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## **Shadows and Stars**

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D. B. Lindgren

Shadows and Stars

A Collection of Short Writings

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*To all teachers, everywhere.*

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## It Rained Today

It rained today  
but nothing was washed clean

Afterwards  
the air was muggy  
and smelled of exhaust

All the puddles were oily rainbows

## The Lines

Toplit silver cans wait in straight columns like inspection-ready soldiers. Reaching to grab a particular cylinder, his hand inadvertently brushes against another can, nudging it out of position. This misalignment must be mended. Surrendering the cold brew, he replaces the part removed from the whole. Only after he is certain that frigid order has been reestablished does the refrigerator door swing shut. He suspends all action suddenly. His mind becomes occupied yet unorganized. Lost amid blank contemplation, one thought arises from the muddle: a beer would be nice. A fleeting moment is wasted on the notion before he removes himself from the kitchen while checking his front pocket for his house key.

He stands in the living room, reviewing its composition. Although the room is set with plenty of seating, he stands, refusing to ruin the precise adjustments made earlier in the day when the couch cushions were arranged. Continuing his scrutiny, attention is drawn back to the kitchen. The angle and line of sight reveal a black speck in the

far-left corner of the tiled flooring, a blemish imprisoned within perfect order. It is swiftly, pitilessly swept away by its fellow captive. Broom in hand, he closes his eyes.

Softly there comes knocking upon my front door. She is early, as she always is. I am prepared for her, however, having already completed my daily organizing and cleaning routines. I return the broom to its designated hook among all the other designated hooks in my kitchen closet: first the duster, then the broom, next the dust pan, and finally the mop. I linger to check that all are properly situated before directing myself towards the front door. Along my neatly cut path in that direction, I detect a floating fragment of lint, a freeloader who has chosen the wrong apartment. Its discovery causes a quick detour to the trash can. More knocking comes.

I must pass the television in order to reach the front door, and the glare from its black, inactive screen ensnares my attention. As plain as the reflected sunlight, a streak runs the width of the glass. Sidetracked once again, I am forced back into the kitchen to retrieve the glass cleaner. The knocking has ceased. Kneeling, I mist glass and air with bluish liquid. Warm hands wrap over my eyes from behind.

“Guess who it is,” she gently commands, as though anyone else would crawl into my home through the bathroom window.

“My mother,” I dryly reply.

“I really don’t think your mother would do this.” Impishly she pulls and spins me around. Her lips wet mine with a quick kiss.

“Well, she did, but just that one time.”

“Shut up,” she slips with a smile. She always reprimands me kindly. Sunlight soars through open slits of window blinds, illuminating the straight whiteness of her teeth. Perfect teeth are something I have always appreciated.

“You’re early.”

Ignoring me, she instead unfastens the topmost button of my neatly pressed denim shirt. Passing her attention over my entirety, she abruptly decides to untuck the shirt as well.

“This won’t do. It’s too frumpy,” she sighs.

“Frumpy? What does that even mean?”

“Stay here, I’ll pick you out something nice.” Off towards my bedroom she scampers to rummage through my scant wardrobe. If she is looking for an outfit more exciting and enticing, she will not find it there. I cringe upon hearing my precisely spaced metal hangers scrape against the beam of wood from which they hang within my tight bedroom closet. The even, half-inch spacing is time consuming to attain, but I will deal with its restoration later. I check my front pocket for my house key and wait.

Shortly she reemerges with a boisterous blue and yellow Hawaiian shirt purchased three years ago as part of a Halloween costume, as well as a pair of khaki shorts I have never once worn.

“Here you go,” she says simply, handing me the outfit.

I try not to argue with her much, especially when her decisions seem resolute. Taking the outfit from her, I head for the bathroom to change like a child shopping for new school clothes.

In the bathroom mirror, he watches the progress of his fingers as they button up the silly Hawaiian shirt. The shirt is wrinkled, having rested endlessly at the bottom of a dirty clothes hamper without hope of reprieve. His eyes focus on lines of bent wrinkles and curved creases, which cross the shirt like a network of varicose veins. His thoughts become lost among them. The lines are too imperfect, too uncontrolled. They begin to spawn distress.

“I should not be wearing this,” he mutters, hurriedly pulling the shirt off his body, overcome with the need to rid himself of it.

“What’s taking so long? You okay?” she calls from beyond the bathroom door.

“I’m fine. I’ll be out in a minute.” These words are said more to himself than to her, a means to help restore his composure. He checks his front pocket for his house key and puts the shirt back on. Fastening the top button, his eyes tilt to a note, neatly hand-written and taped securely to the bottom left corner of the bathroom mirror. It reads:

- Floss teeth
- Brush teeth
- Wash face
- Comb hair
- Take medication

It is one of his many reminder lists. They serve to reinforce his routines, assuring him that everything is accomplished in the proper fashion and order. This particular

note was created the day he forgot to floss his teeth. Upon realizing the oversight at a neighborhood supermarket, he was driven directly home by overruling anxiety.

She was disconcerted by these notes at first. However, having endeavored to be nothing but optimistic since entering his life a few months ago, she said nothing. Although he does not understand how or why she is so patient with him and his peculiarities, he is certainly grateful. She provides him with the only solace he has from himself.

Reentering the living room, I find her sitting cross-legged on the couch, eyes closed. She looks as though meditating, which is possible, as she enjoys such things. The couch cushions have been altered to support her lounging, but I will fix them later.

“I’m excited, aren’t you?” she asks, eyes still shut. “I think I’ll try the spicy tuna this time around.”

“Yeah, I almost ordered that last week.”

Today is Tuesday, and every Tuesday for about the past month, she and I have been sharing dinner together at a nearby Japanese restaurant. It is one of the few times during the week that I leave the apartment. I just do not see much purpose in it, leaving my home. Inside, I can manage at least some small amount of peace. Outside, however, everything is chaotic, and the lines are beyond my control.

She opens the front door and ushers me out. My vision is drawn directly to the ground. A strong wind blew last night and the concrete footpath is strewn with foliage and twigs. The frenzy of dry wood and dying leaves is disorienting. I

attempt to discreetly organize the clutter below me with the tip of my shoe. She notices, and I stop. She briefly brings her cool lips to mine, as she always does whenever I defeat such an urge. The positive reinforcement feels good, but is never enough.

His eyes scan ahead, across the span of the winding footpath. Dazed, he stumbles. The wind's untamed movement reaches from the past through the hectic wake it has left behind. Everything works against him now. The lines are jagged and wild and unrelenting. They are uncompromising in their dysfunction. He stumbles, retreating back into the house. She enjoins her arm in his, saying nothing.

“How about we order in some Chinese food instead?” I offer.

Visibly disappointed, but hiding it well, she accepts. Within the soothing confines of my home, I gather myself and my nerves, checking my front pocket for my house key. Meanwhile she coaxes the CD player to emit a slow, soulful tune.

“Dance with me,” she whispers.

I am not very graceful, and do not dance much, but the request is made with such gentle aching that I dare not refuse. We sway slightly to the mellow sounds. She rests her head under my chin amid our embracing movement. She begins to cry, so softly that she must think me unable to hear it over the music. The tears disappear as quickly as they came. She lifts her head with a weak smile when the music switches to a

more upbeat track. The forgotten disco relic persuades her to bounce on the balls of her feet, taking my body away with her own. Our reckless dancing carries us to the edge of the coffee table, where her leg involuntarily takes flight, striking the magazines precisely stacked there, and spilling them onto the floor. I halt our movement, alarmed. My eyes seize up the accidentally established disorder.

Lines from all directions intersect to form absurd angles. The magazines are lost among them. Everything is lost among them. Oftentimes, all I can see are lines. Outlines, borders, edges, and contours. Infinite and indomitable. I drop to my knees.

“It’s okay,” she faintly contends, almost begging. She pulls at his body, attempting to restore him to his feet.

“Please.”

“It’s not perfect, but it will be,” he explains to her. “I just need to fix it.”

He feels her hands leave his body. He closes his eyes. He senses the distance increase between them. He hears the front door open softly and shut again. He cannot look back.

## Omniscience I

Promises of seeing  
everything there is to see

Guarantees of knowing  
all there is to know

Now I sit and I stare  
at the place I once belonged

A mind too cluttered to think

## Stones

One unassuming day in the restful village of Shine, there emerged a most disagreeable-looking gnome from the mysterious and foreboding forest that bordered the eastern edge of the town. His face was permanently contorted into a malicious grin, which, accompanied by his yellow teeth, eerily resembled a golden crescent-shaped moon. Bearing a burdensome bag strung across his shoulder, he cut a direct route to the mayor's cabin.

The mayor, who was tending the vegetable garden that possessed most of his yard, stood up from his crouched gardening posture to greet the approaching gnome. The gnome flung the heavy bag from his shoulder with a satisfied grunt. It landed at the mayor's feet, crushing a portion of that year's sweet potato crop. The gnome collected both the mayor and the bag at his feet in one harsh gaze, and commanded the mayor to tell him what could be found within the bag. The mayor, perplexed but not wanting any trouble for himself or his village from the spiteful-seeming gnome, did as he was ordered, finding the bag to contain stones—many small stones

of varying shapes. The mayor told the gnome exactly that, but his declaration was answered merely with an ominous cackle that spewed forth from the gnome's unnerving grin.

The gnome, out of twisted charity, told the mayor to take a second guess at what the bag contained, imparting that if he was incorrect once more, the gnome would curse his garden to never again bring forth a healthy harvest. The mayor rummaged through the bag, rolling each stone across the palm of his hand. Inspiration soon took hold of his panicked mind. The mayor began to lay each stone down upon the ground before him in a very particular manner. Each stone interlocked with the next as he piled them upon one another, and a structure clearly began to emerge. The completed construction yielded a minuscule stone fortress. The mayor pointed at the tiny castle in triumph, his only reward being the gnome's utter disgust as he scooped up the stony model, and returned to the forest.

## Burn You to Nothing

I could burn you to nothing

It's only your heart that's stone

But I would be unable to suffer  
your burning hair, flesh, and bone

## Communism

INT. JACKIE'S DINER – DAY

Tacky neon light designs cover the aging walls of the tiny 1950's style diner. ANNABELLE MACILROY, a bored, middle-aged waitress, leans against the linoleum dining counter and examines the split-ends of her long, dull hair.

DEREK HAINES, 23, miserable, and dressed in a work uniform featuring jarring, primary colors, and ANDY "SHAD" SHADRICH, 23, with long unkempt hair and constantly slouching posture, sit in an upholstered booth near a large window within the otherwise empty diner.

Derek absently eats from a plate of French fries as he stares out the window, while Shad devours a strawberry milkshake. His eyes on Derek, Shad snatches a handful of fries and stuffs them into his mouth. Derek turns to face him.

DEREK

What the hell was that?

SHAD

What, dude? Communism.

DEREK

What the hell are you talking about? Do you even know?

SHAD

Know what?

Derek snatches Shad's milkshake and finishes it with one long gulp.

DEREK

There, that's what.

SHAD

Dude, if you wanted some of my milkshake, you could've asked.

DEREK

You stole my fucking French fries without asking!

SHAD

You owe me seventy-five cents.

DEREK

What?

SHAD

That milkshake was still a quarter full, man. It cost me three bucks, so you owe me seventy-five cents.

DEREK

What about my French fries?

SHAD

Those cost you two bucks, and there was a whole pile of fries on your plate, so I guess I can knock off like a dime from what you owe me.

DEREK

What happened to Communism?

SHAD

This is America, dude. Sixty-five cents; pay up.

DEREK

This is America. Sue me.

The two stare one another down for a moment. Derek, his eyes still fixed on Shad, reaches for the plate of fries and slides it into the middle of the table.

DEREK

There, we'll call it even.

SHAD

Deal.

They both settle back into their seats as they eat.

DEREK

Aren't you at all interested in why I called you to meet me here?

Shad grabs another handful of fries.

SHAD

To eat, dude.

DEREK

No. Guess who I saw today.

SHAD

Sergeant Melody Hardbody.

DEREK

No, and please don't start with that again. I saw Jill.

SHAD

Big deal, you both work at the mall.

DEREK

I also saw Hannah.

SHAD

Cool. Did you talk to her? How's she doing?

DEREK

Oh, pretty good, from what I could see.

SHAD

What do you mean?

DEREK

I saw them together.

SHAD

So, they do know each other. I told you they were conspiring, man.

DEREK

I guess you could call it that.

SHAD

Huh?

DEREK

I saw them together.

SHAD

Huh?

DEREK

I saw them making out! My ex-girlfriends were sucking face!

Annabelle looks up from playing with her hair. Derek notices her watching and settles back down.

SHAD

That's totally hot, dude!

DEREK

No, it's not. In fact, I can hear them having their first little meeting together:

(in a feminine voice)

I hate Derek. I hate him too. Hey, let's have sex! Okay!

SHAD

I know, dude, that's totally hot.

DEREK

Shad, I turned two ex-girlfriends gay. I mean, I knew about Jill, but now Hannah is a lesbian too? That's just messed up.

SHAD

You're missing the beauty here.

He grabs a bottle of mustard.

SHAD

Jill.

He grabs a bottle of ketchup.

SHAD

And Hannah.

He pushes both bottles towards Derek.

SHAD

The way I see it, man, they're just one Derek away from a threesome.

DEREK

That's, well, that's...

He pauses as he thinks.

DEREK

Jill hates me. Hannah probably does too.

SHAD

Hannah doesn't hate you, dude. Jill doesn't either, but she does like to piss you off, so she'll be a little trickier.

DEREK

No shit, she's a lesbian. That's one of the reasons we broke up.

SHAD

Nah, she's dated lots of guys since you. Lots of girls too, of course.

DEREK

I didn't realize you've been following her career so closely.

SHAD

It's a small town, man, word gets around. Anyway, the way I see it, you need to go after Jill first, because if she goes for it, Hannah will be no problem.

DEREK

Hannah and I haven't even spoken to each other for eight months. I don't think she'll be "no problem."

SHAD

You're telling me you two haven't talked at all since—

DEREK

Graduation.

SHAD

I was going to say since she dumped your ass, but seeing as that happened at graduation, I guess you're right too.

DEREK

Listen, neither of them are going to go for it, so let's just drop it. I'm not actually considering this.

SHAD

Yes, you are, dude. It's every guy's dream.

DEREK

I can't believe I'm actually considering this.

SHAD

Trust me, man, go to Jill first. She'll go for it.

DEREK

I don't know, this just doesn't seem like a good idea.

Annabelle approaches with the check.

ANNABELLE

Can I get you guys anything else?

DEREK

No, no thank you.

She places the check on the table.

ANNABELLE

(to Derek)

I think you should go for it.

She gives Derek a wink and walks away.

DEREK

Let's get out of here. I need to think about all this.

He takes out his wallet.

SHAD

Cool with me, man. You're out of fries anyway.

He stands up and walks away from the table.

DEREK

Shad.

Shad turns around. Derek motions to the check.

SHAD

Oh, can you cover me, dude? I don't have any money on me.

DEREK

No problem, comrade.

## Blame

You looked  
so calm so cool so collected

How could you have known  
you'd be rejected  
so quickly so completely

I don't blame you  
if you blame me

## Contemplations on the Young Life of a Virgin

Titling this rambling essay as such serves to provide a disclaimer: following is the chronicle of my virginity. It is the recollection of my more youthful years, or at least those fragments pertaining to sexuality. While I realize one's sexual history may be considered a sordid subject (or perhaps a celebrated one), my physical exploits in that domain have been meager at best (and therefore not worth celebrating). No, it is not tantalizing tales of carnal feats I wish to impart, but rather the deliberations I undertook to avoid them.

Children raised in Christian homes, as I was, often encounter sexuality at a young age, yet not in the controversial sense one may assume. They confront sexuality within the Bible, which history has shown to be more controversial than any mere human device. These children may not fully comprehend such encounters, but considering they stem from ancient texts of (supposedly) divine inspiration, I would speculate that most adults do not either.

The Bible begins with fanciful stories of creation, and as children are said to enjoy such fairytales, I suppose it is no wonder they are told of Adam and Eve's exploits. More than mere bedtime stories, they are an easy method for parents and Sunday schools to initiate indoctrination. And so it was that I too first became aware of sexuality via my parents' faith. Yet as a kindergarten child, I understood in purely the broadest sense, not knowing why Adam and Eve were unclothed, or what the devoured fruit represented. Unsurprisingly, my parents hurried over questions like these, as they were not the purpose of the story. Rather, the purpose was to be humbled by humanity's original sin and God's righteous punishment.

Thus the seeds of my sexual contemplations were inconspicuous, yet I sought to cultivate them into a truer fruit of knowledge. As for my parents, whom had unwittingly planted these seeds, they could not detect my desire for such information. As I grew older and progressed through elementary school, I began to understand that the story of Adam and Eve was, in part, about the sexes. I of course recognized the rudimentary differences between men and women, yet the Bible suggested a more inequitable dichotomy than I had been previously taught. After all, it was woman who fell under Satan's influence and committed original sin. Man followed only because he loved and trusted her. Was woman therefore the true source of humanity's downfall? Or was it man's trust in her? Either way, the Bible clearly suggests that woman is the more wretched of the two sexes.

In pondering this concept, I could not justify it. God is perfect (as a divine creator of apparent precision must be).

Man was created in God's image, and woman was made from man. Hence, should not man, and consequently woman, be perfect also? Clearly they are not (as was proven by original sin), and so a flaw must be inherent within their design. Woman sinned, it is true, but so too did man. Therefore, imperfection was not a result of woman's creation from man. This leaves only the possibility that some defect occurred in making man from God's image. So, was man created in mere imitation of God's perfection? Or is God not perfect?

It soon became clear to me that man and woman are equal in their wretchedness. I found a peculiar comfort in that discovery. After all, someday I would love a woman, and I would not want to love an unequal. Such an imbalance would certainly cause constant deficiency. This discovery may seem insignificant or obvious to someone detached from the situation, yet the true breakthrough was not so much the conclusion I had come to, but rather that this conclusion signified a successful beginning to my sexual explorations.

And so it was about the time of this discovery that I began to look upon women (or girls at the time) in a different manner. I did not start coveting them or obsessing over them, the way many of my male friends had begun to. Their interests were too debasing. Surely, women were more than contours, colors, and scents. Women were a wonderful new mystery to me. I was not so much attracted to them, as I was much more attracted to the idea of them. A sex to compliment and complete my maleness. A better half, as some might put it.

Yet I would discover junior high school to be a terribly frustrating time and place for one who questions sexuality. I was not foolish enough to reveal my inner ruminations to my classmates, whose worries (such as where to hide their newly instated pornography stash, or how and when they would first feel a girl's breasts) were dissimilar and indifferent to my own. I had nothing to contribute to their discussions, and so I was teased for my aloofness. Teased, certainly, but no more than most my age were for their own schoolyard faults. Kids can be cruel, it is true, but puberty proved much crueler. After all, it was puberty that clouded my judgment with hormones. It was puberty that spawned a daily struggle between the appreciation of form and the appreciation of substance. And unfortunately, form is much more immediately identifiable.

I asked my mother once why men were so attracted to women's breasts. Taken aback, she answered only that one day I would understand. Better said, she meant that one day I too would be attracted to women's breasts. Of that she was correct, yet I never have understood exactly why. Is it some sort of innate drive retained from infancy, to strive for that which once nourished us? Or is it perhaps because a woman's breasts are uniquely feminine, and are therefore unmistakable symbols of womanliness?

The first breasts to ever charm me belonged to Monica Cloisonné. Full, firm, and flaunted, they were the breasts of a cheerleader. The entire male population of my high school sophomore class (and beyond) shared my sentiments. Well, perhaps not exactly. They shared my attraction to the form of her body, but with radically different motives. By my second

year in high school, I had been struggling with puberty for a couple of years. In that time, I developed the knowledge that physical attraction was an unavoidable level in seeking sexuality fulfillment. The most superficial of all levels, perhaps, but a necessary one all the same.

Yet my peers continued to view physicality as a pinnacle, personified in Monica. Much to their disenchantment, however, the intimidating athletic build of a football captain soon made a fitting match to her figure. I moved on to other breasts, knowing that there will forever be another Monica Cloisonné, always another unattainable body. Conversely, what I did not realize (but was eventually to learn) is that there will always be only one Jenny Holcrum. Jenny was my first girlfriend.

Despite all my prior musings on sexuality, I was never preoccupied with attaining a romantic relationship. I was quite comfortable in knowing that the events culminating in romance occur at their own pacing and direction. To contrive sentiments and situations in order to “lure” a woman is merely counterproductive. I was a virgin by choice, after all, and there was still much I did not understand about sexuality. As such, I did not feel prepared to undertake somebody else’s uncertainties and insecurities in addition to my own. Still, to have ignored every relationship opportunity would have been to neglect the experiences necessary to obtain the very knowledge I sought.

Jenny and I met in drama club, senior year. Her perfect grade point average, several memberships in popular school clubs, and substantial roles in school theater had many

expecting Valedictorian honors. And she was beautiful. Slender, but not overly so, with auburn hair highlighted by golden waves, and an ever-present distant luminescence in her green-grey irises.

I was not the hapless recluse you might imagine my thoughts betray me to have been. I was a reasonably attractive young man; a handsome, dignified face balanced atop an admittedly short, scrawny body. I was involved in a handful of extracurricular activities, and my grades were strong. I did not, however, possess many friends, a consequence of my reflective demeanor and introverted nature. Yet it was this very remoteness that intrigued some, like Jenny. She told me once (after we were together), that she had promised her friends to become acquainted with the mysterious loner of drama club, and to discover my “secrets.”

Jenny was also a virgin, and I suppose that was partly the reason why we seemed compatible. The rationale behind her virginity (much like Jenny herself) was blameless, yet unexpectedly naïve. She had not yet met the “right” guy, she would explain to me whenever such a topic came up, which, given my predisposition, was often. This concept amounted to achieving certain objectives (such as saying the proper words and giving the correct gifts). In the flowery language of a teenage girl, she confessed her need to be utterly wooed. And I was there to woo her. Jenny was a romantic with a very specific notion of romance, and so I endeavored (through trial and error) to do all the right things for her.

At first, I believed these actions stood as proof of my affection for her. Yet as my conviction gradually depleted, I

began to feel as if trapped within a stage performance. The closer I followed the script, the more artificial it all seemed. I was an actor playing a role for the appreciation of a specific audience—Jenny. All that I said and did were out of a craving for validation, much like any actor requires validation from an audience in order to justify their performance. None of my virtuous deeds would have held any significance if Jenny was not there to appreciate them, to take pleasure in them. Her happiness gave me hollow purpose, yet in the process I also began to obtain her love.

And so it was that our relationship both blossomed and withered over the span of several months. Whenever Jenny proclaimed her love for me, I concealed the lack of my own. Although I had become aware of the reasons for the emptiness I suffered, I did not divulge such thoughts. Partly out of concern and confused compassion for Jenny, and partly out of simple cowardice, I could not end our relationship. Ultimately, however, it was her graceful beauty that impeded my honesty and common sense. I reveled in having a beautiful girlfriend. I was lost in aesthetics and entangled by appearances.

Deceit in romance (even with innocent intent) typically falters, and mine fared no better. One night, seemingly insignificant amidst the conflicting emotions of our approaching graduation, Jenny (in not so subtle terms) conveyed that it was to be *the night*. Gleefully proclaiming that she was at last certain she had met the “right” guy, she sought to consummate our relationship. She desired to enhance the love she felt and believed I reciprocated. She

wanted to make love, but sex was all I could offer. By virtue of our conversations concerning sexuality and virginity, Jenny and I shared that important distinction. To make love is the highest form of sexual experience. Yet making love requires mutual love between two partners. If either is lacking, sex is the result. And sex, while gratifying to the body, is insufficient to satisfy the soul.

Making love is heightened only by virginity, and virginity is not relative. One either possesses it or does not. It is a precious gift to be given only once. Therefore, my charade was obviously obliged to end. In the most tender words I could gather, the truth spilled from my lips to devastate Jenny. Rightly furious, she became resolute in avoiding all contact with me. We graduated high school without exchanging another solitary word. Although a cheerless ending to our relationship, Jenny will forever be the first woman I truly cared for, and the first to ever love me.

But love is merely a rationalization for sex, or so I was informed by Aria Ekhart. She claimed to be a feminist. To her, sex was one of man's tools of oppression. Birth control and abortion were the countermeasures. We met at a party during my freshman year at college. I was never especially interested in such parties, but curiosity subdued my better judgment. Much the same can be said for Aria's allure. Her befuddled intelligence at first intrigued me, yet rapidly wore thin.

I suggested to her that perhaps her platitudes were detrimental to her own sexuality. After all, I offered, men seem driven towards sex, while women seem inclined towards

relationships. Each is often the means to the other's end. Many men utilize relationships to achieve sex, while many women apply sex to achieve relationships. Therefore, birth control and abortion actually benefit men, in that they become less accountable for their sexual drives. Instead of "leveling the playing field" (as Aria liked to remark), these methods merely degrade a woman's distinctive and wonderful sexuality. Moreover, why should a woman deprive herself (even if temporarily) of that blessing which men will never possess?

She condescendingly scoffed at my argument, retorting with the notion that humans are nothing more than animals. Rational animals perhaps, but rationality fails us often. Sex is a biological activity, she continued, one simply requiring arousal. Arousal, in turn, has the sole requirement of physical attraction. There is nothing more miraculous to the process than these biological facts, she concluded. It became clear that the form of my body satisfied her personal prerequisite for arousal, as she attempted to seduce me shortly after our debate. I declined, defending myself with my virginity. Thinking me coy, she pursued. I expounded the rationalizations for my virginity, and she was dismayed to hear such backwards beliefs. Our courtship did not last long.

Shortly thereafter, I began to feel as though this world was not meant for my love. Deep love, imbedded within my very essence. Aching love, inseparable from my sexuality. I pondered that perhaps the world was not yet prepared for such ideals. Or had my time already come and gone—an age long ago when the world shared my sentiments? These thoughts

frightened me, yet I continued to contemplate them in my loneliness.

A smattering of months fell away before I made the fortunate mistake of attending another college party. A mistake because I possessed no further interest in the party scene than I had previously. Yet I hoped to discover some existence of maturity (or at least more than was present in my prior outing). None was evident. As ever, the purpose of such events can be distilled into a pure desire for intoxication. I suppose I will never comprehend the need to consume some mind-deadening and mood-altering elixir. I have never sought to lower my inhibitions in such a manner. Instead, I must presume they exist for a reason and should not be tampered with. The popular desire to become someone else (the life of the party perhaps) is not shared by me.

Yet my presence at the party was also fortunate, as it was there that I first became acquainted with Samantha Thorpe. She hung to the back wall, watching everyone. Introducing myself, I stumbled over obvious attempts at conversation. Her responses to my queries were monosyllabic and terse. She seemed an angry young woman, but her resistance only reinforced my determination to unveil the source of her bitterness. I idly and resolutely chatted while she nursed a mixed drink. Eventually she relented, slowly integrating herself into my stubborn conversation.

Throughout the course of the night, Samantha's sullen exterior leisurely dissolved to reveal a sharp wit, keen mind, and kind heart. Our discussion was both meaningful and effortless, until broken by an abrupt and startling disclosure.

Samantha alluded (offhandedly) to her virginity. Staggered by her own candor, and visibly distressed, she reverted to silence. I did not press for details as we lingered in thick stillness for several moments. She thanked me for my kindness and patience, attempting to retreat. An earnest kiss convinced her to pause. Confounded, Samantha stood stationary, staring. I empathized with her loneliness, recognizing the fear and confusion she harbored against her own sexuality. As we accompanied one another out of the party, I tenderly assured her that she need never fear such things with me.

## Omniscience II

Now that I know  
all there is to know,  
I know that this knowledge  
has cost me my humanity

For now that I have no fear  
of that which I do not know,  
I have lost all knowledge  
of what it is to be human

And I would freely forget  
all that I know  
to once again know  
my ignorance

## A Waterfall

I saunter into the room. Well, I don't exactly saunter. I don't know if anyone has ever really sauntered in their entire life, but I do enter the room with a lightness in my step. Levity, I guess, if that's the right word. If it means *without the pressure my life, and deadlines, has come to exert on me in this past week*, then it's the right word. You know, when I put it that way, it sounds a little melodramatic. But fuck all that, I saunter into the room.

The room is my living room, though it doesn't have much room for living. It barely has room for a simple couch, a coffee table, and my jukebox. I toss my keys onto the coffee table, kick off my flip-flops, and head over to the jukebox. I punch a couple of buttons and soon the sweet sounds of an obscure 60's surf band breaks into the air. I plop onto the couch with a smile.

I look around the room. I've done it a billion times before, but the end of this rough week has me in a reflective mood, so I take stock of my surroundings. I look at the mural I painted on the wall when I moved in. It was during my

Naturalism phase. I've grown to hate it as years have gone by, dismissing it as hasty and underdeveloped. I've come to see only its inexact execution. But now I remember the joy with which it was painted, the joy of moving into a new home.

I jump out of my seat, and almost out of my skin, when some jerk starts pounding on my front door. I peep through the peep hole. Jacob Hollander. He finally followed me home like a puppy. I open the door.

"Hey, Lauren, sorry to bother you," Jacob pushes out, short of breath. He looks the same as ten minutes ago, when we left my studio. His dusty brown hair is a mess, as always. His clothes are flecked with paint. His backpack hangs from his right shoulder. His junky bike leans against my house.

"It's no bother, Jacob," I say, which is true enough.

"I mean, I know you like your privacy."

"Yeah..."

Jacob just stares at me, like I know what he's here for. He slings off his backpack and retrieves a paintbrush, one of mine. He holds it out to me. "I forgot to give this back to you. I had it in my pocket when I left."

"You could've just given it to me next time," I point out as I take the brush.

"I know, but you said it was one of your favorites, because you like how it handles fine detail. I thought you might need it before Tuesday."

He smiles awkwardly, perhaps realizing how unnecessary this is. He's a good guy, but too overeager, like the aforementioned puppy. And I'm more of a cat person. On cue, my wiry Siamese, Viv, saunters into the room. Cats are

experts at sauntering. Viv notices the open door. He edges towards it, assessing his chances. He makes a break for it. My grab is too slow, but Jacob's isn't.

"Woah!" Jacob exclaims as he deftly clutches Viv at the doorway. He lifts the cat to his chest and strokes his head. "You almost got away, huh?" he asks rhetorically in that singsong voice reserved for babies and small animals. "What's her name?"

"His name is Viv," I answer, and wait for the inevitable follow up.

"Viv? Like Vivian?"

"Vivaldi." As though that makes more sense.

"Like the composer?"

"My father named him."

"A big Vivaldi fan?"

"No." And that's all I'll give him on that topic. Searching my silent face, he seems to come to the same conclusion.

He looks beyond me, into my apartment. "Hey... do you mind if I come in? I've never seen your place."

He's certainly persistent; I guess I have to give him that. "It's Friday. I'm beat. I've had a very busy week wrapping up that commission for the children's museum."

His eyes scan the inside of my apartment. "Yeah, you seemed a bit tired at my lesson today." His eyes stop scanning and return to me. "I mean, I didn't take it personally or anything. You still did a good job," he clarifies. I say nothing, hoping he'll finally take a hint, but his eyes are back in my apartment. "Wow! That is amazing!" he exclaims as he steps

inside and towards my mural. You know, there's a fine line between persistence and annoyance. "Did you paint this?"

"Yes."

"Of course you did, what am I saying? It's just I've never seen you paint something like this. What is it?"

"It's a waterfall."

Viv interjects with a chirping meow. Jacob briefly obliges with a pat on the head. "I know it's a waterfall. What waterfall is it?"

"Mystic Falls at Yellowstone. My dad and I took a trip there when I was in high school..." And for a moment, my mind is back in Yellowstone twelve years ago, and the fond memories foul my mood. "You know, Jacob, I'm tired and I've had a long week, and you need to go now, okay?"

"Oh... okay," he says with the sad look of a reprimanded puppy. A puppy doesn't know why it's been reprimanded; it only hears a voice harsh and raised, and sees a face stern and hot. And just like when you reprimand a puppy, the sad look always works, because you realize the naïve creature doesn't know any better.

"I'll see you on Tuesday, okay?" I say with sweetened voice.

"Okay," he replies. He sets Viv on the floor. Viv retreats to my bedroom as Jacob retreats to my front door.

As the door shuts behind him, the room falls silent. Well, except that it's not silent. My jukebox is still going strong, and like the lapping waves of a persistent surf, the surf music breaks upon my ears. I return myself to the couch I was so rudely divorced from. The smile returns to my face, but

then fades just as quickly. Something is missing—I need a cocktail.

In my tiny—but I call it cute—kitchen, I retrieve three items from the refrigerator: orange juice, grenadine, and ginger ale. There’s nothing wrong with a Shirley Temple. That’s one of my life’s little mottos. At least it has been since I gave up alcohol.

Returned to the couch once more, I rest my feet upon the glass-topped coffee table. I hoist my drink in a toast to Mystic Falls. Not to Mystic Falls the locale, but to Mystic Falls the painting, and to my rediscovery of it. And to painting in general. And to the completion of my painting for the children’s museum. And I’ll drink to that!

Viv saunters back into the living room. He looks up at me with his yellow eyes and meows a request to join me. I pat my lap in response, and Viv accepts my invitation. I stroke his sleek black coat and sip my Shirley Temple. Life is pretty good. Viv’s purring tells me he agrees.

## Queen of Commotion

You left me  
again  
to walk home  
alone

Queen of Commotion  
Lover of Catastrophe

You'll have it your way  
You'll have it without me

## Response to Underground

I am a happy man... I am an ignorant man. I am happy by virtue of my ignorance. Ignorance of Underground. Ignorance is bliss, it is said, but better still, I say ignorance makes good sense. And yet you may well curse my good sense as cowardice. To you, my happiness is self-dilution and fantasy. I do not care. You believe Underground elevates you above me, above all others, yet you are too miserable to enjoy even that. What good is being aware of your utter emptiness? What good has Underground gotten you?

You scoff at me, saying I cannot possibly comprehend, but I understand all too well. Underground is your crutch, your excuse for inaction. You are a contemptible nobody in this world, ignored and cast aside by the blind fools you detest to such a distinguished degree. But you have your Underground. Well, it is yours to have. I hold no envy towards you, although I realize my envy is not what you desire. Desires are not for Underground. All that exists there is an infinite state of dismal inertia. I am surprised you managed to work up enough presumptuous momentum to

declare yourself as more “living” than I. There is no light Underground for life to grow. For someone who claims understanding, I find it peculiar that you have not recognized this.

I have found comfort in what you discern to be deception. This is true. However, I say that it is you who is truly deceived. You seduce yourself with Underground. You believe that everyone else beguiles themselves into accepting a facade comfortable enough to persevere. Do you not see that such is true for you and Underground? Underground is your comfortable facade. It is how you continue to live. You hide behind an elaborately embroidered mask of false understanding and superiority. The only difference between you and I is that your solace is more luxuriously self-indulgent than most.

## Whispers

We cannot live  
with the state we are in

Not a state of confusion  
or denial  
though maybe those too  
but a state of oppression

I'm just talking  
but I'll quiet down

The whispers of many  
create a deafening roar

## Fresh Paint

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO – MORNING

The gloomy island of Alcatraz lies shrouded in a thick blanket of fog that covers the entire San Francisco Bay.

An unending stream of cars spans the Bay Bridge. Among them, a YELLOW MOVING TRUCK cruises along with an old station wagon in tow.

EXT. MOVING TRUCK – CONTINUOUS

HOWARD MORENSKI, late 30's, unassuming, with thinning hair and a slight paunch, sits behind the wheel in the crowded cab with anticipation alight in his face.

Next to Howard sits his wife, GRETCHEN MORENSKI, late 30's, with gentle features and a willowy body. Her eyes eagerly take in the approaching city.

Next to Gretchen sits their daughter, NATALIE MORENSKI, pre-teens, with a sweet, round face that belies her cynical nature. Her head rests against the passenger side window.

HOWARD

Who's excited?

Gretchen smiles.

GRETCHEN

I am.

Natalie ignores the question and closes her eyes.

EXT. SAN FRANCISCO – CONTINUOUS

The traffic reaches the end of the Bay Bridge and pours into San Francisco, which rises majestically above the morning fog. The moving truck travels into the heart of the city.

The truck stops at an intersection and turns onto Mission Street, one of the primary avenues of the eclectic Mission District.

The truck passes a diverse range of businesses: taquerias, smoke shops, book stores, bars, etc., as well as an impressive basilica with tall bell towers.

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING – MORNING

A small collection of aging but well-kept apartments.

The moving truck and station wagon come to a stop in front of the building. Howard and Gretchen exit the truck. Howard lifts his arms in triumph.

HOWARD

Here we are!

INT. MORENSKI APARTMENT – MORNING

Freshly painted walls and new carpet cover every room of the quaint, two-bedroom apartment. In the living room, a sliding glass door opens onto a porch, allowing sunlight to fill the room.

The front door swings open. Howard and Gretchen step inside. Gretchen glances around.

GRETCHEN

This is nice.

Gretchen steps into the center of the living room. Howard watches her eagerly as she examines the room.

GRETCHEN

Plenty of space.

HOWARD

Yeah.

Gretchen runs her hand along a wooden bookshelf built into the wall.

HOWARD

Solid pine.

GRETCHEN

It's beautiful.

She turns to Howard with a smile.

GRETCHEN

I'll take it.

Howard returns her smile.

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING – MORNING

Howard struggles to lift a bulky cardboard box from the back of the overstuffed moving truck. He awkwardly carries the box towards the entrance of the building as Gretchen approaches.

Gretchen mimics Howard's efforts to keep his burden steady. Howard gives her an unamused look. Undeterred, she halts his progress by draping her folded arms atop the box.

HOWARD

Stop, I'm going to drop it.

GRETCHEN

You're no fun.

She leans across the box and gives him a quick kiss. Howard struggles to keep his balance as Gretchen releases him and walks on.

MRS. MARICRUZ ALVAREZ, late 40's, motherly and world-worn, discretely watches everything from the front window of her apartment. She watches as Howard enters the building.

INT. MORENSKI APARTMENT – MORNING

Howard enters and sets the box down in the empty living room. He rubs his neck as he proudly surveys his new home.

The FAINT RUMBLING OF A VIDEO GAME EXPLOSION interrupts his moment of satisfaction. Howard follows a trail of VIDEO GAME WHIZZES AND BEEPS to a bedroom where Natalie sits on the floor, playing a portable video game.

HOWARD

You need to help unpack more than just that game, you know.

NATALIE

But I finally made it to the boss and he's almost dead.

HOWARD

He's not the only one.

NATALIE

Whatever.

HOWARD

Natalie. I mean it.

NATALIE

Fine, I'll pause it.

She sets down the game and stands up.

NATALIE

This better be worth it, because I almost have the third soul orb.

HOWARD

I think our new home is definitely worth some soul orb.

NATALIE

Whatever.

HOWARD

Can't you at least give it a chance?

They exit the bedroom.

NATALIE

It's not as big as our old house.

HOWARD

I know, but it's expensive to live in San Francisco.

NATALIE

It smells weird in here.

HOWARD

That's just the new paint on the walls. But see, that's why you have to help unpack all of your perfumes and things.

NATALIE

Mom won't let me have perfume.

They exit.

EXT. APARTMENT BUILDING – DAY

Howard grabs a box from inside the nearly empty moving truck and hands it to Gretchen, who waits with Natalie.

HOWARD

For you, m'lady.

GRETCHEN

Thank you, kind sir.

She exits towards the apartment as Howard grabs another box and hands it to Natalie.

HOWARD

And for you, madam.

NATALIE

Are we done moving all this junk yet?

HOWARD

Just about. But then we get to unpack and organize it all.

NATALIE

Yay.

She exits towards the apartment. Howard exits the truck with his arms full. He pulls the back door shut, latches it, and walks towards the apartment building.

INT. MORENSKI APARTMENT – DAY

Howard, Gretchen, and Natalie rest against a wall in the living room. Before them lies a mess of unpacked boxes and various household items that have not yet been put in their proper places.

Gretchen looks at her watch and GROANS.

GRETCHEN

Okay, I think we've been lazy for long enough.

She stands up slowly. Howard and Natalie GRUMBLE and remain motionless.

GRETCHEN

Come on, we've got a lot of work ahead of us.

She grabs Natalie by the arms and pulls.

NATALIE

Ow, you're going to pull my arms off. Can't we do this tomorrow?

Gretchen yanks Natalie to her feet.

GRETCHEN

We have to get through all of the heavy stuff today. Your dad will be gone all day tomorrow at school—

She grabs Howard by the arms and pulls.

GRETCHEN

And we need his manly strength.

Howard GROWLS, pulls Gretchen down on top of him, and kisses her.

NATALIE

God, please don't do that.

KNOCKING at the front door. Howard and Gretchen look at each other, puzzled.

HOWARD

I'll get it.

He rises and answers the door to reveal a basket of pastries with a note attached. Howard looks to the left, but sees nobody. He looks to the right and spots the weathered face of Mrs. Alvarez peeking her head out her front door, watching.

Howard bends down to examine the note. Scribbled are the words, "Welcome to neighborhood. This is pan Mexicano. Maricruz Alvarez. Apartment 103." Howard looks back up, but Mrs. Alvarez's door stands shut.

INT. MORENSKI APARTMENT – EVENING

A few large objects now occupy their proper locations, including a television that sits on a stand in a corner and a bookshelf filled with mystery novels and mathematics texts.

Gretchen sits on the floor, surrounded by boxes. She pulls a blender from one box and places it to her side, where several other kitchen appliances sit.

Howard and Natalie push a couch across the floor and set it flush against a wall.

HOWARD

What do you think, honey?

Gretchen looks up from her work.

GRETCHEN

Looks good.

She glances around the room.

GRETCHEN

It's really coming together.

NATALIE

Can I take a break now?

GRETCHEN

Okay, you've earned it.

Natalie exits to her bedroom.

Gretchen returns her attention to the boxes. Howard approaches her from behind, kneels down, and massages her shoulders. She rolls her neck and MOANS.

GRETCHEN

That feels good.

Howard kisses her neck. Gretchen closes her eyes and smiles.  
Howard kisses her temple.

GRETCHEN

You're kind of frisky today. Does this mean you're going to take me out on the town like you promised?

HOWARD

I'm just excited. A new home, a new job. A fresh start.

Gretchen turns to him.

GRETCHEN

I know. I'm excited too.

HOWARD

I wish Natalie was.

GRETCHEN

She'll come around.

KNOCKING at the front door.

HOWARD

We're quite popular for our first day here.

Howard starts to stand, but Gretchen pulls him back down.

GRETCHEN

You never answered my question.

HOWARD

It would be my honor to escort you out on the town for a romantic and unforgettable evening.

She gives him a quick kiss and releases him.

GRETCHEN

Good answer.

## Harder

Everything becomes harder  
with age—  
one's heart, features, and face

Everything becomes harder  
with age—  
one's life, problems, and pace

## Life Assurance

The cluster of cubicles and not quite cubicles calls to mind the maze of a laboratory rat, or the graves of a disorderly cemetery. One plot holds the body of Jeremy Tripp, not a corpse, nor a rat. A man of twenty-three years, Jeremy does his best to look busy. To have mastered such an important office skill at such a young age shows blossoming potential. He jostles some paperwork around, checks his company e-mail, checks his phone for messages, then jostles some more paperwork.

The small walls of the studio apartment constrict like a mechanic's vise. The vise holds the young man of twenty-three years. Jeremy is the proper age to feel the pressure—pressure to succeed, pressure to find one's way. He sits on the worn fabric of the love seat he took from his older brother's apartment when he moved out three months ago, and peruses the internet on his laptop computer, a gift from his grandparents when he graduated from the local state college

last year. Amid his online research into flat panel televisions, Jeremy's cell phone rings. He digs it out of his pants pocket and glances at the caller ID to see an unknown 800 number. He lets it ring as he places it back into his pocket.

Jeremy sits within his cubicle. He stares at the report on his computer screen, but his attention darts to the clock. He completed the report about twenty minutes ago, and has been languorously proofreading ever since. Another five minutes to kill until it is due, so Jeremy returns to his task.

"You wanna go get some lunch?" The question drifts to Jeremy like a life preserver, and the woman who threw it pauses briefly at the inlet of his cubicle, already knowing the answer.

"No, no thanks. I got to finish this report," answers Jeremy without looking away from the computer screen, "Thanks though."

"You need to stop working so hard," the woman comments as she continues on her way.

Jeremy's laptop whizzes atop a foldable card table that serves as a dining table, as well as any other kind of table Jeremy requires. Next to the laptop is a box of tissues. Jeremy sits on a bar stool in front of the computer, shirtless, with his pants and underwear around his ankles. On the screen plays a 30 second preview clip of a pornographic movie on an X-rated internet site. Short, but long enough to get him aroused. As

the current clip ends, he clicks on another preview. Jeremy's cell phone rings from a pocket of his crumpled pants.

"Jeeze," Jeremy utters, annoyed. He retrieves his phone and checks the caller ID—the same 800 number as the evening before. He rolls his eyes and tosses the phone onto the love seat.

Within his cubicle, Jeremy practices the skills of a successful office-dweller—in this instance, clock watching and break taking. The clock hits the hour mark, and Jeremy shoots from his chair, out of the cubicle and into his scheduled break without the loss of a single second.

His legs stretched out to his side as far as he can manage on the loveseat, Jeremy rests his head on an armrest. He watches the movie that plays on his laptop, which sits in prominence on the stand that will one day hold his shining flat panel television. The movie is some sophomoric comedy created for cheap laughs. Jeremy is happy to oblige, letting out guffaws at the gross-out antics. Amid his laughter, Jeremy's cell phone rings. The caller ID again identifies the persistent 800 number. Agitation overtaking his patience, Jeremy pauses the movie and answers the phone.

"Hello?" he asks in a huff.

"Hello. I'm calling because I'd like to offer you the opportunity for supplemental life insurance with—

“Okay, okay. This is why you keep calling me? I don’t need life insurance. I’m twenty-three.”

“It’s never too early to consider a life insurance policy,” proposes the pleasant and assured female voice.

“No, I’m pretty sure it’s too early.”

“Because you’re invincible, right?”

“How old are you?” asks Jeremy.

“Twenty-five,” she answers.

“Do you have life insurance?”

“Yes.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I work for a life insurance company. You think I don’t have life insurance?”

Jeremy slouches in his seat. “Listen, I’m not going to argue with you. I just want you to stop calling me. Take me off the list or whatever.”

“So, what’s Mr. Invincible up to tonight?” she asks, ignoring his request.

Jeremy shakes his head. “Just because you have a crappy job with obviously too much time to kill doesn’t mean you have to waste mine.”

“I like my job. I give people something they need.”

“Well, I don’t need life insurance.”

“Not just life insurance—life assurance.”

“Right.”

“Actually, often the most important thing I give people is someone to talk to,” she states with an almost reverent tone collecting in her voice, “There’s a lot of lonely people out there.”

Jeremy straightens. “All you do is prey on people and try to sell them a product. Nobody in their right mind would talk to a telemarketer.”

“You’re talking to me.”

“Well, now I’m not,” says Jeremy as he hangs up the phone.

Jeremy gazes deeply into his cubicle’s computer monitor, beyond the spreadsheet it displays. The whiz and buzz of the computer fades from his ears, replaced by the succulent sound of silence.

“Jeremy, have you finished updating those logs yet?” The booming voice flies like buckshot, scattering the silence. Jeremy’s awareness waxes, his eyes return from hazy nothingness to numbers and fields. Jeremy turns his head to face his determined manager.

“Not yet.”

“We need those by the end of the day.”

“Almost done,” responds Jeremy’s empty voice.

Savage sounds emanate from the tiny, tinny speakers of Jeremy’s laptop. With violence and courage, Sir Jeremy, the proud paladin, continues his quest to save his homeland from some sort of ultimate, world-devouring evil. Jeremy curses at the oncoming horde of simulated villains. His toes, sealed in dirty socks, fidget as he manipulates the controls like an advanced typist, which, according to a typing certificate in his

portfolio, he is. Jeremy's cell phone rings. He fishes the phone from his pocket with one hand while continuing his rampage and carnage with the other. "Hello?"

"Hello. Have you changed your mind about the life insurance yet?"

"Life insurance girl. Why am I not surprised?" asks Jeremy, not so annoyed.

"Miss me?"

Sir Jeremy swings wildly at the horde. "No, but I'm sorry I hung up on you last night. That wasn't cool."

"I've had a lot worse. Hey, is that Vengeance Knight?"

Sir Jeremy decapitates a soulless interloper. "Yeah, you play?" he asks with slight surprise.

"I've already beaten it," she says, her smile audible.

Jeremy is taken aback. "It just came out last week." An enemy stabs Sir Jeremy in the gut.

"True," she states, her vocal smile widening.

"Damn," he offers, impressed.

She laughs. "Where are you at?"

Another enemy slashes the face of Sir Jeremy. "Castle Bloodstorm. These damned zombie monks keep ganging up on me." One of the aforementioned zombie monks delivers a death blow. "And now I'm dead." Jeremy sets down the controller. "Don't you get in trouble for talking to me like this?"

"Talking to people is what I do. What do you do?"

"My job, you mean?"

"Sure."

Jeremy's voice sinks, "I do nothing. Nothing punctuated by menial tasks. I'm just an office monkey."

"Why don't you quit?"

"I need the money. And it could be worse, I guess."

"You could do better," she states simply.

He scoffs, "Sure, but life isn't that simple."

"Life is only as complicated as you make it. Before I found my calling, I did a bunch stuff I hated. Eventually I got tired of making life tougher than it has to be. Take those zombie monks, for example. Sure, you can fight through them all, but how many times will you have to start over? A better plan is to travel to the monastery in the Ice Crown Mountains and learn the banishment spell."

Jeremy pauses. "I think I'm in love."

She laughs. A lovely, lively laugh.

## The Trouble I'm In

Can't seem to get you out  
from under my skin

At least until  
the euphoria wears thin

Only then do I realize  
the trouble I'm in

But until then...

## Disappeared into the Wilderness

“Never surrender!” shouted Oliver as he shoved his sword fiercely out in front of himself, running through the goblin who stood there brandishing an evil sneer. Oliver pulled free his blade, swung it in wide circles around his body like a hyperactive gyroscope, and swiftly dispatched the six remaining goblins that surrounded him on the woodland trail.

No goblins actually surrounded the young man, at least none that anybody else would be able to see. But they were real enough to Oliver. He imbued all of his imaginary creations, enemies and allies alike, with a real sense of life. Therefore, as all the goblins fell dead, Oliver sheathed his willow reed sword with true satisfaction.

“You can come out now,” said Oliver proudly, “they’re all dead.”

“Are you sure?” came a voice so buoyant and airy that it seemed to ride on the brisk breeze that ruffled Oliver’s sandy hair.

With a heavy squint of his sun-laden eyes, Oliver peered into the thick cluster of fir trees before him. “Quite sure, my lady.”

From behind one of the trees tiptoed an enchanting elf maiden. Seeing the goblins all dead at his feet, she paused and smiled at Oliver.

“What?” he inquired.

“You look quite fetching when the sun catches your armor like that.” The sun’s rays shimmered off of Oliver’s armor, from his chain mail coat to his polished plate boots. The perennial knight in shining armor. All that was missing was a magnificent helm with feathered plume, but Oliver did not like the lack of peripheral vision such a headpiece imposed.

“I don’t have time for such flattery. I must be getting back.”

“Then you better tell *him* that,” said the elfin maiden, whom Oliver called Autumn, as she pointed behind him.

“Who?” he asked, as he turned to look where she was pointing. There, obstructing the path that led further into the wilderness, stood a towering troll. With muscles bulging terribly and teeth like the tips of dripping spears, it was the most formidable troll he had ever seen. “No...” Eyes locked intently on the creature, it was all Oliver could manage to mutter. He was taken by the desire to overcome this new challenger. He gritted his teeth and took a step forward, but stopped. The troll snorted. “No. No, I don’t have time for this. I have to get back,” Oliver said as he turned to Autumn, who was no longer there.

“Target acquired,” spoke a hollow, robotic voice. Oliver turned back towards the troll, but a hulking robot bristling with laser guns and rockets stood in its place. Oliver glanced down at his feet, which were now encased within anti-gravity boots. His armor had been replaced by a slick bodysuit of futuristic design and polymers. “Termination sequence initiated. Ten... Nine...”

“Termination sequence?”

“Eight... seven...” continued the gigantic robot.

“Fine,” retorted Oliver as he kicked on his anti-gravity boots. They whizzed and hummed, then gently lifted Oliver about two inches off the ground.

“Six... five...”

Oliver turned away, gliding deftly along the trail on a homeward course. Only it was no longer a wilderness trail at all—it was a post-apocalyptic city street. The decrepit metropolis felt very sad and very dead, which only spurred Oliver on more earnestly.

“Halt, human. The termination sequence has been initiated.”

“So I heard. Guess you’ll have to catch me.” Oliver’s boots whizzed again, louder than before. The humming elevated its pitch. As the noise increased, so too did Oliver’s speed, until soon he became only a blur amidst the city’s bleakness.

“You’re late.” The burly man set down his beer and turned his fat head towards the rusty screen door, where Oliver stood.

“I’m sorry.” Oliver closed the screen door behind himself without making a sound, and slinked into the living room.

“No, if you were sorry, you wouldn’t have done it.”

“I know. I’m sorry, dad.”

“You’re fucking fifteen years old. Why don’t you start acting like it?”

The timidity that was glazed over Oliver’s eyes lifted. “I’m fourteen.” The words came with more than a hint of agitation. As his father lumbered out of his recliner, the agitation evaporated along with his nerve. Oliver backed his body up against the sagging screen door.

“You little fuck.” The big man spit his words with insincere intensity. He was angry, to be sure, but such curses towards his son had long become trite and stale. No, there was only one way for his miserable son to learn. “You need to show some fucking respect.” As his father approached, Oliver began to push open the screen door with the backside of his sinewy body. “Nope,” said Oliver’s father as he took a long stride forward and grabbed his son by the collar of his shirt. With a quick jerk of his arm, he sent Oliver to the floor.

Trembling slightly, Oliver tilted his head upward. “I’m sorry.”

Oliver’s father clenched his teeth and lifted a fist. “No, you’re not.” He raised his fist higher as though to strike, but paused. With his other hand he pushed Oliver’s head away,

and then brought his fist down hard against his son's shoulder with a solid thump. All else was silent as a second thump sounded, then a third. "If you were sorry, you wouldn't have done it."

Oliver began to sob softly. "Go clean yourself up. Madeline's going to be here soon," spoke his father without emotion. Oliver remained still. His low, rumbling sobs continued. "Get up," his father demanded.

Oliver obeyed, stood slowly, and walked to the bathroom.

"Oliver, your father tells me you're a real adventurer."

Oliver lifted his eyes from his lap and gazed across the living room at Madeline. "What?"

Madeline was a few years older than Oliver's father, but much of her prom queen good looks still remained. Mired within a sagging loveseat, she readjusted herself and spoke again, "Your dad told me you like to go exploring in the wilderness."

"Yeah," Oliver breathed.

"Are you okay?" asked Madeline with concern for the quiet young man.

"He's fine," interjected Oliver's father as he looked over at his son. "Don't be rude to her."

Oliver's eyes went back to his lap. "Sorry."

"He's just shy, I bet," offered Madeline.

Oliver's father stood up from the loveseat. "Come on. We're going to be late for our reservations."

Madeline stood up to join him. “It was nice to meet you, Oliver,”

“It was nice to meet you,” returned Oliver.

“You’re on your own for dinner,” said Oliver’s father as he and Madeline crossed the living room towards the front door.

As the door closed, Oliver raised his head and stared out into the silent, lonely room. Tears trickling from cheerless eyes, he slid forward off his seat, onto the floor, and cried.

Oliver exited his room quietly while slipping on a goose down jacket. His hair was an unruly briar patch. He raked his fingers through in a futile attempt to tame it. He did not have time to comb his hair; he just wanted to get out of there.

He entered the kitchen and opened a cupboard, exposing its bare insides. “Of course,” he muttered. He shut the cupboard, only a little too forcefully.

“Oliver?” called his father from the living room. Oliver froze and hoped.

“Hey, Big O,” shouted a second voice. Daryl. Oliver released his hope with a shallow sigh and crept into the living room. “There he is,” said Daryl, a short man with a big gut. A bottle of cheap beer balanced atop the mound of his stomach. “Are you just getting up now? It’s past noon, man.” His words came out slightly slurred, which, along with the collection of spent bottles at his feet, betrayed his morning’s activities. An unopened case betrayed his plans for the remainder of the day.

“I didn’t feel like getting up.” Oliver cast a gaze down at Daryl’s shabby sweatpants.

“Slacker,” Daryl commented. “But that’s what Sundays are for.”

“I guess.”

“You going into the wilderness again?” asked Oliver’s father, who held a beer of his own.

“Yeah,” Oliver answered.

“Ain’t you scared of bears?” inquired Daryl. “Or cougars?”

“My son ain’t scared of shit, are you?”

Oliver moved his mouth without words, unsure of how to answer. His eyes locked with his father’s.

“Come here,” spoke his father. Oliver obeyed, and dragged his feet across the living room to the big man’s recliner. Oliver’s father stood up and loomed over his son like a rain cloud. He dug into his back pocket and removed a folded pocket knife. “Here,” he said as he handed it to his son. “My dad gave this to me when I was your age, and now I’m giving it to you.”

The bronze handle shone dully in Oliver’s hand. He couldn’t take his eyes off it.

“Well?”

“Thanks,” Oliver said with a crooked smile. “Thanks, dad.”

“You’re becoming a man, and every man should have a pocket knife,” his father matter-of-factly replied.

“Yeah, now you can take out any bears that get in your way,” Daryl interjected with a laugh.

Oliver proudly pushed the pocket knife into his own back pocket.

Walking amongst the trees of the wilderness, Autumn at his side, Oliver kicked away a small pinecone.

“Well, I think he’s a lout,” Autumn opined.

“Yeah. But he’s not always so bad,” countered Oliver.

“I hate how he says, ‘If you were sorry, you wouldn’t have done it.’”

“Yeah, me too.”

“He’s just a bully. Simple as that.”

“No. Real life is never simple.”

“What’s the matter with you today?” Autumn asked.

“Nothing,” defended Oliver. “Why?”

Autumn cocked her head. “You’re distant, preoccupied.” She looked him up and down. “And where’s your armor?”

“I’m just not in the mood for that,” he said as he sat down, resting his back against one of the tall Ponderosa pines that bordered the trail.

“Not in the mood? But you’re a knight. You’ve sworn an oath to protect the forest, and you’re supposed to be ever-vigilant.”

Oliver stretched out his arm to grab a small, rigid branch that had fallen long ago. He pulled his new knife from his back pocket and began to scrape off the bark. “Not today.”

No further argument came from Autumn, for she was no longer there. Oliver looked up to see that the forest was

also gone, replaced by the buildings of an Old West town. The wilderness trail was now a dirt road that ran down the center of the small, frontier town, and Oliver's clothes were now those of an intrepid sheriff. The pocket knife had become a long bowie knife, the branch a pearl-handled revolver. Oliver looked down at the sturdy, leather boots on his feet. They were the kind of boots any experienced lawman should own. Oliver glanced back up the dirt road. A figure approached from the other end of town. Oliver squinted but could not make out who the man was. No matter, he knew what kind of man he was—a dirty outlaw. Oliver stood up, revolver in one hand, bowie knife in the other. “Who’s that?” he called out.

The man continued his approach.

“I said who are you?”

Neither stopping nor slowing, the man answered.

“Name’s Billy,” he said.

Oliver swallowed. “Billy the Kid?”

Billy laughed an odd, sickly chuckle. “Nobody’s called me that in a long time.” As the man continued to advance, the truth of his words became apparent. He was most certainly not a kid. In his forties, Billy had thinning, oily hair and a mustache to match. He was dressed in a flannel shirt and blue jeans, both worn away to bare threads in several places, some of which were covered over with patches of heavy cloth. He wore a cowboy hat and boots, each in similarly rough shape.

“What’re you doing around these parts, Billy?”

“Just drifting through.”

“I’m going to have to ask you to stop right where you are.” Billy ignored him and pressed forward. He was getting

close. “You’re not here to cause any trouble in town are you?” Oliver questioned.

Billy chuckled again. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, boy.”

“If you don’t stop, I’m going to have to shoot you.”

“And what’re you going to shoot me with? That twig?” Billy grabbed Oliver’s arm with a quick jut of his hand. A real hand. Oliver lost his breath as the hand twisted the branch away from his grasp. In an instinctual, defensive posture, Oliver held his knife out in front himself. Billy chuckled again. His laugh, now very real to Oliver, was entirely unnerving. “That’s a pretty knife,” Billy said simply. With a smile, he brought the tree branch down hard across Oliver’s arm, forcing the pocket knife to spring out his hand and to the ground. As Oliver made a move to retrieve the knife, Billy brought the branch down again, this time against Oliver’s head. A spike of pain, and then swiftly only darkness.

By the time Oliver weakly lifted his head, night had already fallen. He had been out for several hours. Oliver felt the back of head. His fingers ran through his hair, matted with dried blood. “Uhh,” he moaned. Oliver sat up slowly and moaned again. He tried to recall what had happened, and as his memory returned in a rush, his eyes widened. They darted all around the ground, frantically searching, but finding nothing. “No.” The pocket knife was gone. “No,” squealed Oliver, his desperation obvious and growing. He rose to his feet in a quick jerk. Too quick. His vision blackened, his

center of gravity wavered. Oliver closed his eyes and gathered himself. He felt queasy and all together unwell. After a brief moment, he reopened his eyes and continued his fruitless search. He knew it would be fruitless, futile. But he searched anyway, and as he did so, his despair grew. Tears began to drop like liquid stones, each one further weighing down his heart.

Oliver pulled himself to another Ponderosa pine and rested his body against it. He stared away into nothingness. Vacantly he stared until the shoes on his feet inexplicably caught his attention. Eyes affixed upon them, his shoes soon filled the entirety of his vision. His shoes. Not the shoes of a courageous knight, or of a futuristic freedom fighter, or of a Wild West sheriff, but the shoes of Oliver Ettinger. He closed his eyes again and let the tears fall. He let his mind drift away.

After a time, after all his tears had fallen and his heart was a rock, Oliver lifted his heavy eyelids. His vision was blurry, but at the same time very clear.

“Are you well?” asked a familiar voice.

Oliver looked up to see Autumn’s beautiful, concerned face. She frowned and repeated the question. “Are you okay?”

Oliver managed a weak smile. “Never better.”

“I wanted to help, but I could do nothing,” she stated with shame.

“It’s okay. It doesn’t matter.”

“You should get home. It’s very late. Or very early—the sun will be rising soon.”

“I can’t go home.”

“You’re already extremely late, your father—”

“You don’t understand. I can’t ever go home.”

Autumn studied Oliver’s face and said quietly, “I understand.” Dew rested thickly on forest undergrowth, and mist hung in the night air. The wilderness was calm, quiet. “What will you do now?”

Oliver stood, more solidly than before, but still with pain. “I will do what I have sworn to do.” He turned to face the seemingly endless wilderness. “I will protect the forest.”

Autumn moved beside Oliver. “*We* will protect the forest.”

Oliver smiled. Not a weak smile, but one of resolve. “I would have it no other way, my lady,” he said as he stepped forward and disappeared into the wilderness.

## Fragile State of Mind

Your sorrow is just a fragile state of mind

Don't know what that means  
but I tell myself that all the time

Your sorrow is just a fragile state of mind

You'll be on your feet again soon  
and the pain will fade in time

## Writing Is War

Writing is war. It is a war of many battles fought with words and ideas. They are battles for expression. For some writers, perhaps the words, ideas, and expressions emerge uninhibited—fresh water flowing from the life-giving springs of their minds. Other writers, however, are constantly battling.

The fight with words is one that requires constant patience. Any lapse in a writer's endurance could easily lead to an inferior finished work. There is no room for compromise if a writer wishes to truly transcribe their thoughts onto paper.

Never, however, should the battle over words obstruct a writer's goal of creating unique ideas. After all, writing is not merely a collection of carefully selected words. Instead, writing is a collection of carefully selected words which form a unique voice used to express ideas. In a story, these ideas take the form of characters, descriptions, locations, dialog, etc. In that way, writing is much more than the sum of its words.

Writing is war. A war to assemble words and articulate ideas, but to what end? Ultimately, it is a war for escape. A

writer escapes their own life through writing. It is an escape from life in order to create life. A writer escapes the world in order to develop one anew, a world which pours from their mind and onto paper.

## Shadows and Stars

My vision is filled  
with shadows and stars

Stars are just reminders  
of dead suns

All of my thoughts  
are desires for new thoughts

Those with the most time  
have the least to do

