trees—these blue triangles of glass between spaces of black like a storyless stain glass window.

Something's rustling in the bush and Kenny gets up and he starts doing some dance because Andrew quoted some show from when we were kids—I think it was Spongebob—and there's this part where Spongebob dances and we laugh but the guy needs to tone it down. He'll be first to be eaten I say and laugh before realizing no one knows what I'm talking about, the rustling bushes. Carson tells him to sit down he always does this and Kenny asks what and Carson says make an ass of yourself. I think of Spongebob and then I think of Captain Slumberpants and the idea of fantastically huge eyes on Carson's ass and I start talking about Slumberpants to everyone before I realize it and because of that I laugh before I finish talking about him. Kenny's stupid hat. Red shelf visor. I hear more rustling in the bushes and I'm resigned to anything that wants to pop out at us. I know I'm kind of high at this point how did that happen even though I didn't take anything, and it's upsetting like being dragged somewhere you hate, and now I'm certain, like I thought, that I am not good at this, this pot thing, its making me a mush mouth and I don't know if I'm thinking something or saying it. They know it at this point because Kenny says Stop you're not even high but Carson asks me how I'm doing and I just laugh. And something about it makes me depressed to laugh and I just want to go home or go back to school but there really isn't any difference I guess because I go to school fifty minutes

away from home it's all the same like exile without going anywhere and this little dark circle we're in isn't anything new to me no bildungsroman manro dungsbil dungsman bilro Andrew called me Pat earlier like we were eight or something. It's so dark that stain glass is gone.

We are passing through the neighborhood, heading back to the house. I don't feel high anymore. The streetlights are orange and give the neighborhood dark granular features. No one is outside.

"Is there anything to do tonight?" Carson asks.

"We could play *Wordspill*," Andrew says. *Wordspill* is a game where you each make up sentences with a few given words and whoever has the funniest ones wins.

"That would be so good right now," Carson says. "Patrick could kill that high."

"He didn't get high," Kenny says.

"I feel fine. I was going to head home, actually," I say. "I have stuff in the morning."

Andrew groans theatrically. "Alright. You here the rest of the week?"

We are at Andrew's house now.

"Yeah," I say. "I'm here."

I say bye to everyone—Kenny gives me a one-armed hug. Everyone heads inside. Andrew's cat is staring at me through the window.

I get in the car, start it, and roll down the windows. I back out of the drive and head home. There is no one on the road at this hour—I press on the pedal and go ten over the speed. The stale air is nice; the sky above the empty yellow city is burnt red, completely shrouded over with clouds or smoke. I go twenty over. A dry white streak of lightning twitches and bolts above the arrowheads of faraway trees. I laugh some, I go thirty over. It's the sort of grand godly image

I realize I've probably seen over and over, but never remember. I want to remember it—I ask myself, I tell the circumstances I call myself, to remember it. I wait for thunder.

My Stall

I want to capture, as vividly as I picture it, a sprawling chateau, villa, or some elaborate estate that resides on, say, a lush and gentle hill, descending gently to a humble village in France, Spain, or something, with characters mulling over marriage and manners and inheritance—fair problems with fair pale beauties and their tight Victorian corsets rousing the wiles of fair men in bowties. I would love to frame perfectly the dark and damp alleys where men in trench coats, aiming glossy dark pistols through the rain, solve murders via murder—but every script I write comes out stillborn. ~~Lil~~—(^Mistake. Thought I heard someone.) Like some third grader's drawings, the characters read themselves back to me (^mixed metaphor) stiff-jointed and teased of the third dimension. However I may try, and however sacrilegiously it is pulled off by the foggy realm of "other writers," I can't divine a person spontaneously into existence; I can't build the foundations of unthought places. They have been built. Everyone has been born. But—I'm a good writer. So, it is by my professional diagnosis that I prescribe you (me), Damien, to try something tactless, some ugly true bona fide nonfiction, and we'll see what catches.

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A quick portrait: a post-community college left-over, currently staying at his mom's new apartment, doing some screenplay writing, saving to move to L.A., and so on. When I read my own biography, I am a little haunted by a sense of cultural prepackaging, but, I tell myself, no person is a living cliché. After all, my mom's new apartment is easy to characterize: very nice, a good place to stay; a brand new three-story brick building on the expanded part of town; the place has white untouched walls and fresh, soft carpeting. Moving boxes with labels like

KITCHEN and ~~LAWRENCE'S PAPERS~~ DAMIEN'S BABY TOYS are stacked about like frayed alphabet blocks. Mom has not had time to unpack very much, I have tried not to unpack very much. I am trying to stay uprooted—all the applications I have been sending to film schools keep me on my toes.

I work late shifts at *Howard's Video,* one of the last movie rental places in the fenced parking lot we inhabitants lovingly call Glenview, Washington. *Howard's* is located in a little mall-type complex with other local stores. It's a clean, faded white complex with tense metal fixtures and a little round fountain in the center courtyard. *Howard's Video* sits slumped on the first floor, its sign a single, burning, fluorescent worm tracking the round letters. *Howard's* looks how you might picture a rental place: rows of DVDs on red wire racks, and yellow walls with bright or bleak blockbuster posters in plastic frames. The carpet is a splotchy lava lamp design of yellow and purple. The bluish lights, to add another candied flavor, make the clownish colors seem to glow. For all its ugliness, we keep the place tidy; the DVDs are kept in alphabetical order, never at a slant, thanks to yours truly. Howard is usually slumped in the back room on the computer keeping busy, and thankfully is afraid of young people and so talks to us very little. Kate, the only coworker I usually see for evening hours, on the other thankful hand, is personable, and tends to handle most of the customers. I tend to focus on the DVD sorting, cataloging, and the cleaning.

I have a stall, I call it my stall, (^Do I? I don't, to anyone. I suppose, in unworded thoughts my mind has stamped the stall a rightly possessive label) in the third floor public restroom no one use~~C~~s (^sorry thought I heard something again, should write with pencil). As far as bathrooms go, this one is a bathroom: white on white on white, tiles and stalls and toilets. What sets it apart, though, is the seats are free of kinked hairs and pee spots, and walking in you

smell only the bleachy perfume of a clean bowl. No one uses the third floor restroom. The stores on that floor are all gift shops and local art places selling blindingly vivid Washington landscapes and bears catching salmon in their mouths; Mom & Pop stands that only get visits on weekends in the summer. And so, naturally, no one is ever there. The first floor of the complex, however, is heavily populated. I'm not a germophobe (^when is one, officially?) but, the typical public restroom ecosystem, polluted with the guttural sounds of grunting and spaloinking, spurting out of paper-thin stalls, fumigating the air with God knows What…this is not conducive to business. (Occasionally, I would run into my boss there too, and so what's worse is hearing those noises and breathing those smells from bloated old Howard's end.) I would be at a stall and I stare at a tile and try to forget anyone is near but I could never relieve my body of its pressures. These distractions, also, kept me from writing anything. I would have my pen out, ready to let lines flow down the page—and then a squelch, a wipe from some bloated sta~~ll~~lwart neighbor, and…nothing to write. This would be a problem almost daily when I used the first floor bathroom. The second floor is almost as bad as the first, but the third—the third is nearly vacant and thereby pristine.

My Stall is at the very end of the restroom, as far from the door as possible, and I use it for every type of business since, of course, urinals don't have stall doors. And, ~~w~~rightly, I am allowed a quiet place to sit and write. I bring with me a small black notebook ("Cogito Ergo Sum" embossed on the front), a Pearlman F6 Black ballpoint pen (I might start using a pencil) and, sometimes, a pack of gum. I will sit, sometimes for a half an hour, writing…

The amount of graffiti in the stall is relatively little: one oversimplified phallic drawing, and big, struggled, straight lines reading FUCK, a cultural staple of the bathroom wall. (^What overcomes someone so that they pull a pen out of their pocket, bag, tote, what have you, and

bring it to the stall door to etch in some empty expletive that does nothing to, or for, anyone? It is nothing, null, dead space to anyone that reads it. The easy first guess is that this is just the after-muttering of some bored, angsty teenage boy. But it's not just teenage boys—I was a custodian at my old high school—I've seen FUCKs in all of the bathrooms, including the Staff Lounge bathrooms, both genders—apparently it's a universal need—pervading all facets of mankind—that we must write here—in a place of relief—single, isolated words we think are offensive or edgy. I'm not offended—I'm perplexed.)

I can't owe it to anything other than boredom and curiosity that one day in April I had finally decided to leave a more meaningful mark. I had my pen with me. I wrote: *I THINK, THEREFORE I AM!*

Maybe a little pompous, in retrospect—think what you will—but someone responded to it.

It wasn't for a couple days, but I made my way into the stall and sat. And there was an answer: *I THINK, THEREFORE I ~~AM!~~* SHIT.

Well.

That day, I only had a pencil. But when I finished my visit and went back to work, I took a pen from the desk and put it in my pocket for the next appointment. I spent the rest of the time in the store thinking of my response. I could just write the person off; I could say NO, or *YOU'RE* SHIT. But I'm not going to get into an endless line of insults. I could simply rewrite the AM—but that would be pointless. He would just cross it out again. I could have said nothing—that would have been the conventional, "mature" thing, a figurative walking away, like what your parents tell you to do with a bully, but I didn't want this to die. This was My Stall; this was the décor of my place. You don't just defile it for no good reason.

When I was in there again, before even using the toilet, I scratched in: EXPLAIN.

I figured it could go two ways—either, he engages, and comes up with some smart answer to explain his lazy amendment, or he will write something of little to no value that only rehashes what he has already said. Either way—there was a small thrill. It occurred to me that he could say nothing, because he won't return. If he was just some customer wandering by, he could have written that in passing. To me this seemed unlikely; no one ever uses the restrooms up here. It must have been a staff member. Someone at that craft store or the art store or the arts and crafts store. Or, God forbid, Howard himself.

The next day, I burst through the door and held my gaze away from it for a moment, just to imagine briefly the response—and there was nothing on the stall.

For a long time now, I haven't been able to talk to people comfortably. And by "people" I mean that generic mass of *peo*ple, not Mom, or the gang from high school, or Dad. But I don't even talk to any of them very much, except for Mom, now. Of course, I work at a video rental place, and so inevitably I have to work with *peo*ple, but it wasn't like finding a film-related job in town was easy, and it's not like I have to deal with that many people at *Howard's Video*, when no one really rents anymore and Kate is usually ready to talk to them. On those nights where Kate is busy and I have to ring someone up, my anxieties are sometimes alleviated by doing voices. Vicariously, I can evoke a version of myself to talk to people. I just do it through voices I can mimic from movies or people I know. The most common ones I do are my dad, and a subtle version of Jimmy Stewart. I like doing Jimmy, because I have gotten good at capturing that jowly drawl without scaring anyone. My dad's voice, in turn, is nasal and flat and declarative like Orson Welles. I do that one only when I'm tired of Jimmy.

For the next three days there was still nothing. I came in, checking with a languid eye, paradoxically pleased and disappointed, with that reflexive told-you-so attitude at the sight of an unchanged stall. What was I expecting? I would have even liked a new response from a new hand. I know it was no big deal, it was no big deal, it was graffiti. But this whole thing had some sort of value to it. I couldn't place what it was. I can't place it. This connection was remote, strange, unconventional…I can't place it. There was a potential here that was not being engaged. Something remote. Something a waste. I can't place it.

The Men's Room door opened and I heard footsteps. I tensed up and immediately paused my work. The footsteps came up, and I could see the ankles stop in front of my stall, and bend slightly. I hoped he wouldn't try to open it—he didn't, and moved on. Was it him? He must have checked to see if this stall, my stall, *My* Stall, was taken. I tried not to get ahead of myself—anyone would want the end stall. That didn't mean it was anyone in particular. Rooted in my seat I squirmed. *But… maybe so,* said that voice, you know the one, the countering voice which shows up at every fork in the road, every conflict of judgement, every decision.

I needed to give a subtle signal to check if it was him. He opened the stall next to mine, the middle stall, instead of the stall at the other end of the line—likely a signal of his own.

I tapped my foot.

He coughed.

I coughed back.

A foot skirted.

I pretended to sneeze.

Bless you, he said.

It was so dry, so disingenuous, my sneeze—he had to have known.

I don’t know why I felt so ambitious. I did it in my Jimmy Stewart voice.

“*I think, tharfor I shit?*” I said.

—

(null, dead air.)

It was probably not him. I stayed in the stall as he flushed, washed his hands rapidly, and left. He didn’t dry them off.

This is all easy to for me to write now, but when it happened I took it very seriously. I sat and waited and stared at the sentiments on my stall door, and later when I finished and as the toilet water laughed down the bowl and gulped, I took out a pen and crossed out everything so it read ~~*I THINK, THEREFORE I AM!* SHIT.~~

There was just a simple constellation of FUCK, EXPLAIN, and a penis doodle.

I didn’t want to talk to anyone for a long time and so I stayed there for a while. This kind of embarrassment was at least anonymous, and much better than my middle school encounters, when twice in one week my stall was breached by other kids. The first time, it was just a broken lock on the door, and George Wheatley waltzed in casually and saw me as I had stood up to finish, and we both stared paralyzed at each other for too long, and after that we never spoke a word to each other. The second time was when the black hearted Dillon Fogel busted in, having followed me from gym, presumably just to laugh at me. His glare, my second wind of embarrassment, was particularly terrifying, and he of course made his findings far more public than George Wheatley.

The vent in the ceiling whirred; a spec of a fly ran suspended laps in the clean, florescent air. I waited for it to leave before I unbuckled.

When I came back to the store, Kate asked if I have been eating alright.

After I walked home that pitiful day I climbed the stairs, and saw a faint gold glow out of the cracked apartment window next door. I slowed a little, kept my head forward but turned my eyes out of curiosity: my neighbor, Mrs. Lauren, a woman of about forty or so, was reading in her unmade bed, entirely topless—breasts plain and deflated, like half-used whoopee cushions, cozily tinted by the bedside lamp, blemished in spots here and there, her black frazzled hair tied and billowing modestly. I felt my own guilt peering at me close behind, but the scene was warm, and I could not turn away just yet. Her brow was furrowed, pressing her tiny eyes toward her book, rendering a tattered frown softly worn. She breathed in slow timid rhythms. This woman was just reading like this, with the window open. And then (to think—!) I entertained a delirious urge to get her to turn, to say something to her—it would be very easy, just a tingle of the vocal chords and anything could come, but I didn't know what that would be, and for a millisecond or more, I felt as though I were going to do it. I wanted her to move, to be more than a still life, and I wanted that movement to point its terrible implication to me. I made a small sound, proving I could do it: *(Op!)* Louder? Suddenly that stern voice, in the garden of forking paths: *But…maybe not.*

I climbed the stairs into the apartment, relieved. I have noticed it is only after a decision is made, having had time to dry, that you turn back and see your forking path, after all, did not fork. (^Mixed metaphor, watch out.)

When I got inside Mom was heading to bed. She had her robin's egg robe on and no makeup and tired eyes as if she just woke up. She asked me how was work Damien?

"Fine."

Just fine as always? You don't seem like you're fine. Did you write anything today?

"Yeah."

What'd you write about? (Perky, casual.)

"I don't want to talk about it."

Alright—(fishing for something, something)—Hey, did that guy respond to you yet?

"No."

Okay, well you need to bug him again. This is important to you isn't it?

"It isn't a big deal."

Yes it is. If he doesn't get back to you, try again. But, you need to have a plan B with other schools. Maybe something cheaper, honey. I thought your uncle had good connections at that place but apparently not. Oh well. Where else are you looking?

"I don't know. I wish you would stop talking about it like it's a big deal."

Please don't talk to me that way. Like you're a caricature of a thirteen-year-old. Yes thirteen, because you close yourself off like you're going through puberty again and *No one gets me, man*. Make things harder for yourself than they need to be. Oh, don't—don't give me that. Okay. I'm going to bed. Can I ask you a favor? Tomorrow morning take those eggs back to Mrs. Lauren for me—I have an early morning. I left a reminder on your nightstand. Dinner is in the fridge.

I was not feeling well and so, like some tragic character out of a bad movie, I grabbed some of the vodka she keeps in the bottom cabinet in the kitchen and poured too much. It was not long before the world was turning ahead of my eyes, and there were these trashy little fruit flies hovering around in the kitchen I tried to wipe away, and I went to the bathroom with a

Sharpie and shut the white door, frustrated, and after I flushed I etched on the new wall in Mom's new apartment a big ugly FUCK on the wall and I chuckled, and went to my room, pants at my ankles, and fell onto my bed. I laughed into the pillow like FUCK meant something very clever, but I couldn't tell you, soberly, what that would be.

The next morning, when I was still asleep, my mom burst in to confront me about the bathroom wall, surprised to be greeted by my other end's embarrassed sideward smile.

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Scrap. There is little plot, there's almost nothing compelling about it, and the characters are hazy and virtually unfamiliar. Nonfiction breeds that new indulgent, aimless writing…

EXT: A ~~w~~bright white day on the countryside

Spiro's Mountain

"Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. *(Pause.)* Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap."

–Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

I lived next door to him, and I never really talked to him, but after all the commotion I asked him what had happened—and later I asked again but to tell it again with more detail, so I knew where to go with the whole thing, and then he invited me over to the place and I gave the piece some more detail and, lo, it all came together, this whole little thing came together:

It was January, it was sundown. Almost-old Dave Spiro was snoring with a stained towel cloaking his face, the faded wintery red sunlight sparkling on it, straining to touch him from over the horizon, over the mountains, buildings, behind the pines, through the slide door of his den and at last to his recliner. His forty-two-year-old body was full and slightly oblong, like a stuffed scarecrow, and it was very deep into sleep, limp in its dungarees. Dave was dreaming, in an amber haze, of being chased by a goat, gray and thin and much like the one that had breached his wife's garden only yesterday, sniffing around, casually eating 'her' newly budding strawberries—of which Dave and Lisa mostly tended—and strolling back home, leaving Melissa in a fit.

Dave Spiro roomed with his wife, Melissa, in a flat house on a two-acre property with a small hill descending behind them, toward one of the quieter parts of Western Washington: a

forested area, stuck between Tacoma and Seattle, a glowing line of grass twitching in a sidewalk crack.

The beer between his thighs fell to the ground as his legs sharply sprung out (the goat had apparently caught him). He awoke, arms flinging up. They stayed raised until his head collected the necessary items to know where he was. Recliner, feet, TV, slide door, hill, trees. Collected, he heard his beer lapping into the carpet. He mumbled soft, obscene words as he picked up the can. He stood up, took a good swig, and looked at the stairs. It must have been around five, so Lisa was still tending to Melissa up in the bathroom.

There was nothing on but the news, so Dave circled around the room trying to busy himself with something, moving this and that around, sighing and stretching as the TV played. A half an hour before he would go upstairs…a half an hour was just enough time to have nothing to do.

The den and the garage made up the first floor, whereas the kitchen and bedrooms made up the second. The den was a primary artery for the house's junk stream, almost exactly half of it from Dave, half from Melissa. It was cluttered with boxes full of papers legal or sentimental or useless: property agreements and tax papers and letters and birthday cards and Christmas cards and New Year's cards and newspapers and copies of *Cosmopolitan*. Around shelves and on the floor there were crumbs and wrappers and bottles and one of Lisa's hair pins. Two bicycles, one rusty one new, leaned on the wall. Among trash sat old dolls and infestations of old knickknacks such as the minor Pez candy dispenser collection Melissa had started and quit (settling instead on just buying the candy), featuring the likes of Tweety Bird, Bugs Bunny, Santa Clause, a policeman with a punching-glove jaw, Chewbacca, Count Dracula, Vincent Price, and a jack-o'-lantern. Lying around were stacks of DVDs and VHS tapes, in unalphabetical order: *Old Yeller,*

Babe, Jaws 3D, Finding Earl, Temple of Dusk, Dracula, The Cannonball Run, The Temper, Freaks, Die or Consequences, Austin Powers, The Good Dad, Boogie Nights, Nightmare Before Christmas, Fear in a Handful of Dust, Dracula: Special Edition, Animal House, The Fast and Furious 3, The Way We Were, Wasting Time, Bowling, The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, Friday Night Lights Season 1, Saturday Night Fever, Tuesdays with Maury, My Dinner with Andre, The Breakfast Club, and more. In wrinkled cardboard boxes and on shelves and tabletops, there was a mixture of old hardcover books and yellowed mass market paperbacks with bright bold titles such as *She Wants My Soul, Driven Crazy, Lord of the Flies, Gretchen the Immaculate, Dawn of Memories, Automobiles and You, The Last Alive, You and Your Car, Code: Blood, Odessa the Frisky, Trembling Fingers, In Cold Blood, Dracula, Women in Love, Dammit!, Finding Mr. Right* (an old one), *How Am I Doing Down There?, Cooking on a Budget, Tangled Up in Bleu Cheese, Exotic Hamburgers, The Holy Bible, The Greatest Gift: Baking Tips from My Uncle, Dracula, The Mechanic's Bible, Hairstyles of the Rich and Famous, The Sex Lives of Famous People, Laughter on the Dock, Deception,* and *Word Games*. Wedding paraphernalia, such as pictures of Dave and Melissa standing by the lake, Dave and Melissa nuzzling and smiling by the lake, and Dave and Melissa kissing in front of a priest, were smushed into the same boxes as some old clothing: shirts red or gray or blue or yellow with navy stripes (and one white with a delicate frayed hems and a low neckline), jeans and shorts and jean shorts, sweaters with various knit-pixelated joyous critters—all of which no longer fit Melissa. Over the TV: a soft-spoken samurai sword with a wasp-like handle Dave bought for cheap at a garage sale. In crates: Dave's records next to some bags of dishes and silverware, a ceramic crucifix from Dave's hopeful delirious mother, some stuffed animals from Melissa's youth (such as the teddy bear Dave won her at the Puyallup Fair), old speakers, old sneakers, desk parts, dust-draped art.

All of this in Dave's periphery as he looked outside at Melissa's garden and the woods beyond, shining sundown sprinkling godliness over all, washy lightheadedness still rolling about him. He was called upstairs.

"H—Dave," a voice interrupted itself. It was Lisa's voice. "Dave, Melissa wants you to come upstairs."

His head was no longer light.

"Coming."

For a moment he stood, and then, slowly, up the stairs he went.

Dave and Melissa seldom talked anymore. He saw her when Lisa was not around. Weekends, he brought her breakfast and sometimes watched television with her, but few words were spoken. (Those two days were difficult.) During the week, he slept in the guestroom, and when he came home from the garage where he worked, he napped until Lisa was done cleaning her. As he climbed the stairs he noticed the gossamer corners under one of the plywood steps, where a pregnant-looking spider shined like coal on its white cotton bed. He reached the kitchen and looked down the hall to the open door.

'Morbidly obese,' despite Melissa's resentment at the doctor's "so *called!*" professional diagnosis, were the words Dave tended to play most often in his mind when he found himself gaping at her spectacle. The very phonemes, muddy and guttural, instantly evoked the ghastly bulging flabby bloated image of his, his, Melissa. *Moore-biddly—Oh-bease.* These thoughts, which he called biological, though nonetheless too mean to utter, were always rearing their heads. He feared those compulsory (repulsory, convulsory) moments when he nearly verbalized them, even when confiding in Lisa, who was very defensive about Melissa (despite certain contradictions).

Yet, Dave found himself, each day, still married to Melissa. He was too tired. The drama of leaving her, of staying with her, of the in-between he caught himself in, mattered more than he cared to indulge. For all the nastiness that boiled in his chest when he was near her, to bear it silently kept any complication from materializing. All his life, in the glue that pasted his thoughts together, there seemed a pervasive uncleanliness which he could never begin to sift through. Unfinished beliefs were gathering dust in his head.

Dave told me he often thinks of this moment when he thinks of Melissa, from the middle-years: a puzzle on the table, some pieces making the fragmented frame of a majestic mountain in shimmering gold light (as displayed on the box)—but the bulk of the scene mostly shattered in a cardboard mound, on the coffee table, by the TV in the living room between the kitchen and the bathroom and the bedroom. The mood is set: burnt lighting from the brown lampshade, calico creeping on the sill behind the curtain, Melissa around three hundred and fifty pounds, Dave thirty-seven years old. Melissa sifting through the pieces with a bag of cheddar chips between her legs. Dave tending to a corner of the puzzle, still in his oil-smeared white jumpsuit, fresh from work. *And…scene*:

"Stop trying to match up the sky pieces—look for the last flat piece," Melissa said.

"They're all flat," said Dave.

"Bunk! You know what I mean, the piece with the-you-know-the flat side—one of the end pieces," Melissa said.

"Well honey if I get through the sky part we can find that easier," said Dave. "There are too many pieces on the table and the sky takes up a third of the thing."

As if she hadn't heard him and as if she hadn't said anything, she continued to fidget, shoveling through the pile with her hands.

“Honey could you stop? I can’t find anything if you keep shoving all the pieces around,” said Dave.

“We need to find that end piece first!” Melissa said.

Dave sat and watched her. He watched the orange powdery caps of her fingers comb the round and rigid puzzle pieces; a mound, a mixture of glossy print and gray paper, the cheddar dust sprinkling and smearing. He almost told her it seemed she was gaining a lot of weight. But instead he sat—and slumping onto the couch came the old calico, whose splotches he remembers were mostly black and white with only spots of orange. He petted her and looked at her and she was getting on in years and pounds too.

But getting to the matters at hand. Melissa’s room was well kept. On the window facing the hill there were potted plants newly sprouting, and next to that a shelf with books and framed pictures of Melissa’s family, and her button-nosed cat Moo (now deceased), and a few lingering plastic busts, Pez brand, of Scooby-Doo and Yogi Bear. The blinds were new, Venetian, a nice dark faux mahogany wood, which Melissa hardly ever wanted open (Lisa insisted at least one should to be open for the plants). She had a television and, presiding above, a painting of a clay-skinned Jesus, with marble sheep eyes and thick strokes of hair—the sort of gaudy painting, it seems, one could only find at a thrift store. (Dave hated the painting, but Melissa said, with a choosy fast-food customer’s tone, she thought she would like one for Christmas. Well, after all, there was so little he could do for her nowadays….) The carpet was clean, though unfortunately a dark chocolate shag, but nonetheless clean, and all the shelves and corners were only beginning to recollect their relentless dust.

The composition of this scene of course had nothing to do with Melissa at all but was rather the work of patient Nurse Lisa. Melissa's contribution was a disheveled bed with wrappers and empty cans and crumbs around it. Currently the blinds were closed.

Melissa was blonde, blindingly blonde, and her chickadee face was so nearly a replica of her younger self, dollish and porcelain, yet smooshed by cheek and fat, that you could nostalgically picture the girl underneath, as if all the fat only needed to be peeled away. It was six hundred and fifty-eight pounds of fat. She was unable to be moved from her bed, there was so much fat. When Dave remembered just how exceptionally big she was, and compared her to reasonably-sized plus-size models he told himself he could certainly get behind, he gave his reprehensible repulsion a pass. For a long time now, in a manner he thought noble or even monastic, he tried to let go of sexual topics and focus on Melissa's personal qualities.

"You want to tell me what the fuck is going on?" Melissa said.

Yes, six hundred and fifty eight pounds and forty-three years old—that is, four hundred and sixty pounds heavier and one year older than Dave. She slept alone in the master bedroom (a word that, how many years ago? would be said with lusty significance—the *Bedroom*—now, its utterance dead on arrival, it was a bed room, a room with a bed). Yes, she took up one queen-sized bed all her own—and there was no more to be said about it. Her body had erupted from an accumulation of boredom, depression, and selective nihilism, all delivered in the form of sedentary gorging. As a gentleman in their early years of marriage (they were married seven years now), Dave had never stopped her, nor said a word about her habit. (Of course when he did say anything she ran to the bedroom with her hands on her face, bawling that she was disgusting to him.)

Some things Dave told me about her: She was raised in comfort and had a fast metabolism, and in her teen years never saw warning signs of her life's little well drying up. She went to dance classes, and that was much more expressive than calculus, but she made sure she never failed anything. Relationships were often imbalanced: she had a habit of picking romantically neglectful men, who always left her starved for signs of complete devotion. Out of high school she continued to live at home and went to community college. She decided to be a nurse, then a physical therapist, then a physical therapist's assistant, then nothing, nothing, nothing seemed to fit at all, and she met and married Gabe… (and on that subject this paragraph would digress eleven years too far). Then there was Dave Spiro, the tipsy thirty-something mechanic, after that trip, waiting for her, perched on a stool at Red Robin bar, asking for a refill first and then sliding so smoothly across the counter, to her dull delight, a pen and a napkin reading NuMBER?

She was pleasant for a while, quieted after years of restless unknown. Dave liked that. But his feelings sobered up as she expanded. She was not pushy until she needed more and more space, and he pushed back because that space had been his whether or not he needed it.

He kept distant from her in a demeanor depressingly chummy. Sure, he would say "Love you" when he turned out her light at night, but from her silence the missing "I" came forth, out of its hiding place somewhere in the darkness now flooding. Melissa, suspicious and self-deprecating, had since stopped fighting the blatant falsity of Dave's sanitized smile, his painful knightliness. He could feel her face tense up and her eyes harden whenever he was in her room. He knew she knew, she *knew*, he had not been attracted to her for years now, even though, for the past two years or so, he was kinder than ever. And now, she knew something else.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dave said.

In the corner, fist on her cheek, elbow on the TV, almost young Lisa had a hard but feminine jawline, and wide grey eyes always seeming in their curious authority to be looking at you from under her eyebrows. As Melissa's nurse, Lisa was in charge of bathing her, making her lunch and dinner, cleaning her bedroom and the bathroom, and waiting on her while Dave was at work. Lisa was supposed to enforce a strictly vegetarian diet on Melissa, with little dairy and little to no sugar, but, perhaps out of pity, she would bring her sweets and fried chicken and the like anyways. Melissa truly liked Lisa, Dave could tell, but she used this admiration to contrast something. He overheard Melissa announce, one morning, as Lisa was emptying her bed pan, "We work well together, Lis. You're my woman."

"You two been fucking each other?" The beam from Melissa's eyes ricocheting between Dave and Lisa.

Dave looked at Lisa, who seemed to have already heard the local buzz.

"Melissa, where did you think of that?" Dave said.

As if to another question: "Oh really? I have ears you know. And so does *this!*"

Melissa tilted toward a phone resting on her pillow, waiting to be used. Dave exchanged a look with the impossibly straight-laced Lisa and continued to watch Melissa poking furiously at the device.

"Melissa, honey—"

Lisa shot Dave a look.

"Shush, I'm finding—here, here it is! Listen."

Her staunch stubby arm raised the phone high. The sounds that came out were a static rifling through some shady pocket, and then clarity, followed by an occasional muffled thump that could just as well have been cabinets closing as cuckoldry.

“Mel—”

“Shush! Keep listening.”

Dave leaned in. From the fuzzy darkness there was a grayer sound.

“And how do you explain that?”

“What was it?” Dave asked.

“You know damn well what!”

“No, it sounds like nothing, I—”

“Dave,” Lisa said, looking off.

“It sounds like nothing!”

“Bunk! It’s *you*, Dave!” Melissa’s voice began to break, her face contorting and sinking. “Sticking it—to—this—*bitch.* I could hear you last night, and the night before, and the night before and!”

“Honey—”

Lisa shot Dave another look.

“Oh don’t ‘honey’ me, David!” Melissa said. “How? How how how how?”

“Well it’s pretty obvious don’t you think?”

“Enbrighten me! Please!”

Dave still could not say it—say what she was.

Lisa got up to open the blinds.

“Keep those closed!”

“We should have better light in here,” Lisa said.

“I don’t want better light! The sun’s going down and it will get right in my face keep it closed!”

“Melissa—” Lisa said.

“I will get to you in a bit bitch don’t worry—sit down—I want to hear what David Spiro my husband of seven seven seven goddamn years has to say for himself. Dave?”

Lisa looked at the sunlight slicing through the shades. The phone continued to mumble. Melissa’s scowl released, her expression lost.

“Dave?”

There was nothing more to be said.

*

Melissa Spiro was extracted from the house the next day. They took out the window pane and brought a forklift. No one looked at anyone. (I had seen this part from my window.)

*

It was a Saturday, and so he was home all day, and the house was cold. Monday, the movers would come for Melissa’s things, which put Dave to the task of sorting through the boxes and her room. He was happy to rid of the Pez and the painting. He remembered her bible phase, which was a joke, which he was convinced she used to press guilt on him via some authoritative source other than herself. When she couldn’t go to church anymore she stopped bugging him about damnation and unhappiness and anything, really.

Descending the stairs, he saw and let live a spider in the molding in the corner. Dave only half finished the sorting, but was happy to have started it. He stretched with pride, crooked his neck side to side, and sat in his chair. Through no effort of his own, it seemed the latter half of his life was ushering in its own kind of simple clarity. Now that this was only his house, he liked the idea of shaping it as he liked—moving the furniture around, buying a pool table, getting

some red-cushioned chrome-legged bar stools for the kitchen, and whatever else he damn well pleased.

The night fell in snowflakes. He heard Lisa come in upstairs.

Almost every night, Lisa came over and they slept in the guestroom. Lisa wanted to make it nice and composed and coffee-shoppish, and soon she wanted to move in. She was thirty-eight and her apartment was all fluorescent lights and unbearable.

"You don't have to move in."

"Honey, I know I don't have to," she said with confused humor. She turned to him, hair ragged, head leaving the headboard. "It seems pointless for me to pay rent for that trashy place and come here almost every night. Especially now that Melissa's gone."

"Let's not complicate things," he said. He was suddenly conscious of her body's weight on the mattress; her corporeal presence was *there*, with him the bed, and in ineffable resentments, something strung between his gut and his head, he despised the imposition. The bed, the room, the house were all his. He looked at the nightstand. He noticed dust falling faintly under the lampshade. "Please can we not complicate things now."

"Honey, if we love each other and see each other every night, then shouldn't we live together?" she asked. She bore an intensity worn somewhere behind her face, peaking at a slight wrinkle between the eyebrows. He had seen that look many times before, glaring under the sheets, pillow folds creased like web strands spreading from the apex of her short dark hair.

He sighed, "If we love each other."

And so eventually Lisa got to stabbing Dave in the arm. One oddly bright day, a week or so later, at the far edge of January, she had told him, excitedly, that she was pregnant and that this was a turning point in their lives, and that she could not wait to have a family with him.

“You’re pregnant?”

(Dave and I still wonder if she really was.)

“Yes. What’s wrong?” There was a fogginess in her unblinking eyes.

Dave’s panic, and subsequent blame that she stopped using birth control on purpose, was the loveless outburst Lisa had anticipated and desired—it was her confirmation, her cue. Dave remembers she had a look on her face, as if all of the various intensities of her previous looks had conglomerated into this one. She knew right where to go, leaving him writhing in fear and anger upstairs, yelling, “Where are you going?” as she, naked, marched down into the den and grabbed what she needed from above Dave’s TV.

This is a lot of information to take in, so I will keep the rest short. The image of the two fleshy old bodies (one wielding a sword, the other cupping his) running about the house, and eventually out into the garden, from tripping over boxes and books and DVDs to berries and rocks and leaves, may be a bit too carnivalesque for some. Dave Spiro being cornered by the splintery fence and mercifully stabbed in the arm, all youthful surprise returning to his aging prickly cheeks is, I think, a nice touch. His trip to the Emergency Room, and his sweating distrust of the nurse bandaging him, both reveals and closes a pleasing comedic symmetry. But to dwell on this would distract and detract from the most poignant point, as he related the whole incident to me, a neighbor looking for a story, once and once again, the most poignant point which I have left for the end, the end, the moment which was, as Lisa raised the slender sword, that Dave swore he saw in the dry winter gray an angel in the garden, and he says he came to Christ then and there.

Spiritus Mundi

I.

We live a process of draining ourselves of time and of movement—this the animator of existence, this the essence of ourselves.

We preserve only frames of ourselves, and so nothing else exists, as nothing else endures.

II.

We believe there is nothing ineffable.

We have defined that which we believe exists, and believe it is exactly how it is defined, and so that which exists is understood as that which is defined.

It is described, defined, not portrayed.

A description is inevitably a prescription.

A definition posits itself and so posits the future of itself.

The imagined future, not coming, all too loved, renders our true future, the one we do not imagine, merely like the present as it stands.

III.

Accordingly we eliminate the meanings of our words for what we believe words should mean, for what we believe everyone's words should mean, from here and from now on.

We herd our words and we plan new and complacent words.

It is natural that we do not like when our new words are not accepted.

But is it natural that we plan them?

When we try to create meaning, as the spotlight burns and we try to create for all the prying eyes and ears listening for a new testament, we stutter, we stutter—we change our minds again and we stutter: here is the way, the way the word should mean from the way it does not mean, as the word as of yet, it means…it does not mean.

We see the words themselves do not mean and so we see we must make them mean ourselves. Words will always have private meanings—but to paste together our private meanings: that is to force a synthetic meaning.

And yet for all our futures and meanings, we are afraid of true difference and to let words mean as they mean as they mean for the time, for the time being.

Meaning exists until you create it yourself.

IV.

In art, genre is synthetic meaning.

Pure genre is definition, stereotype, repetition—it is declaring rest in a place of restlessness. Repetition comes from knowing not where to go and so staying where you are, and so speculating where you shall be, and so never moving, never moving. That is why our art has no shade and no depth and we do not know our work. It is not free.

The cheapening and the confinement of art lets it serve our narrative of wants fulfilled.

And so art that disappoints or perverts the narrative leaves a bad taste.

The producer of genre traps and molds his words into a sweet soft note and with them he softly traps his audience sweetly.

And yet the producer does not recognize he is at the behest of his audience.

A stalemate of reciprocal entrapments.

And so, of movement: there is no question there is no movement.

We are turning ends in themselves to means for ourselves and means for the narratives of ourselves.

This is a destructive sin, to the left and to the right. One hand clings to those narratives that once existed, the opposed tries to manufacture new ones—all out of handfuls of ground matter. Matter only and only matter.

Is it interesting that I speak for art and the story, and against narrative?

The narratives we expect, and so perpetuate, are of genre.

V.

Escapism, pervasive fantasy purest fantasy, is the isolation of the self via genre.

Fantasy is to favor elsewhere for its being elsewhere. It speaks of what the world is not like. To speak of what the world is not like is an endless procrastination, a stalling of movement.

Do not make the mistake: to make the real unreal is to experience the world as if it were new again. This is the truth of art. This is to compliment life.

To make the unreal real is to experience elsewhere as if it were somewhere. This is to insult life.

VI.

It is not common to believe a story is anything but ourselves speaking. We must see our ideas of ourselves in them, for they are elsewhere and so we should be.

Stories are used as a path to the futures we imagine.

Instead of having faith in the nonobjective as its own good, we try to shape the nonobjective as objective. Objectivity is the aimed good.

These are our terms. We made them when we decided we needed them.

Yet objectivity has no observer.

In the forest fell a tree. Hear the letters come together.

In America we feel cultureless because we disallow art and word to speak themselves.

We hope for sprawling culture in private corners.

We have tried, yet still, still yet, we have not been able to make meaning from matter as we said we would. An imagined future. Our stars drift as we cinch the empty air.

VII.

Commodification is the pit below this material high-beam.

Undoing this structure requires a letting go of the manifest destiny of personal identity. This is to let go of the future. This is Becoming, receptiveness, movement. This is the denial of self-storytelling, of still shots and immobile repetition.

This is to undo our private meanings and our corners of lonesome niches, where for self-gratification we sacrifice coherence.

This is a faith in words.

VIII.

The notion that art carries a soul lay in a bin of old beliefs. This was once synonymous with the muse but does not have to be. Say what you will of the truth of the soul of the self or of art, but it is true that art is not considered a being, a thing in itself, a thing respectable—it is considered a tool. So, art has no authority.

Artists do not disagree that art contains energy of a kind, but for the materialist this is the observation of one's own neurons firing. It is not experiencing a fire. The former is material, the latter mystic.

But is art empirical or rational or objective or material or absolute?

The artist both denies and shields a pitiful faith she must keep to create—the faith that art carries any meaning of its own—that words and pictures are not just the signifiers of linguistics, nor tools for imagined futures of wealth or social change.

The artist does not recognize she is actually in a necessarily spiritual vocation.

This is why the artist today exists in a self-pitied subculture.

The artist believes her work has meaning but that she has made it all herself out of matter and for her own means.

Wealth, social change: these things may come from art but we should never seek art for them.

We might not behave this way if art were understood as a thing in itself.

I do not expect respect or agreement in my faith. I am not trying to make anyone have faith. I am telling you why art struggles today.

Artists, I say you do not have to believe it but you must be asking why no one is listening.

I ask: have your words ever spoken back to you things you did not say?

Have your pictures ever looked you in the eye?

Or is the page your megaphone and stage?

To let your work enter the fourth dimension, to let it move in time—this is to accept its will and to respect it.

If we see art and all other things as things in themselves, we will see us in ourselves.

We will see us as we are and not as we imagine we should be.

This unifies. This is meaning. This is movement.

This is to respect art's will.

Here and hear and here the words come together.

IX.

One might say we are hasty to humanize, that this is the modern sin: anthropomorphizing—we cannot touch anymore if we stick personhood to all we touch.

I invite you to differentiate anthropomorphizing and respect.

We have touched everything there is to touch.

We have not felt all there is to feel.

There are things ineffable.

That life, that personhood, exists in all things is not a new idea. Perhaps the rhetoric of nonsense might recede from our minds and our mouths if we treat everything, including our words, as alive, as ends in themselves, as purveyors of truth, and not our own truths—that is, not as a petty means to carry our lonesome selves.

This is another proposal to let go our grip on a life expiring.

But I will not press these words with ugly vehemence.

This is only a portrait of how it is.

So these words say.