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Ambrose

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Ambrose

a novella by Elise Nardi

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Abstract

“Ambrose” was composed over the course of three very cold months in the winter of 2016, partly in response to Barth’s short fiction collection, “Lost in the Funhouse”. Many texts played some role in the influence and inspiration of this novella, though, it is Barth’s protagonist who is borrowed, and represented in the post-adolescent form. Likewise, it is Barth’s exploration of the funhouse, Barth’s complications of the journey, from which this project sought its ‘foundations’.

The foundations being something of loose irony here, in terms of the work’s architecture and design. Often, it is the very foundation, tradition, of narrative and Authority that this work seeks to question. “Ambrose” is fraught with internal contradictions: so much so, the implied speaker continually, and brazenly contradicts the logical consistency of the narrative-truth. These contradictions often arise in the form of imperatives, for example, that demand opposing actions from Ambrose, but also Reader. The result of this, or so I intended, is something akin to a ‘split’ from Authority to Narrator, from “Ambrose” to “You”. A space is presented to the Reader, through which the Reader may question the operation of Perspective and Authority itself. The Implied Speaker imposes queues and double-binds, demands, and falsely-neutral positions upon the Reader, so that Reader may become privy to the irony at hand, and possibly, resist against it.

About the second person perspective, Carlos Fuentes once wrote: “It’s a voice that admits it doesn’t know everything”. There’s something about this assertion that haunted me while working on this project, which I do not have entirely wrestled out today. It was partly my intention to explore the consequence of second perspective which does not admit, but openly flaunts, how little it knows of Truth, and of itself.

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AMBROSE

“For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose, it is a place of fear and confusion.”

- John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*

I.

You're unwrapping a wet tuna sandwich on your lunch break at the park when you hear your name said once in a familiar voice. *Ambrose*. You look around your right shoulder then your left. It's been years since anyone has called you that name. You don't even have time to doubt the acuity of your senses when a flight of pigeons pecking at detritus on the sidewalk pulls up across your vision in a curtain of flapping wings. There is a flash of white underwing and cooing. You can feel the coldness of the snow carrying with the aroma of exhaust. *Ambrose*. You're almost positive her voice sounds familiar.

You decide to forfeit the tuna sandwich today and return your half eaten meal to the parchment wrapper that was less soggy the last time you used it. You attempt to fold the paper around the saturated triangle with care as if you intended to gift it later but the paper is falling apart and infused with some kind of material plastic that protests the flexibility of its bend. The job you do is good enough for what it is however. You tuck the clumsy mess of paper inside your briefcase to throw out later to hold the small but necessary comfort of knowing that you'll be prepared. You know the next time you happen to cross paths with a trashcan there will be less time and energy wasted than if you had attempted to search one out without a plan. The park is vast. The city looms dark and tall. You feel as if you have forgotten something or like you

remember too little and something was lost from view and blink back into your vision and shake off your thoughts like water from dripping fur. You hardly have time to wipe your eyes when *Ambrose* plays into your ear from somewhere and. You buckle your briefcase shut.

You know it was forecast to snow this evening. You pass vendors peddling plastic bangled jewelry and knockoff designer handbags. You walk past a man selling red carnations wrapped with newspaper around the stems and the cart on the corner selling soda in aluminum cans and hot dogs from Sabrett. Part of you may want to dismiss moments such as these as synaptic misfires or intrusive dreams and dismiss them as malfunctions or chance occurrences. Though a part of you still seems to go on without the better judgement of your reason to reveal the disjointed stirring which corrupts your operating as a whole. You are always clashing with yourself it seems and sometimes the grinding of countering parts can become so exhausting that you may stop and shut down entirely. You can feel yourself veering toward a state of red alarm sometimes that can drive you to extreme impulse or egress. Today though you are doing okay and try your best not to overthink too much. The density of the atmosphere has thickened and cause the the loose hairs around your sideburns to curl from humidity. You touch the strand stiffened from the frost and some of it melts on the tip of your finger. You turn your chin to the string of cirrus clouds beginning to collect into one cloud in the sky very far above you and solidify into a mute watch of walled grey. You flick up your collar against the wind.

Ambrose. You're not in the habit of dwelling on thoughts such as these for long

and squeeze out the gate of the park's entrance. You pass through a cold and colorless afternoon. You stumble through the decline of fall with one of your eyes still cocooned by crust as the season finishes without you. Or at least so at times it seems. Sometimes you forget which direction you meant to be going. Sometimes you walk confident in your gait until a storm appears and confounds you. The month is November though hardly does it matter. You would hold the lapel of your jacket against your mouth in July if the cold stung just the same.

The end of November longs for the winter and flirts erratically on its cusp. A month you spend clamoring for warmth and wait out with shallow sleeps. You protect your lips for the symbolic comfort while your hands turn hard from cold. Let go.

At least let go before darting into the street to cross the traffic without the ability of your hands. It can be useful to keep your balance. You turn your body sideways to squeeze between the bumpers of compact-cars and between the bumpers of yellow taxis as if you are a geometric shape navigating a polluted game of Tetris. You enter breathlessly into the lobby. Straighten your tie. Square your shoulders. You find your way past the fluorescence and shellac finish to a narrow and poorly lit hall that leads you to that anomalous yellow wood door which creaks like a dying yowl and grants your entry to the stairs' ground floor. Sometimes you prefer a fit of anxiety from the elevator but only when you are having a physical fit that's much worse. Today you take a deep breath and begin the not especially unique endeavor of climbing the building's six full flights of steps. Take your time. Try to enjoy it.

At some point you arrive at the mouth of a familiar maze that is floored with grey carpeting and determined by the arrangement of cubicles. All this you could navigate just as easily in your sleep and file your way down the aisles until you reach the tacked photograph of a pitbull and a cat wearing elf hats by a fireplace and know that you've reached your block. You pass the neighbor's pets and return to your standard-issue desk inside your standard issue collapsable walls and without ever once thinking something of remote consequence. You are thinking about the pitbull and cat's mutually dismayed expressions when you sit and resume your work again. The kind of work they pay you to do is equally complicated and tedious. Chop to it. It won't take long before you numb out and forget about the park and her voice.

The next morning you rise late after spending too long in bed thinking of a bad dream which you thought you might be able to sleep off. Instead you slipped back into another. You plan on eating lunch at the petite café adjacent to the office today because you don't have time to do much else. You'll go there and eat that Frenchicane cuisine despite the fact that it's more appearance than sustenance and despite your preferring to save money with a bagged lunch and being relatively well off though less well off than most of your associates. You have no complaints and the Frenchicane will be fine you meant to say. With one leg thrust inside a pair of business slacks you know you won't have time to be prepared and that even one more silly or minor delay could hold the power to make you late. But remember it's only business.

You sit down on the edge of the bed still feeling stuck inside your clothes and

helpless and unbalanced and gently worm your other foot through the other leg's hole. How much time would you have saved if you had simply taken your time in the first place? You brush the thought aside because worrying will slow you down for even longer.

Admittedly there is another moment or two where you stumble around in near darkness before the clock demands you make a serious attempt at assembling yourself for the oncoming day. Then you are reaching inside the breast pocket of your jacket and you are excavating the house key with a routine and unthinking exactness. You are turning the key and listening for the soft click of the metallic with half your ear for the confirmation while it churns. You take the stairwell two steps at a time with your briefcase partly latched and swinging from your fist and all of this you do with the abandon of a veteran sleepwalker. You have procured a dormant understanding of the stairwell's shards of stray glass. You've developed a mild awareness of the litter and obstacles and other abandoned debris. An unconscious map formed and forms sometime between your dreams. Go on.

Jump from the remaining steps. You land on the ground-floor softly though your toes prickle upon impact still. You smooth over the fresh creases in your dress shirt with reasonable haste. Then the door to the lobby opens and one of its brass hinges squeaks like a mouse being slowly tortured. A gust of cold flurries into the dark stairwell and mixes with orange warmth. There is a faint glimmer in the lamplight of vanishing snow before the door snaps shut and the coattails of your neighbor brush against your leg and wind up the curve of the stairs. You don't catch the face but only the dark collar. A shadow slides

down the steps like a dark run of spilling water reminds you of the dream you had. The one where you were followed through across the city on a train through the valley. You appeared peaceful while you slept.

Lunch is served in the crammed and balmy café with the yellowish countertops and framed photographs of its wiry white-haired shopkeeper hunched over the shoulders of particularly esteemed patrons. The body heat and roasting coffee distends over the countertops and across the dining tables in a haze of steam and teeming breath. The smell is rich and sharp mixed with coca and soup and sweat. You order 1/2 a sandwich with Eggplant and Feta and a side of Salade Nicoise. You order a small coffee without room to go. Dishes clang in multiple places behind the register. The barista calls out your order to *Anders* the name you give to most people that you meet.

It doesn't take long before you are beginning to feel uncomfortable in the crowded café and breathlessly whisper *c'est la vie* or shrug *what the hell* and pick up your fork for salad. You dangle the four pronged instrument less than a centimeter from the plate's surface and wonder why your appetite suddenly rebelled against you. Why you are surprised at the unexplained but usual. You may desire to rid yourself of mounting impressions of claustrophobia but intend to do so by the means of ignoring the mounting impressions of claustrophobia. You intend to avoid claustrophobic facilitators whenever you can though sometimes it's not enough. Sometimes it can't be helped at which times an apathetic and uninvolved disposition can temporarily postpone full seizure. So you fixate on a thin and sepia vein that lays across your plate now and suspect to be an

employee's hair before carefully lowering your fork onto the plate where it clatters despite this. You sip nervously from a glass of tepid water and scratch like a quiet bird.

You take another sip. Then another. Take a sip again. Imagine what you must look like sitting there while scratching at the plate with your fingernail and shifting your eyes across the room like a sickly cat shifting her eyes across festering garbage. Feeling spontaneous and hungry you scarf down what remains of the Salade Nicoise. You point a glance over your shoulder. You look around the café and think something about the general activity or your thirstiness when the patrons' conversations are silenced by a discordant shatter from what sounded like ceramic in the kitchen. Forget about it. No suspect information makes the case unworthy of considering and yet you imagine a chef. You swallow your last bite of Salade Nicoise. You blow your nose inside a paper-napkin.

There are lots of things you'll need to do when you get back to the office which you understand in the low lying and unconditional that resolves itself as being a permeant task of small progress. You know this in the same way that you know you'll never actually reach an end to the stuff that you need to be doing. Forget about it. Why not forget about it? You must nip your persistent imagination before it flourishes from the bud and train yourself. You must turn your eye the more pressing things you could worry yourself down to nothing over rather than organization and decision making and To Do lists for someone else. You tear into the Eggplant Feta which tastes as stale and bland as a spreadsheet and wonder what or where or who those more pressing things might be. An attempt to let your mind go blank follows. A

vague suspicion that you resemble a cow grazing dead eyed in the open pasture will settle over with mounting details that become impossible to ignore.

You lay the sandwich down on your plate and yawn. There isn't much daylight in the café's circulation because the snow clouds have blocked out the sun and the dim standalone lamps have made your eyes feel warm and bleary. You get up from your setting by the window and glance outside where the snow is slowly falling. You collect your belongings with a dim feeling of being observed. This too you just as well may shrug off.

The storm has let up some when you are relieved from your shift and so naturally you chose to take the longer but justifiably more scenic route home. You pass beneath a snow draped gate and take quick steps into the park. A few people meander along the trail in the distance and you watch their tracks leaving thick drags across the snow. It's late enough and cold enough to make the vendors guiltlessly retire. You study the evening sky while it becomes darker before your eyes and watch the day slip away although not without the lonely witness of your heart. Which seems to be still beating by the way. You believe moments of dwindling resource to be of higher precedence through some primordial inclination that wills you to unconsciously apply this to nearly every dusk and dawn you witness. You gaze around the sky like a newly divorced gazes around the parking lot of a hometown motel. To feel as if a familiar attraction by the roadside's were only being seen now for the first time tonight.

So you will map the sky's impressions as if they are innately more precious knowing

soon they too will be taken away from you. Days are largely spent indoors for you now and so are easier to forget or not miss.

Look around. You've been going on and unaware of where you're heading again. You must be somewhere. Take comfort. Even when your feet fall asleep and you buckle into collapse while still in. You must keep moving. But quiet one moment. Just look. A full sweep of the park will reveal the skeletons of leafless trees as well as the looming silhouette of the city. You count lampposts and benches and mosey around fenced exhibitions of flora with your eye. Watch silent snow blanket the trash and almost camouflage the Styrofoam. You linger on the shadows of warped trunks as they bleed into a solid wall of the night's darkness. Discomfort finds a crevice and creeps in.

Perhaps you are by nature a practical traveler and attempt to read the hour on your watch with the little legible amount of light while you still possess it. Or perhaps you are more poetic than practical by nature in which case you won't time have time to dwell on these circumstances as long as you would like to before something interrupts. But what? Something you've felt before and you know. *Ambrose*. By whose voice had the name been said? Someone who says it like they've loved you.

Spin around. Of course not. There's no one. You will not. Spin around. You refuse. Spin. You turn halfway. You can spy no one beside yourself. Spin around. Fully. There's nothing you could squint from the peripheral darkness even if you wanted to. Don't bother. You will. Spin around. You already tried this. Nothing. There's no one. You spin. Force

your eyes back onto the path. Grit your teeth as if you wanted to all along.

You keep going. The cold has become a painful and constant presence with all the natural light almost gone now and makes your lungs work harder than before. Maybe you begin to walk a little faster than you ordinarily would. Maybe you find yourself briskly traveling in what might appear to be a rush. But you aren't in a rush. It's work that next expects you. Only a feeling. You feel a little spooked.

Forgive yourself. You are just one person trying to get home on a path that is long and poorly lit and less familiar than you remember it to be. You are one person on a path that winds and turns in places that you don't always expect or understand and sometimes appears to operate entirely without cause or reason. The night can be cold and unforgiving. If you aren't careful you might get lost. When the day feels long and seems to outlast itself then your nerves might feel drawn out and shot before you even get home from work. You trudge along to your destination without company to enjoy the remaining freedom of the night and. You are exhausted. You can't help but think that a well lit path might at least give you the impression of something being out there beyond the night's disguise of nothing which is everything that is usually out there when underlit. Perhaps in circumstances such as those you would be at least with the squirrels rather than your imagination.

An ostensible nothing crops up on the path from somewhere you cannot see. But it's late. It doesn't matter. You lose your balance and almost fall over when you discover her

pale figure there in mirage with phantoms of falling snow. And you know her.

Or maybe you don't know her but at least find the way she keeps you unapologetically in focus and it's this expression that you know. The curious eyes that don't look to be hostile or kind on either side. You are attempting to determine whether she blinks or hasn't blinked when your approaching intersection occurs along with the necessity to meet with her. You must know if she is who you think she might be. If you could match the timbre of her voice you will establish something of your own sanity it seems. You tread among the ruins of yourself when her black belt suddenly becomes untied from her trenchcoat's hoop. You watch the belt relax around her waist and shimmy down to loop about the ankles. She kicks the ribbon free with her first step forward and you watch it flutter down to the snow frosted ground and rest limply. It's unclear whether she has noticed. Shake yourself free of whatever blockage is contained within you and rise to the opportunity now. You must. In the name of progress you find reason to initiate the talk.

With the black belt twisted on the sidewalk paces behind he she does not divert her gaze even now which surprises you. It surprises you enough to prevent your making a sound when you open your mouth to tell her about the accessory she left behind. You hold your finger up in a weak gesture that is something between a question and declaring a point. Your belt! is what you want to say from the place where you had frozen. Wait! You lost your belt! Before it's too late and she drifts past you. The stranger emits a sharp laugh from her sinuses. A hushed quality follows from the night's recent snow. There is no echo. Why would there be? An echo.

Clarity returns and it's still not too late to do something about the belt so you run ahead and scoop it up with the pivot and precision of a professional relay runner. Spin around. You spin around now. You are willing. You are finally ready to open up your lungs and you go around spinning around. Go around spinning spinning spinning around like the only thing you have ever known is spinning through cold and dark. How tragic. You stop. She's gone.

II.

The next day you are determined to rise early and achieve this goal with ease. You get up before your alarm and prepare a nutritionally balanced bagged lunch for your future self. It's surprisingly not that cold this morning. You watch the balcony's emerald curtains stir tenderly with the toss of a draft. You pack a thermos of black tea and one Winesap apple and a sleeve of white saltines. You pack a sandwich of turkey and Jarlsberg. The cheese is usually riddled with holes but not today. You're pretty sure someone once told you that these holes are known as "eyes" but maybe you made that up. You pat down your jacket and figure you must've misplaced your keys because they are absent from their usual place inside your breast pocket. Today you'll leave the apartment door unlocked.

Unfortunately your lunch will be better served at your desk than somewhere else outdoors. Unfortunate because part of you desires to return to the park because a more specific part would like to discover the mysterious woman waiting for you there. But the wind is too strong to make eating outside a comfortable experience today. You can picture the Jarlsberg being sucked out from between your sourdough slices and carried off

with the wind blindly in a gust. Instead you share your cheese instead with a colleague from the neighboring cell named Terry who has gingivitis and marital concerns. He helps himself to a sloppily torn corner of your sandwich and picks off all the crust.

You can't help but notice the food occupying his mouth when seamlessly he changes the topic of conversation to the game though which game you're not entirely sure. He tells you about the rising cost of goods and services and insurances. He tells you specifically about dental insurances. The rate of a decent lawyer.

"...now she's become fond of doing this thing where she makes lots of stupid, not-funny jokes at my expense and for no reason, whatsoever. Which she thinks is just *soo* funny, and *sooo* much funnier, if I'm not enjoying it.

"—Which I never am. How am I supposed to enjoy it when my tooth is rotting out? I mean, I'm in *pain*, for God's sake."

He sighs sort or exhales loudly and blows raspberries with his lips, "*Why don't you just put your money where your mouth is, Terry,*" Terry says with his voice abnormally elevated in pitch, "*Why don't you tell somebody who cares, Terry— unless oh, wait — you can't afford a therapist, either, can you,*"

Terry laughs in a throaty and self-deprecating way that sounded like it was more for the benefit of social harmony than a genuine expression of emotion. A deep and watery look of probing fills up his eyes like a puppy that wants something from you. You take a second and pause from the quiet and monotonous chewing of your cud and force a

reasonably polite smile onto your face. From somewhere on or around Terry's tongue a chunk of overworked turkey and spittle careens like a missile rock and sticks to your desk with gusto.

He is pinching little piles of bread crust between his pointer finger and his thumb to relocate them onto the stapler while getting quieter and quieter until the conversation comes to a full stop. Terry slips into a more private train of thought and you wonder if it's necessary that you give a reaction at all in times like these. You wonder if Terry wants something more from you than half your ear tuned in. Sometimes it seems as if only the squirrels are noticing. Out the window you spy a twitching tail watching you from the branch.

"You been down to the park, lately?" he asks abruptly.

"No," you say, "not recently."

It's bothersome to you that the lie came so automatically. It's not like you have something to hide.

"I saw some workers setting up the carnival this morning. Me and the old lady were thinking about going, you still seeing, Cindy? You could invite her, if you want to. I'll call you."

You smile again and mention a weak of affirmative and offer a dodgy word of thanks. Terry tosses a crumpled napkin at your wastebasket that trips beyond the rim. It's been months since you and Celeste have spoken. Maybe you will give her a call but probably not. It was easier to forgive her in infidelity than forget how relieved you were when she finally had left. You'll phone him

tonight to tell him you forgot you're regrettably booked with plans. You simply won't have time to make it. In the meanwhile you pick up the crumpled napkin. You shuffle your papers against the desk.

The National Weather Service issues a severe weather warning just as you are getting off of work. Expect winds greater than 58mph and 1-inch diameter hail. Coming home from something grueling you would prefer not to walk away in the sleet snow wind and hail and decide you'll flag down a taxi. You decide to save time and pay the meter but all of the taxis seem to be off duty or occupied and drive past you with unlit roof lights. With your arm held limply out from under the shelter of the marquee you begin to feel like a chump while the taxis roll through the puddles and splash past you. Eventually it so happens to occur to you that maybe they just can't see you from the angle where you're standing. You duck out and rush to the corner where turn-signals are crawling downtown.

You pull your jacket above your head with one arm and gesture through the hail with the other. The rain and runoff mix with gasoline in the gutters and puddle beneath your feet. Your shoes become wet down to the soles. Try stepping out into the street from the curb a little. Stick out your arm with a soldierly and devout kind of discipline. It will be easier for drivers to notice you if you're visible. Easier if you're scanning for eyes. One of them will nod and take you. Be prepared.

"66th, 13th."

Welcome aboard. Find yourself immediately wrapt in sports coverage from the radio. The broadcast cover a sport that don't follow in a language you don't

understand. The team names from your mother tongue you recognize only remotely. The babble is unintelligible and soothes you into slipping down into the background's hum where "Islanders" and "Bruins" occasionally fly out at you from the dark. So many exchanges you have had in your life like the one with the taxi driver here whose face you caught hardly a glimpse of before you found yourself in practice of its avoidance. Meanwhile the taxi speeds around a minivan and into the shadows of your neighborhood.

The driver isn't shy when it comes to passing the lane's competing cars. He glances at you in the rearview and smiles. You watch his eyebrows raise up in the shape of a question that seeks to affirm your support or your approval. Look away. Part of you may want to quickly steal a glance but. You stare on through the windshield of the cab into the movement of bad weather. There is a mess of passing asphalt and precipitation that melts into a feeble and polluted grey and runs across your eyes and beneath the taxi's wheels. The radio static fizzles like a soda's pulled tab. Hush. You peer through a blur of rain on the windshield or try to. It's difficult to discern much beyond the seeping colors of light through the water. You sit with sore and heavy legs and summon the strength to lift your chin up and open your eyes to the little streams of runoff and watch them drip into beads that must either become new and independent bodies of water or otherwise assimilate into larger puddles. You watch the streams produce offshoots of weak veins that fork out from the channels and attempt to pioneer the windshield's alternative routes with the occasional success.

The wipers rise and move eastward across the windshield. You can see now that

you cannot ever know what sources of light cause the dashboard to shine a kaleidoscopic haze. It is impossible to know these beacons from where you sit behind the glassy lens but only the fleeting colors held within the trickle and drops of rainwater for periods that are relatively brief. In a moment the selfsame timer of the vehicle will deploy the wiper across the windshield and clear the water and your view. The frenzy of speckled red that you presumed to be taillights that gave rise to wordless images of acne and fields of poppies hardly had time to break out or to blossom before the blades made their mark. There is warming awareness developing of your presently backseat position. You are weighing just how much passenger that might be when the ride comes to a standstill and you feel yourself becoming more involved with the scenery than where you sit.

Often times moments of standstill or immobility like these are unavoidable. Little can be done beyond egress from the taxi when the road becomes congested though the weather does not recommend. The streets swarm with helpless lines of imperfect and noxious vehicles driven by imperfect and occasionally noxious drivers though the most of whom are really just trying their best. Sometimes the mood to consider this strikes you and them but not usually. You understand interpreting the laws of traffic not to be your responsibility but the driver's. But the question of your participation and well being still remains involved.

You understand presenting certified paper to be your sole responsibility in the agreement and quiet the defeated feeling pulsing away inside your chest. You realize you are looking out the window still and. The driver whistles a long declining whistle. It's

not worth bothering with the mirror to check. You can already feel the vehicle speeding up as if for liftoff or firing rockets. Hold tight.

You hold tight. Don't invent a good reason for the dread you are feeling or even think of trying to explain how the ache is so tenacious that it crawls down in your bones. Panic buries inside your spine and spreads stiffly through your neck and seizes your ability to react and decapitates your ability to function then. You become lost and drown in a wave of sudden paralysis. In this precise moment your circumstances make appear irrelevant in terms of obstacles at hand. You try to start inside and work outwards. You would much prefer moments to shrug off these moments of infested concern. Only a feeling. Shrug it off. Shrug it off.

Raindrops hit the vehicle and roll off so fast that you cannot tell one strike from the next. All of it washes over you in a dull patter kept by the wiper's two four signature in time. It's not possible to distinguish where one movement ends and the next one is interrupted by the hopeful driver's glance.

He grins from the rearview again at you. Grins. You have misread what you imagined was invitation for conversation perhaps. You must have recognized the coy knowing that winds his lip up and wondered if perhaps the driver wants you and. The windshield wipers click and bat across your view from side to side. You hear the congested screech of rubber on watery glass and slouch further into the backseat. The slouch is done more for schtick than for the actual comfort of your shoulders. You settle into the comfortable routine that comes prepackaged and prepared from the 1000 times you've done it before. A nest of knots

wind and fall apart inside you. Breathe. Breathe. Breathing. You are breathing. You think about how long the day had been and. The driver lays loudly on the horn.

He passes a compact car for no obvious purpose before making a sharp turn onto your street. The turn is made with the overdone aggression of an actor performing the part of a taxi driver who has based his conception of taxi drivers exclusively on films that portray taxi drivers as being gruff and aggressive by the nature of their trade. You feel for the bills you laid out ahead of time warming up now inside your pocket and know that soon you'll be over with getting prepared. That soon the journey will finish. You'll get finished with getting prepared and be done. You know that the fare costs about the same each time and so you believe it's not entirely absurd to hope one day you can maybe become comfortable enough with the ride to forget the price and not think once of the damned process. You will step out onto the curb of your street and without having held a practiced goodbye the whole way there inside your mouth. He won't have to spit the fare out to you and you won't have to say a word and.

"How do you like city here?" you hear him ask. You pretend that you did not and bask in your suspicions confirmed. He begins to speed up though your building is approaching.

"It's good, it's not?"

You feel his gaze reflecting from the rearview and burning onto your skin. You feel light inside the cabin as if you might almost levitate above your seat just when you notice the tip of your driver's right knee coming up over the console's horizon though hardly do

you have time to investigate its curious appearance before it disappears again. The vehicle rushes faster as its driver brings his foot down on the pedal and flattens it so far you imagine the floor of the taxi must resist against his shoes. He must be testing the acceleration's limit perhaps you think he probably knows what he is doing. You clamor your attention together and search the rearview's mirror for a glimpse of his expression which momentarily reads of what you register as something in the strain of glee.

There is nothing of you that the driver thinks about when he finally commits to his destination in the truest most wildest sense and dedicates himself to his position as The Driver in the kind of blind determination that typically belongs to desperate people and those with untenable desire. He clenches the wheel to hold strongly onto the present and drive away the residue of slumber that weighs on his eyelids and blinks once or twice. It has felt like such a long time since the command of his mind synched with that of his body without objection and so a third time he will blink. Very few places and behaviors can shock him because he has driven many destinations and had many diverse clientele and he knows this now. Today the driver wants to work first and foremost for himself.

But he is driving too fast too reckless you think. We'll crash or pass your stop or in the very least won't have time to stop for it. If he won't have time to stop he'll have to turn around. But if he plans on making a U turn he can't because you live on a oneway street you know. He would have to drive on for a little while and the detour will affect your fare. The driver is surely too unqualified to represent the yellow and black dispatch agency branded upon his vehicle and so you consider filing a

report if you are to survive the trip and also become the kind of person who writes agencies with angry reports. You look around for identification and find none.

He doesn't drive with a reasonable concern for safety or for the road you think this man is a hazard if not to himself and yourself or others. Meanwhile the driver listens for the hum and growl the changes in applied pressure while he punctuates the gas in accordance to little more than his own ear's musicality so that at least once he may allow himself to feel indistinguishable from the purr of the engine even if for only momentarily without regard and entirely in regards to driving the speedometer's limit. Your stomach leaps into your chest from the speed. If even for a moment to feel nothing but the hum of the taxi sputter the gasp and chortled growl smell its exhaust see the vivid lines of the road as obstructions parallel to his determination and unite all the energy of his vehicle's expulsion with that of his burning chest while his foot holds steadfast its command and. You place a hand softly on his shoulder.

The car suddenly lurches to a halt like a roller-coaster ride with tires squealing manically and cutting rubber across the asphalt in the peeling smell of incineration as the taxi swings and bucks from too much brake at too high a speed—. Your forehead collides with the back of the passenger's seat, and your lurch forward with the image of your shoes dialing in slot-machine rotation before your eyes, as nausea sets in; the vehicle rocks to a halt.

III.

You rub where there is throbbing from your scalp. The driver shifts the stick, and

you can hear nothing but the ring and want only for its fading to desist. You can see the driver turn around in his seat, a blur beneath your eyelid. An urge to to run compels you without further process but your vision is corrupted by black spots: you cannot right yourself, feeling ill. You see the blurred shape of the driver pointing to the ceiling.

"You agreed." he said, "You take taxi, you agree. No exceptions."

It takes the use of your complete strength to remove the ten the five the two dollar bills from your palm and hand the money over.

"You didn't wear seatbelt." he says, "I saw."

You open the door enough to slide out onto the curb, turn, and reach back to close the taxi's ajar door when the vehicle's engine sputters loudly and plumes exhaust onto the curb, and you cough while the driver speeds away.

IV.

There are a handful of letters stuffed inside your mailbox that bend at the corners from spending too long in a tight space. You flip through bills for electricity heat and water as you are walking up the stairs. You settle down and concentrate on the pressure you feel with each step of your feet. Some of the envelopes are addressed to "Current Resident" which you immediately file to the back. These are promotional flyers you know which aren't worth the time it takes to open. You take the last of the stairs ready to tuck the envelopes inside the pocket of your coat when a manilla envelope which seems to contain

something inside it weighs down heavy on your palm.

The web of crimson ink spelled out in a cursive penmanship steals your eye and your attention becomes caught on *Ambrose* the word. On the one line of red continuous script. There is no postmark no return address. There is an unmarked stamp which does little to fool you well. Be quiet. Someone must have dropped this letter off. Light puddles around your shoes from where your apartment door was left ajar to quiver. You can hear the sound of something dripping somewhere in the stairwell's dark through which comes the pattering of a rat. You can hear the clicking of wet paws. Pull the door with steady fingers and hold the knob in place. The door will creak less that way. You are gentle so behave gently. Be strong. Breathe. Just hold your breath.

You collide head-on with an assaulting stench. The smell which you can't quite place your finger on like garlic myrrh, and clove a mix of coca plaster paint the smell of too many things compounded and mixed. The smell is full-bodied and earthy like a fermented stew of foreign breath and body-odor that is alien. The door clicks shut behind you.

You don't have to look very far to notice the furniture. You notice the four mahogany chairs which you bought at an antique shop with Celeste have all been stacked upside-down around the living-room's table with their legs pointing up towards the ceiling. It looks almost as if a night-crew had come in and retired their use for the evening to make way for mopping the floors. You step sideways around the table carefully and consider calling out. But no.

You'll stay quiet. Your intruder could still be here and only hiding. Your green velvet curtains flap widely against the balcony's open door from beyond the table. You move to close the door and stop. Maybe it's better you didn't touch anything just yet either.

Maybe you would be well-advised to preserve the evidence or to arouse minimal notice of your present. You were violated. But were you robbed? Running your hand along the back of the couch you wonder. You look around and find your television something that would be of high-value to a robber comfortably in its place. So maybe at a glance it appears that nothing has been stolen. But the initial relief you experience won't last for very long. Of course there's still the kitchen the bathroom the bedroom. You should probably check your storage-unit and the garage. There's still a scenario where someone stole from you for some misunderstood if not chance reason. There's still time to forgive the burglar you hope. There's still time to exit through the gate and buy yourself another toothbrush or watch or it doesn't matter. Buy yourself another television you hoped. Move on to the bedroom.

The six drawers in your dresser have all been emptied and folded again into piles that you almost trip over when you first enter into the room. The disassembly and subsequent reconstruction of your wardroom is in accordance with the genre of garment of clothing you notice off the bat. Shirts with shirts it seems socks with socks. You run your eyes through the rows and count the piles until the present begins to drift from you as unthinkingly you evade it. Your thoughts recede to a place that is remote and nameless. Going dark to a place where t-shirts, ties, and

trousers burn out behind your eyelids to ash and your jeans and socks and sleepwear your sweaters all run into a colored mess with only the elastic band of your briefs keeping form in the pale flag of surrender where white stays white until your mind loosens with the dark.

Loosens into a precarious impression that descends upon you like a fog descends from the slopes of a mountain and enters the unsuspecting valley's warmth and light. You dismiss the stiffening of your shoulders dismiss your hair erecting and allow yourself to fall deeper. The hairs will rise despite yourself. The hairs will rise and it reminds you of wild animals. It reminds you particularly of wolves. You begin to recall the full-moons of your memories and close your eyes. Pant beneath the moonlight. Your breath is the hottest fire you have known besides another's warmth. You are a wolf.

No, no, you are not a wolf. Pry your eyes open. You blink with the whip of the curtains. A deceptively vacant expression settles over your face and masks the swift and industrious panic taking fire in your chest. You do this out of habit because you are as self-conscious as you are neurotic and know this about yourself. It's something you have trouble forgetting especially when you are too scared to stand or uncertain of where you should be going. You rub where your skin has gone numb before another seize of violent shivers puts you in the throes. It's unclear how much time has passed since you got here. But you can't wait for your onlooker all night while they lurk somewhere under your covers. At some point you'll starve or stand up.

You stand up. You crack your bones, and return to the bedroom. You opt for further

inspection of the pile of sweaters partly to delay discovering something worse. You opt for slow torture imagining murderously specific details of your own invention while pawing at thin-air for explanations. You imagine strange hands molesting every last article of your clothing. The skin you imagine the severed cuticle you imagine the clinging from the finger. The cuticle caught on your favorite sweater's thread the tissue pulling back to expose a nick of raw flesh. You imagine the red sweater knitted by your late grandmother being abused in ways that are too unspeakable for common words. You're picturing the ink or blood you're not certain all of that coming together now in the image of seclusion where penmanship is performed by the light of a single candle in the darkest corner of a room. Picture the dark bead of crimson when it drops above the knuckle and onto the skin when it seeps into a saturated twist. What you hope is dye wish to be only ink coursing through the unique topology of a foreign skin. Bleeding thorough the grooves the drop travels like morning-dew on a spiderweb though it scares you. Imagine a map staining onto the fingertips from the type from fingerprint. From the touch of every shirt sleeve that runs along all your pant-legs up the thighs and crotch. Smothers into your pillowcases and spits. An stray hair is potential. A follicle you will never lose or forget. Go deeper why don't you burrow under the fingernail. Carve a place in the grimy nails' bed. You leap from invisible floating cells to germ and bacteria to fall softly onto skin-flakes like flying-carpets like petals like snow.

It disgusts you that you almost enjoy this. That there's something almost pleasant about looking at this even in a strictly impersonal way. A persisting hunch of order

among chaos if only you could evoke its code. You recite the sequence of the visible spectrum under your breath like a nursery rhyme as the colors file back in the same order of your clothes. You step back and fall to your knees. You shove your nose in the stacks to analyze as close as you can without turning your eyes crossed. The consistency of chromatic order jells you with quick satisfaction from the discovery which you feel for a precious momentarily before the observation beings to resembles less of a clue or new information, than it resembles an attack or testament to your own psychological disturbance. There is frenzy and you spiral off. You slap yourself across the cheek for good measure and hard. You stomp your feet against the ground. Rap your fists against your chest. You cry out.

Settle down and applaud yourself for anticipating the alphabetization of your bookshelf. You duck out from the frame of your bedroom door and leap into the hallway where you deploy a double-o- seven demeanor that relies more on snappishness than stealth. You glance at the living-room with express as if you might catch your intruder returning to the crime-scene in the act if you just whipped your neck around fast enough. Your eye lands on a gold,coquettish leg-lamp wrapped in black fishnet that you remind yourself was a gift.

The living-room looks less like a room for you to live in then the shell of a set that someone has stripped of all its props then laid out in an condensed, but flawless manner that is super-organized,and equally inhuman. The suede couch seems to be untouched, for the most part, though you do suspect the pillows to be an exception (you can't remember if you kept them this straight

normally). Anything postured becomes suspect. It gets difficult to tell what's been staged and what hasn't partly because your mind was probably wandering while you were straightening the pillows last. Partly because straightening the pillows rarely tends to be an important event in the grand scheme of things so in good faith you really hadn't been paying it much attention. You purposefully tilt your favorite pillow to a slightly crooked angle.

You spend the rest of the hour in kind of provisional rotation that involves punching in the non-emergency number for the police line and then sweeping the phone back to port because sometimes it's difficult to estimate if the police will be more trouble than they will be worth. You gnaw on a wiry ringlet of the beige plastic phone-cord and contemplate the principle behind filing a report that you're pretty certain will be futile considering the absence of suspect information, or legitimate suspect information. After another long minute of tapping your toes together you decide you'll wait on calling mostly because the Friday evening is already growing late, and you don't feel like considering any more questions that you can't acquire the answers to. The day today has been long and very trying. You could always call the police in the morning. You could go down to the station and file a report in person then.

You collapse into the recesses of the couch with unrest stirring inside your belly as the questions continue to burst forth from the dark without you and aspersion's cast on everything under the umbrella of your own reliability,while cautiously you attempt to rebuild beliefs in a few certain things which won't be easily won back in the moments following alarm. There's a feeling of aching

doubt that seems to follow just behind your line of vision which takes the form of a stranger tucked beneath your coattails and imitates your every step. You remain sitting upright on the couch for awhile and keep a very still posture while doing what didn't look like much of anything and probably wasn't in the eyes of the world outdoors.

A shadow of your head grows monstrous on the wall and the dusk becomes nearly seated. You will allow yourself to resign to a state that is something akin to dreaming where you lay witness to a thousand petty and serious anxieties that stream by your like a river that you know will eventually wash you over. That it's only a matter of time. This hostile water mutates into appendages in the form of black gloved hands one at a time these thick industrial gloved hands they reach toward you one by one and writhe from a swarm of desperate limbs. The arms are being pulled down into the depths of a red and dusty chasm and you pity them. Your setting or the backdrop of the dream is Southwest at sunset. An innate urgency presides over the dream which demands you act before the sun sets completely. Or else what you're not sure.

Naturally, you're having a difficult time choosing which hand to grasp among the chaos. All of the hands seem to be tugging for your sleeve with needy fingers that remind you of lost children and look unanimously identical to you. You become all the more aware of the heightening urgency of your situation when you look above you to the sky in search of the sun's position, and discover it's not there. It has already snuck across the sky of pale lavender and turned devil red to lingers above the horizon. In a few remaining seconds the sun will go down for good and

the opportunity forever closed to you. And your belief in the crisis-state is only worsening your chances insofar as you *know* it could be avoided if you could only remember to breathe. You can never remember to breathe until a kind person suggests you do can never calm your heart-rate down enough to choose anything any hand any old hand. You always lose your breath. Many times you've hoped you would just go on and asphyxiate already. Now you must choose and quickly.

But first you need to think clearly. Take a deep breath. Count to three. Focus. Whether or not it's true that any hand you will satisfy your requirements there is a second unspoken and significantly more-significant motive that demands you choose specifically, the right hand, from the hands. You must choose the best and the perfect hand. Meanwhile you stand stiffly on the edge of a cliff still not being particularly good with making decisions still not trying terribly hard to become better, still unable to sustain self-discipline. Still unable to perpetuate forward motion you think how easily you are dominated by a rise of lonely and panicked fits that now they each for you even while you dream.

There is hardly crescent of light left between you and the horizon when the shadow of a figure sweeps across your vision and disturbs the thrumming of shallow breaths throbbing out your ajar lip and you cough. The cough wakes you.

V.

Or the phone rings. Maybe it was the old phone with a ring that sounds like an oven-timer hammering into the night that woke you. You're disoriented in a sprawled

position on the couch which doesn't do much good for your lower-back when you remember the possessions arranged neatly around you, and you emit something between a whine and a groan, as your circumstances flood back and you look timidly at the space around you, unsure of where to move next. You listen to every sound from the parking lot and the surrounding units with apprehension mounting. It's almost like a rug had been ripped out from the floor beneath you. The phone rings once again. Now you know the ignition of a minivan can register like a bullet-shot when you're wary. You mistake the shudder of heavy footsteps against your ceiling for the starting rumble of a thunderstorm, rather than poor construction of the ceiling, or the clamorousness of your neighbors upstairs.

When the phone rings—it sounds bronze in color, and lurches into the night like a predator lurches from the savannah's tallest grass. The ring startles nearby squirrel, who rested on the ledge before leaping outside your kitchen-window (frantically at the sound, and out-of- sight). The ring collects twice before you lean forward enough to finally stand up, stretch, and move to answer. You feel more tired than you did before you slept, you notice. Meanwhile, the songbird humming of your neighbor is probably nonsense in the kitchen next door.

You're in the very process of walking over to answer the phone when you casually remember the mail splayed out in a fan on the credenza, or much more importantly, the incredibly peculiar envelope with cursive penmanship and an unmarked stamp, and immediately, you wish to rush over and open it. You think, the phone-call can wait because the phone is equipped with voicemail (which

is not to say the letter couldn't wait, but that), sometimes, you prefer to know who's calling first before you pick-up for just anybody. The phone rings for another useless moment where you weigh your options as quickly as possible before opting to wait for the voicemail message (which is what you wanted to do, since the idea occurred to you) and sharply change directions to cross the room, where you bump into the front of the cupboard's paneling on accident, and the credenza rocks forward slightly, on its feet—which doesn't register entirely because you're busy sifting through the letters with shaking hands and their clumsy, insubordinate fingers—and you can feel this new force driving behind your heartbeat, which resounds with suspense and nervousness, as you tear your finger across the glue of the envelope's throat. Meanwhile, the thin jackhammering of a retrograde home-phone persists. You push out the sides of the envelope to inspect its contents before shaking what you won't dare to imagine, into your exposed and open palm.

At first, you try with a slight pouring motion, which won't allow the object to come tumbling out onto the floor, but hopefully, gently coaxes it out. The approach reminds you of someone trying to lure in a stray and skittish cat. Despite whichever angle the light holds, it seems to make little difference in terms of the object's visibility, since it's a small thing nestled in the very bottom among the shadows, where light cannot reach it. You hear your voicemail system clicks once, just as you carefully lift the envelope with both hands, and involuntarily begin to consider the possibly fragile and/or explosive things, which you could currently be in transport of, while you carry the open parcel over to the kitchen counter where you can investigate it further. You hear yourself say, "Sorry, I'm not

home right now,” on the phone- recording and wordlessly curse yourself for the message’s linguistic insensibility, and also for the amount of times you resolved to amend this, and didn’t, because you got busy or usually forgot, until the next time you checked your voicemail, and the process is repeated: you only hear yourself say you’re not-here-right-now when presently, you are here, and were here, at the time of recording. You hear yourself say: it’s certain—this time will be the *very last* time I put up with this, or briefly forget, and hear this message to yourself, from yourself, on loop, ad infinitum. Slowly, you tilt the envelope and begin to slide whatever mystery it contains out—a mystery which falls onto the hard Formica countertops swiftly, and clangs back and forth like a burnished star might, halting to stop at the landline’s medicinal beep.

“Hey Anders, — my man! It’s Terry, again ...What’re you, sleeping? Anyway, it’s a Friday night, so I guess you know what that means!”

You don’t know what that means. You gaze at the bronze key resting on your countertop, and wonder. Your suspicion is almost immediately confirmed when you lean forward and extend your forefinger and thumb to pinch the key’s two longest sides in a timid and mechanical grip that resembles that of an arcade claw’s, more than a human’s posture, and you bring the key just inches away from the bridge of your nose, to look closer.

“Just...wanted to see if you’re still interested in some good old-fashioned fun,” Terry says, before snorting inexplicably, “Me and Meryl were thinking about getting a cab in maybe about an hour...or so, so”

The dot where you left your newest mark seems to gaze back like an eye from the key’s head. The reunion between you and your house-key is something you didn’t ever expect to meet with mixed feelings. Or rather, maybe repossessing your house- key would engender otherwise positive feelings if it were not for the manner in which it was returned to you.

“-but, we can wait longer, if you want to. There’s supposed to be—I don’t know, games, shows... you know, stuff the whole family can enjoy—

“...but stuff that single people can enjoy,”

Wherever you had been going on your so- called ordinary evening before you discovered that your apartment was exploited, and your key, apparently stolen—before the subsequent feeling of panic and disorientation put you to a sleep full of disturbance—until the phone rang you awake, or maybe the congestion—until your dream was met with expiration and a strange envelope reentered your frame of mind—you woke with a sense of provocation and disarm, with unrest. Perhaps it took you far too long to remember the envelope, you chastise yourself, and what a raw idiot you are, to fall asleep, to be immobilized into a state of non-action, during times of uncertainty, and practically of crisis, like this. Perhaps you’ve come to learn more of yourself through this...experience, things you don’t want to learn, than you would like to ever learn, yet.

The key goes on warming up inside your fist while alone, you toil, to the degree than an impression burns inside your palm, while the voicemail plays on and teases you. It goes on tirelessly without saying that, any

hope of executing an ordinary, (albeit) exhausted evening of banal unwinding is by now, very far from you, and your conception of feasible things. It's difficult for even you to imagine where a person might go from here, with so much to process, and so little information to assist in arriving at resolve. So the discomfort and meticulous indecision of 'it-all' will make your hands feel itchy and hue your palms with the trace color of a poison-ivy: your hands turn pale and green like the hands of the infirm, struck by an unusual prominence of the veins, display a thin, translucent quality to the skin. With your possessions assembled so foreignly around you, it almost feels like you're the one trespassing, you think. You don't recognize your living-room, any longer. It makes you so uncomfortable that you can hardly bare to sit, and despair at the thought of trying to stand. You steep within the loss of your privacy and invasion of recent confusion and remind yourself: nothing was lost. But this doesn't help, and still you feel unwell.

"There's no place like home!" a distant T.V. says, from somewhere inside your neighbor' unit. At first, you laugh quietly to yourself, and then begin to laugh harder, and louder, and go on laughing long after the commercial ends. Your ears begins to attune to the other sounds going on around you in the meanwhile, as you catch Terry say in an aimless and meandering tone,

"...so, let me know if you wake up, or if you feel like getting out...Anyway, I think the weather's supposed to clear up later in the evening, but I'm not sure.. so don't hold me accountable.."

You snatch the phone off the receiver at once and say, "Hey, Terry, how are you?"

Glad to hear from you..." short on breath, and "I meant to call earlier,

"Oh—everything's fine, thank you,
"I'm just running a little late today,
that's all."

VI.

The man beside the park's entrance selling carnations from a 5-gallon bucket of flowers bears an unusual resemblance to yesterday' taxi-driver who aggressively drove you home from work, you think, and whose appearance will remind you of the kind of low-budget films that employ actors to play multiple parts of little narrative significance, the ones typically reserved for extras. You see the lookalike extend the head of a red carnation and tease the passersby, while he clutches a cone of newspaper that covers around the stem—which appears to be the comics section, on this particular flower, as the people stream through the entrance and past him, diverting their gazes, or feigning distraction. It is not difficult to do so, with the spectacle of the plaza ahead. Your eyes follow the direction of the traffic, where a market of traveling vendors have set up shop for food, games, and handicrafts, alongside inflatable bouncy-castles, the people point to them, alongside the sundry of carnival rides, the mechanics of whose transportation remains an enigma to you, and probably them, who pretend not to see him, though he is there, and somberly beckoning to them. An extended arm before the boulevard of collapsable stages, set-up for magic acts and artistic performances, call loud from beyond his wake—he can't compete against the volume. You witness a several episodes in which the man is snubbed, along with his plastic-bucket, where someone (he, probably) had sloppily

written \$1 in green permanent pen, in a scene that feels pathetic. You witness a few episodes in which a crumpled dollar is taken up with his free hand, slid down his coat pocket, while he trades a red carnation with the other hand, in an exchange that is wordless, or almost entirely wordless. You witness the man, who is of an imposing stature of man, lean gracefully to the side with the choreographic prowess of a professional ballerina, and carefully pluck the next flower from his hoard.

You notice a few musicians playing with open instrument-cases who may or may not have authorized affiliation with the surrounding events, but play on above each other and all of the jabbering, and contribute to the frenzy or general commotion. The sounds you are hearing swiftly barrage you in commotion of whistles and bells, among other kinds of onomatopoeias that you didn't want to imagine all at once. You hear the distant DING of a Try-Your-Strength machine: the triple DING DING DING of repetitive alarm, that signals someone's winning. You hear a POP and the subsequent POP, POP from a stand, another POP, of Balloons & Darts. You hear even a BOING or two, on occasion, which sounds like someone has pulled back a doorstop and let it run, the BOING—which reverberates the sound of foul-up, that something went no-good, a cartoon of unsuccessfulness. There are, of course, a few KER-CHING, KER-CHINGs, that loudly ring out, from time to time while you're listening, and cause you to picture gold dollar-signs, and the image of a bank-drawer springing open. You can see KER-CHING more clearly than the other, taking the shape of a green speared-S, struck with envy across the eyes—a sound of someone's luck, which can even feel villainous, among it all. There

are other words you hear, the sounds: WHOOP, SWOOSH, BEEP, VROOOM, and WALLOP, all washing over you, and the dull roar of the crowd.

There is a rope of bulbed-lights strung between the lampposts in the center of the plaza, which encircle the public garden and faintly illuminate the flowers and plants winter has defeated, and showcase dried husks the color of a rusting junkyard, their frames collapsing at the foundation of an inoperative fountain, where two lovers stand in a statue that has turned green with patina. The story of the lovers remains unfamiliar to you, dry and pale and coin-less, as if it were the first time you had seen in, with all the electric neon around it. You wonder what the lovers are looking at: there's nothing unusual in the distance, that you can see.

“Anders!”

You see Terry pushing his way toward you from a mass of hats and winter-coats, bracing himself with a sloppy grin that slaps across his face like a shield, his elbows raised to be pushed out like wings of grey-cotton, or someone attempting to engage the use of their entire body in the act of power-walking, or attempting to convince themselves that the act power-walking really is a legitimate form of exercise, so long as the arms are kept moving—instinctively, you recoil from the can-do posture, and briefly consider spinning around and taking off before your hand betrays you, and you give Terry a small wave of acknowledgment with a hesitant motion of your hand that is meek, if not outright cold—and smile a little reserved and modest smile that doesn't show any of your teeth, in your eyes. Your response is due partly to Terry's sudden appearance as having caught you off

guard, considering he isn't wearing his typical white-collar attire, but blue jeans with a sweatshirt and sneakers—which strikes you as a ‘just-trying-to-enjoy-my-downtime’ outfit that looks perhaps a little too comfortable and familiar, for the formality of a public setting. The ensemble is so overwhelmingly ‘Dad-ish’ that you might be inclined to suspect that Terry probably had multiple children, and decided to give up on himself few years ago, despite the fact that he and his wife have none.

“Hey, Terry,” you call, “How’s it going?”

“My man!” Terry says, taking hold of (what you had intended to be) a handshake before pulling you into 1/2 a hug and slapping you on the back—sort of the way tough-guys who are close-friends might hug, when a full hugs might be too injurious to their masculinities—and so clumsily, you react late, and attempt to return the slap on Terry’s shoulder as he’s already turning around to beckon the rest of your party over, and your fingers slide after him while he pulls away. This blunder, however, is forgotten almost immediately, when you look beyond the horizon of his shoulders and find yourself looking at her, unwilling to believe yourself, as she advances through the crowd, her coattails blowing the color of the night, behind her.

“Ladies, meet my number-one honcho-accountant—a Mr. A. Anders, here,” Terry says, gesturing toward you, “Anders, my wife Meryl.”

“How do you do?” you ask.

A puffy-eyed woman with hair the color of hardwood stain throws her shoulders

back and tilts up her chin and says, “Pleasure to meet you,” to you, “The pleasure is mine,” you respond, and she smiles politely, relaxing the posture of her neck slightly, where an awning of skin folds back over a pearl-necklace that you glimpse for a precious moment, though none of this interests you very much, or even registers by comparison to,

“And this is Magda—Meryl’s sister.”

Magda smiles for nearly too long, “I hope I’m not intruding too terribly much,” she says, and looks at you, while she does.

“You’re not intruding in the slightest,” you say, perhaps a bit too quickly, and Meryl begins to sympathetically rub Magda’s back, and Terry looks as if he has already lost his commitment to the conversation at hand, and Magda laughs.

“Anders, huh?” Magda says, and says, more than asks, “You don’t look like much of an Anders to me.”

“Hush, Magda,” Meryl says, and begins to stroke her sister’s hair, “It’s too early in the night to behave rudely.”

“Now, Meryl,” Terry says, “Magda is an adult too.” Then, you see Magda stick out her tongue from behind Meryl’s back, you swear. You study the movement of her eyes under the sweep of a thick black bangs which bounce against her forehead once before Magda’s eyes snap back to your own and something fierce is sent running through your heart.

“Pardon me,” Magda says, “I didn’t intend to be rude.” She looks up from her hands, still clasped at her hips, and then

blinks slowly in your direction, “I only meant to say that you look like you *could* have a different name, is all.”

“Or that maybe you used to,” she says, quietly, “though Anders is fine enough.” And it is as if neither Terry nor Meryl seem to have heard this, or noticed. Meryl is vigilantly watching her husband while he scans around the scene. Magda is attempting to puncture you with her gaze, it seems.

“Where shall we begin?” Terry puts forth suddenly, raising a hand to his brow in the salute performance of a scout, “You guys like caramel-corn? How ‘bout some caramel-corn? Come on!” he asks, and shouts,

“Everybody likes caramel-corn. My treat!”

You watch Meryl’s hand slide from the back of Magda’s head and down the current of her hair to pool in the middle of her back, where the bare and ringless hand guides her sister after the husband she knows she’s losing, and toward the caramel-corn stand—the hand which ushers away your Magda toward the lights, sounds, and attractions that whirl around the all of you, as you being to feel what can be described as nothing short of Dread, and the two sisters look back from ahead of you without disentangling their embrace and motion wordlessly for you to follow —RUN, RUN NOW—is what everything in your body tells you, though you fear your heart will compel you to follow into the night after her, against the better advice of your mind, if she were even to throw a funny look your way. So bravely, you choose to return her gaze, and Magda smiles like the pale death that has come to claim you, toward you. She spits hard onto the earth. Magda winks.

VII.

You are feeling too stern to lick the caramel from you fingers, or resign to a state of good humor when Terry lobs a piece of popcorn into the air, and the popcorn smacks his eyebrow and ricochets onto the pavement, lobs another; Meryl chews hver short nails down even shorter; and you—you are watching Magda, who’s seemingly directing her attention toward the adjacent exhibit, which is a collection of taxidermy animals dressed-up in cyborg-costumes—though you suspect that really, she might be glancing at you, from the corner of her eye, that is. You wedge a kernel between your teeth, wondering if she’s the one who’s been looking for you, calling your name at least, the same woman, with similar clothes, comparable heights, this Magda—though you don’t know whether she’s an imposter, of the name-sayer or Meryl’s sister. You’re willing to keep your analysis open, there’s something to the voice that makes you doubt her—still, they could be in collusion together—wild, yes of course, but of nothing can you be sure.

“I like the turtle with bionic-eyes.” Meryl says, “though the horse with the titanium jaw was probably my favorite.”

“Boy am I glad that animals aren’t robots.” Terry says. Magda shakes her head.

“It’s not the worst thing I’ve seen done to animals.” she says.

You open your mouth to speak your turn but Magda’s open stare seems to anticipate you compliment her defense. You decide to say nothing.

“Want some caramel-corn?” Terry asks, words muffled by a full-mouth, as he

yanks the bag away from his chin and extends it to a place near Magda's nose, popcorn spilling in no direction in particular.

"No," she says, "—thank you." and for some reason, it makes you feel relieved. Magda fixes her hat and turns away. She brushes past you.

It goes on this way, with Terry busying himself and Meryl fussing with Terry or something else; Magda flinging her attention between exotic things that do not seem to hold her attention as well as little things do—like the boy jamming his fists into the teal blue fabric of his t-shirt and twisting a knot above his belly-button, for example; rather than the doppler-effect like sounds being emitted by a RoadRunner arcade game for example: the one flashing in berserk hysteria beside the two of you both; or the electric whirring of bumper-cards from somewhere nearby, the sounds of whose collision are lost, if not indistinguishable from the whistle and punch of pins bowling over; of purple and orange, blue and red, puppet-clowns falling over; the soft thud of a beanie-bag's toss; or the clicking of triggers, on plastic guns. Neither that, nor the caramel-corn as sticky and vicious as ember, can keep hold of her focus, like nothing keeps your focus but her.

Many other things will attempt to grab hold of you and steal your attention from Magda. The various talents, for example—if you're feeling generous enough to call them that—will steal your eye from her when nothing about it can be helped, and drag your further into the dark of crowds. You follow Terry, Meryl, and Magda in single-file, and squeeze between the shoulders of strangers, pressing into backs and cheats on accident, so

you can make it to the front of the audience, or at least to place where you can breathe, or have space to stand, in the chaos of a chair-less pit. You mimic Magda's steps and follow closely behind—afraid of losing her again—when her hand bumps against yours, on accident, and instead of continuing on, or retracting her hand, Magda slides her fingers between yours in the most casual, and unapologetic of ways that someone you don't know very well possibly could manage to do—her bottom lip wryly slanted to reveal a flash of white canine that you catch for photographic second, amidst the hustle of strangers in the dark.

Desperately, you would like to glance at your interlocking hands and confirm the suspiciously good reality of the present moment but you refuse yourself: you make an effort to project a warm and casual demeanor—when really, you hear a warning from yourself that says: you can't afford to blow this—as you stare straight ahead, eye-level with the stage's floor, and begin to develop a nervous sweat that bathes Magda's hand in all your shyness and inhibition. Very much, you would like to wipe your hands onto your trousers, for her sake, but feel the risk isn't worth itself. You've got to hold on for as long as she lets you. You've got to preserve the present feeling of this moment as long as you possibly can: her little hand warm within yours, baby-pink nails against your knuckles, skin as soft as the down of fully-feathered birds—You've got to prove you're worthy of your proximity to her, to her hand—to the present moment, now this. Hurriedly, you sweep the stage for trap-doors, and electrical-outlets—you've got to anticipate the magic act before it happens. You've got to perform a miracle. You've got to be prepared.

“Never seen a magician use a stationary bike, before.” you remark to Magda, which you regret almost immediately. She parts her eyebrows in the curve of surprise, a question.

“Is that so?” Magda laughs.

“It is so.” you say mildly, hesitantly, beginning to wonder what sort of magicians Magda’s seen in her life, whether or not you’re coming off as ignorant and oblivious about Magic, in your own. You feel a meaty hand clamp onto your right shoulder and begin to rub you.

“She’s just teasing,” Meryl says, rolling her eyes like a washed-up starlet. Meryl scoffs, “He’s not a magician,” she informs you, “he’s a performance artist.”

“Same biff,” Magda says, placing a piece of caramel-corn on her outstretched tongue. Meryl shakes her head, Magda says, “He’s like a wannabe-Magician.” She swallows.

“I wanna be a magician,” announces Terry, “HA.” Meryl lifts her hand from your shoulder and transfers it over to Terry’s shoulder, where she begins to scratch, “You’ve got to have nice teeth to be a magician,” Meryl coos to her husband, “A magician’s got to have a nice smile.”

Terry looks in your direction with his eyebrows pressed in the formation of a-V, as if to pointedly express his lack of amusement, and confirm with his gaze with a—see? something he had told you being proved, the injustice, here it is. You look away. The babble of the crowd begins to dim like a dying flame. You are still staring straight and follow two pairs of black Oxfords that tap

across the hardwood of the stage in a parallel march and with sturdy resolution, their shoes shining like pools of black oil, reflecting the galaxy of stage-lights from above.

“Here it is, here it is,” the voice of an unfamiliar woman, in sample from a wide-selection of whispers, “it’s starting”, “it’s about to begin.”

To look at the performance artist, you must tilt your head so far back that the back of your cranium seems to make contact with the tip of your spine—to the effect that you are straining neck just to look beyond the performance artist’s two exceptionally formal escorts, who each wear a suit and top-hat, and happen to very much resemble magicians themselves, as they take hold of the canvas pallet on both sides by the bamboo of its arms, and parade the main-act in, above all of you, and everyone. You can see the performance artist’s toes, dangling from his float, while he kicks his bare feet. There is an atmospheric stampede of whistles and applauding—a limited wave of a white gloved hand—the artist above the men, waving to the women, drifters, and children—fanatics, enthusiasts, and, freaks, he greets them, reaches for them, looking down to the travelers, from the seat of popularity and his renown.

“Man, you’d think this guy’s practically Tom Cruise or something!” Terry yells over the noise, “Woo! Yeah Tom Cruise!”

“Actually, he *is* somewhat of a celebrity,” Meryl says, “or about as famous as an avant-garde artist can get these days.”

“Who is it?” Magda asks, Meryl tells her, and you don’t quite catch the name. You

attempt to read the change in Magda's expression.

For the first time, you think, she looks like she's impressed.

"He's got the same gloves as Michael Jackson," Terry comments, and cups his hand around his mouth, "HEY—NICE GLOVES, MICHAEL JACKSON!"

"Terry, will you shut up please?" Meryl requests, "You're embarrassing."

"Do Thriller!" you're pretty sure you hear him say.

Magda leans in to speak quietly to you, and when she does, a strand of her hair comes loose and tickles the base of your neck; a cold shiver runs down your spine. It's stuffy and dark, but you can feel goosebumps beginning to develop on your forearms, "He doesn't usually drink," she says, or at least, that's what you think she says, nudging her chin in Terry's direction. It's difficult to hear her words clearly, but luckily, Magda is close enough that you can feel her breath when it impacts against your cheek with warmth, "...usually fight, when he does."

You laugh, but not too much, wondering if you just smelled the lingering sour smell of drank liquor on Magda, or someone else, and you open your mouth to quip a response that will surely be quick and clever—is sure to win her over, this time, when the pandemonium of the hall is axed to a hush, and your jaw clamps shut with the polite silence of disappointment, the opportunity having already passed you; the show having already begun. Magda lets go of your hand.

VIII.

"That was the stupidest thing I have ever seen in my whole life," Terry says, "and I have seen every episode of COPS, and all of its spinoff productions."

"That's very surprising to hear, Terry." Magda says, "We are all *very* surprised to hear that."

"Well I don't know why Meryl would be surprised," Terry says, hiccups, "...she got the box-set for me."

"I meant surprised you thought the performance was,"

"—Was it a performance?" Meryl asks, "I'm confused. I thought, maybe he was just... warming-up?" She bites down on her lip.

"Is that supposed to be...a pun?" Magda asks. Meryl says "No," opens her mouth. Magda cuts her off.

"You think," Magda says, "because the artist used a stationary-bike, he was just... *exercising*?" Magda says, quickly, like a machine-gun, before raising her fingers in what you assume are meant to be air-quotes, "You think he's just... 'warming-up,' Meryl? That's funny?" she asks, "really," Magda says, her forefinger held like a dagger,

"He's not some kind of comedian, Meryl." Magda says. Meryl looks to have turned to stone, "The man spends his entire life training for this," she continues, "sacrificing for this, and you joke he's *warming-up*? Who do you think you are?"

"Well, I—"

“Like *you* know something about sacrifice, discipline.” Magda says, and laughs a booming, villainous laugh. She gestures in Terry’s direction in a not-particularly-discreet manner.

“Clearly, *you*’ve given up.” she mutters.

Meryl’s face reveals nothing, not one response of the muscles, as if Magda had spit and spit in the face of a statue; as if Terry had recently taken a blow to the head, judging by the dumbfound look of his expression, while you—you attempt to avoid resting your gaze on one particular thing for too long, and hope that you aren’t noticed too much. And especially, by Magda.

You secretly thought the performance was somewhat overrated, for what it was, at least, compared to what it’s said to be. The performance artist’s claim is a wild one, but not as shocking as you might have suspected: **The Man Who Never Touched Ground**, who takes after his title—is rumored to have never once placed his feet upon the earth, from the time of his water-birth up until the present day, having grown up in some kind of acrobat circus colony that preferred upside-down posture of locomotion by the use of their hands: The Man—who was not much of a man, an emaciated waif with hard, disciplined eyes, that are beady, like a rodent’s, and seem to be composed entirely of pupil—is scarcely within himself, you thought, he hardly seems to be here—as his overdressed chauffeurs lowered him from his throne, the pallet—which he seemed to slide from almost, the way small children would from the apex of a slide, and down to his perch on the bald, plastic seat, where his feet search for the pedals—you wonder if he is

blind—they touch down, and immediately spin-off. His furious pedaling is met with rampant cheers and applause, an outbursting word of encouragement, or two from his gatherers, while you found yourself anxious for something new to happen—waiting for the magic to start. Magda refused to leave long after the escorts lifted him onto the pallet and carried him off, and other members of the crowd had vacated.

“Jeeze, Louise, Magda,” Terry says, “it’s a show. You’re not supposed to get mad about it.”

“I’m not mad.” Magda says, clearly mad. Meryl crosses her arms. Terry places his left arm around Meryl’s back and she does not turn into him. Meryl stares at the ground—you look at the ground where Meryl is staring, and see a partially-eaten corndog, and the corndog’s inner-dog-center, its popsicle pierced like a bulls-eye; you see 1.5 red, raffle tickets; a trampled string (possibly balloon); popcorn and kernel stamped into the 2nd dimension; a piece of what you hope is cotton-candy. Does she notice these things, you wonder, though you don’t have to about her sister: Meryl looks like Magda kicked her; you worry Magda possibly looks pleased.

“Sorry,” Magda says. But even you can tell that Magda doesn’t mean it.

“We have different opinions.” Meryl says, “We like different things.”

“Amen to that!” Terry says. Magda looks blankly at Meryl. Meryl sharply turns her nose.

“What did you think, Anders?” Magda asks, and laughs an overly-affectionate laugh,

“Don’t worry—I won’t bite.” smiles coyly.

“Not with her teeth she won’t.” Meryl says, “Hey,” Terry murmurs, petting the top of Meryl’s head, like someone might pet a dog’s.

You don’t want to offend any one party in particular, and especially Magda’s, and clamor for something neutral to profess.

“It’s very interesting to think that an artist’s old, sweaty socks could be so valuable,” you say, “—though I imagine using the restroom might be something of an event for him.”

Terry quickly extricates his hand from the area around Meryl’s rump and raises it up, then down quickly, to literally slap his knee, and give out a “HOO,” and, “HA,” a holler, before he shakes you by the collar-bones, “*This* guy!” Terry says.

But Magda frowns, wrinkles her nose, brushes a strand of hair behind her ear, another strand comes loose, which she brushes backwards in a sweep—she smiles weakly, something about her going pale, “It is interesting, isn’t it?”

You are wary of your response, feeling yourself to walk a fine line, in this moment, feeling yourself losing her—of course you don’t want to betray yourself, your commitment to your beliefs, but when this is as important to her as it obviously, if inexplicably, is—but because it was as superficial and unmemorable as it was to you, you hardly feel to have lost yourself in conceding to her: how easily you could tell her what she wants to hear—or better to say,

how easily you could act the part she’s hoped for:

“There’s something to be said of the artist’s immediacy to the product of his labor, I think.” you say, patting yourself on the back, figuratively. Feeling confident, you decide to continue: “The medium of his art-form is literally his sweat, in this case. Through the direct efforts of his labor, he produces the stain of his sweat....though no blood, I think maybe we’re meant to notice.”

Meryl looks captivated by you. Terry nods. “No, he’s never touched ground,” you say, “and look at how he toils.”

A long pause. The world seems to move slower, for a second. Magda opens her mouth as if she’s going to speak. “Because the sweat is from his body...” she says very slowly, her mouth flatter than the horizon. She seems accosted. She shakes her head,

“...You think, because a performance artist pedals on a bike in silence for twenty-excessively-long-minutes and some snooty minimalist art gallery decides to put his dirty, disgusting old socks on display, and some festival designed to ignorant housewives inhaling caramel-corn by the bucket, and their dumb husbands, and idiot colleagues, and emotionally- disturbed sister—you think that makes some guy’s disgusting old socks...*art?*”

She looks appalled. Horrified, maybe, humiliated to have your very acquaintance, or an involvement with the conversation at hand. Like she might possibly desire to spit on you, one of you, maybe no in particular.

“Don’t forget about the children.” Terry says. Meryl’s left hand hugs the side of

her waist, the arm supporting her right elbow, her right hand cupped to the side of the face, as if Magda might disappear in the event she could not see her, could not see her husband's peevish smile, or even you—who is, for all intents and purposes, a stranger, laying witness to the intimacy of family-drama. You feel like you're trespassing on something private, despite your invitation.

You're not sure if you ought to excuse yourself—come up with a polite reason for your early departure, as if you shouldn't be here. You decide to say nothing.

Magda laughs a throaty laugh, a little salacious laugh, you think, that flirts on the suggestion of a moan, and climbs in pitch, until it sounds kind of witchy, "I'm teasing you," she says. But you don't believe her.

"Art-schmart," she says. You feel you are being condescended, or at least, written-off, "what do I know what's art."

"You seem to think you know what it isn't." you say, to provoke her.

"A blind man once told me that seventeen is an unlucky number in the nation of Italy," Magda says, "if you asked me if that's art then, I would've told you, yes."

"So don't trust your opinion, you're saying." you ask. Magda shrugs.

"I don't have a real opinion," she says, "Or one opinion, at least. I like to just make them up as I go along."

"Wow you're like a permanent devil's advocate, Magda." Terry says, "I bet lawyers love you."

"—a permanent antagonist." Meryl offers. Magda smiles, a reserved, knowing smile.

"It's fun isn't it?" Magda asks, seemingly to herself, "it's all in good fun."

"I want to see what else the carnival has to offer." she declares, and dances away. Her people follow. Magda looks up to the sky. She spits in the eye of the moon.

And you—you are left there, watching her.

IX.

Every so often, you glance at the silhouette of your office-building looming in the backdrop, like the dark wall of a wave, before it breaks into a crash. You are nothing more than a passenger on this voyage, you try to remind yourself, you are only along for the ride, on this outing—its outcome is not your responsibility—you have no direction over the course of this mission. You're grateful that Terry is your host. Even as the destination becomes less clear with the night as it continues—when you notice a change in your thoughts, to the warm comfort of your bed, to being out of the cold at home, and away from pursuing Magda, through crowds and the cold, the dark. You can't help but consider the possibly that Magda isn't who you thought she was, that you're wasting your energy and time.

She doesn't try to take you by the hand again—you begin wondering if you imagined the first episode but dismiss the thought—and for this, you're almost grateful. You're not sure the woman isn't hostile, after what you witnessed from the previous exchange with her, you're assuming, loved-

ones. Maybe you might not want to be one of her loved-ones after all, you're starting to suspect.

"Over there!" Meryl says, pointing toward a row of one-act performers. The smell of salt and sugar and fryers; the crumbs of cookies; puddles of melted ice-cream; orange peels, curling from dehydration; of soggy hamburger buns, a scatter sesame-seeds; rinds from watermelon; globs of yellow mustard; Düsseldorf; ketchup, and relish; of powdered sugar; chocolate-dipped bananas; three varieties of cola; chicken-legs and batter-fried skin; cotton candy; of water-ice; beer; and nacho-cheese: it is the sanctuary of rats, that you are smelling. You wave the fullness of the smell past you, and feel your stomach manufacturing a growl.

"Hush!" someone says, and some else says "Shhh!" to the first Hush-er.

"What is it," Terry says, "I don't—" Meryl elbows him. Magda seems to manifest from thin-air, at your side. She presses against you, closer than she needs to, you observe. Attempt to shrug it off. You look up at the stage where a woman, who looks like someone you might unthinkingly pass on the street, sits motionless in a wooden chair, one hand placed on each of her knees, her shoulders squared with the back of the seat. You feel Magda lean toward you but do not release your gaze from the woman. She stares at nothing, in no direction, you think. Flatly, she stares ahead.

You feel the warm touch of her breath against your ear, where her lips hover dangerously close, "What is it," Magda says.

You're not sure if she's asking you about the exhibit, or your personal feelings,

and decide a safe response. You point to the sign.

"Silent Woman," you say, reading the emboldened, capital-print, "She chooses not to speak."

"She pledged," Magda contributes. You quit where you were going, because Magda clearly isn't looking to be informed. You step back a little bit, hoping to force some distance between the two of you. The four of you pause in front of the woman for another moment, before exchanging glances amongst yourselves that seem to wordlessly imply that all of you had had enough. You carry on, and side-step without meeting the artist's gaze, when it trails past you. Somewhere in the park, a scream.

"I've read about that woman," Meryl says, when you reach the outskirts of the assembly, "I saw a personality-piece on her in a magazine once."

"It wasn't a spoken interview, I'm assuming," you respond, fairly certain the comment was directed at you. Meryl laughs.

"No—well, it wasn't a transcription exactly," she says, "though it's not as though she won't communicate at all," Meryl tells you, "she just won't verbally."

"Oh, so it was like a written Q&A, then?"

"She wrote out answers in long-hand, so yes, kind of."

"I always thought written interviews provided a slight-advantage to the interviewee," you say, "—since they have more time to prepare themselves."

“That’s a very astute observation.” Meryl says, and Magda hisses like a cat.

Meryl looks at Magda with a blank expression that seems to suggest she does not accept Magda’s response as a valid and adult reaction, Magda wrinkles her nose. Meryl’s face hardens like a disapproving mother. Magda blushes. —You begin to feel sorry for both sisters.

“Did the article mention why she pledged to silence?” you ask, hoping to diffuse some of the tension. Meryl’s eyes linger on Magda for another second before she turns her head back towards you.

“Yes,” Meryl says, “—it did. She took the oath after the death of her beloved, her one and only.”

“How romantic.” Magda says, and you’re pretty certain that she’s actually being serious.

“The ceremony was performed at a remote Himalayan monastery that was built on the highest cliff of a mountain,” Meryl tells you, “The articles said the monks built it up there to be as close as possible to the sky, to God.”

“When I think of God, I think of God sleeping at the bottom of the ocean.” Terry says.

“You’re thinking of Poseidon.” Magda says. “No,” Terry says, “I’m not.” He shakes his head, “Poseidon is some kind of merman-god, he has a tail, like a fish.”

“What happens if she speaks on accident?” you ask, “I mean, it’s not like the monks are going to come for her.”

“Seppuku, probably,” Meryl says, “in the name of her beloved.”

“I thought you said they were monks.” Magda says.

“They are.” she replies, “or that’s what the article said. They’re Japanese warrior-monks in the Himalayans.”

“I don’t buy it,” Terry says, “did you see the shoes that she was wearing?”

Actually, you did not see the shoes that she was wearing. You were too busy searching her eyes for the suggestion of intonation.

“Pretty funny for the monk lady to be wearing Louis Vuitton, don’t you think.” “She can wear whatever she wants.” “Oh God, please Magda,” Meryl says, “—please.”

“What’s that exhibit?” you ask Magda, partly to distract her from Meryl. Maybe you are a passenger, but you can at least attempt to make the ride more enjoyable. “How should I know.” she says. And you think you might be tempted to describe her company as unbearable, right them, in terms of its leisure, and still “Oh but this one’s inter-active!” you find yourself trying to say to her. She brushes past you, and rushes to the carnival’s end.

X.

There are many exhibits that you pass by with little remorse. Of course, you already know where Magda is heading, and so, the lot of you: straight down to the forgotten funhouse, that is, in a beeline toward where most people are not. You stumble over your

own shoes, and also your laces, as you attempt to navigate the flow of strangers meandering through stands, down the sidewalk of the park. You wade carefully through them, transgress through grass, out of bounds, on occasion, and shuffle your heels. You can smell Terry's belch when it wafts back, from ahead of you. With timidity in your step, you nervously carry on through the current, dark crowd.

"Did you hear about the conveyor belt they tried to put in, at one point?" Meryl asks you, "inc case people became tired from walking?"

"No," you say, "I haven't." Terry turns around and looks at Meryl. "Are you making that up?" he asks.

"No," she begins, "I read—"

"—an article. Woop-de-doop-de-do." Magda says, for Meryl, you think. She yawns in her sister's face. You look at poor Meryl, who puts forth a defeated nod. You ask her why it failed, not because you want to know, but because you'd prefer if some of the rivalry dissolved already, so you could finally have some polite and decent conversation.

"Too expensive," Meryl murmurs to you, "to keep in operation. Navigation systems frequently malfunctioned. The belt ended up requiring continual maintenance and repair. Injuries, deaths—lawsuits."

"The belt went rogue?" Terry asks, "...like a garden hose goes rogue? Or like an escalator goes rogue?"

Meryl thinks for a minute, "...garden-house." You witness Meryl and Terry grin.

Then, your eyes are on the frontside of the Funhouse. It's the frontside that faces you, which you notice first, as you and your party enter the empty queue. You follow behind Magda, Terry, and Meryl quickly, through a deserted network of stanchions and crimson, velvet ropes. You'll have to jog if you're going to keep up, you know, and begin jogging. Soon, you break a sweat. Your neck whiplashes from one shoulder to the next, as you throw every glance in the funhouse's direction possible, from what physics and your anatomy permit. You must keep up, you think, because in this moment, it's Magda that runs the show, Magda whom you must follow. It's Magda that's in a rush, and you who must demonstrate the ability to match her pace. Though clearly—this isn't Magda first time at the carnival, neither the funhouse, nor probably even her first time coming here, to this one, you figure. You can tell by the confidence of her walk, the sense of urgency behind her steps, the way she clatters. A black bird above you, a scavenger species, soars on thermals of rising air. You hear a hiss drop from among the clouds. Turn your eyes down, and look. The funhouse is fast approaching.

It goes to say, the amount of dilapidation surprises you—the pale colors, surprise you, the appearance of wear—the exhausted and rickety surface, surprises you. The funhouse seems to be standing on its very last leg, or so it looks. The truth of the matter would haunt you, if so you entertained it. Dusk falls upon you in the park, and the funhouse looks dimmer than you imagined it would. You had imagined vibrant hues of the circus, to be assaulted by an array of color. You had imagined a procession of bunting-flags, snapping like fiery tongues but only count one, drab flag, that tussles limply like the head of a flower, drooping from its pole.

Something akin to disappointment stirs in your gut, or uncertainty, hesitation, confusion. So much so, hardly do you notice when the light undergo its changes and dramatic, is the effect.

Closer to the exhibit, you notice an electronic message board affixed just left of the “FUNHOUSE” sign begins to come into focus. The message was illegible, save the pattern of its blinking, though now you can make out the word “ANTIQUE” when it flashes in red dots. “ANTIQUE FUNHOUSE” the sign reads, then only “FUNHOUSE” for equal duration.

“ANTIQUE! FUNHOUSE”

“FUNHOUSE”

“ANTIQUE! FUNHOUSE”

Almost as if the Funhouse were a collectible that operated half the time, it seems. Some of the letters do not light up with consistency, though still you can read the words unlit.

“AN IQ E! F NHO SE”

“F NHO SE”

“AN IQ E! F NHO SE”

Is what, from a distance, the sign seemed to have said. The disrepair is so severe, you wonder in good faith whether you’re actually staring down a haunted-house that was mislabeled, or maybe a practical-joke. You could imagine a few possible reasons that a devious carnny might nurse a vengeance from the shadows against the letters *u* and *t*, for the sake of your own fun, or to keep your mind fresh, or prepared, willing to doubt the obvious, and still open.

Even though you do suspect shoddy wiring, neglect, the passing of time, the process of erosion, to be the culprit. That, so it happens. You concentrate on moving your feet forward, right, left, right, left. The queue is so long, it feels as though you might never make it. You pant, sharply maneuvering around the corners, wondering if there had been an accident, if you’re witness to a mistake in the labeling. But it seems there hasn’t been an accident, neither a mistake in the current presentation (a passing blur of white catches your eye from Magda’s grin, for a second, and your thoughts fleet away from you). There is a faint and mousy cough. You hear many voices at once, in the distance, a sounding roar.

Why didn’t we cut under the ropes, you wonder, dragging a hand over the soft velvet, considering the empty line. You let your hand trail behind you. Why didn’t we go around? You can’t think of a logical explanation, unless you’re supposed to interpret the queue as part of the attraction itself, much like whatever mystery is contained inside its walls. You can’t think of an explanation, though, of why Magda has lead you all through the rows so tediously, however, unless for only her own entertainment, or for sport. Your eyes track the funhouse and scrutinize the slanted stories, their colors washed-up like those washed-off a clown. You can see where the layers from paint-jobs past that have chipped in multicolor like the changing hues of a jawbreaker, and glance in the ticket-booth beside you. The attendant is sleeping, you notice, face- down into his arms. You can see Magda clambering up the wire steps, half white, half red, less than fifty feet ahead of you. She moves fast, too. You can see Terry falling behind, attempting to catch his

balance, reaching for the rail. Meryl stumbling along behind you. Magda standing on the edifice, in the last light of the sun.

“Come on!” Magda yells, “hurry!” But the darkness, the setting sun, has put you ill at ease. The appearance of the funhouse, incongruent with what you envisioned, puts you ill at ease. So too has Magda, and her intentions toward you, put you ill at ease. The sister coughs. You can feel your feet drag a little, and partly, do this on purpose. Partly, the effort of moving forward feels as though it is being made through cooling molasses. You look to the sky as it begins to blush harder, and visibility becomes more perverted than before.

“It’s going to close soon!” she shouts from above you.

The shadows reach for you, growing longer. You are compelled to hesitate by a burgeoning sensation of unknown and alarm. Panic begins to flourish. I’m trying, you want to tell her, don’t wait up. But you are tired. You feel feverish, cold in the bones, with skin that is wet and hot. Go on without me, you want to say, I’ll just catch up. You open your lips and only sound comes out, lost of form, without language—a soft rasp, a gurgling from the throat. You wheeze a breath that’s only lungs and sounds like vermin screaming. You notice a wooden sign painted with a nostalgic font that reads “*Timeless!*” by the foot of the stairs. You cast on arm toward the railing, and ascend the steps in a stupor of nausea, and confusion.

You clamber up and stand beside them, fully out-of-breath. Terry gestures toward the entrance, its dim corridor, gaping wide like an open mouth, the throat dark like a cavern.

“Are we going in there?” he asks. Knowingly, Magda grins.

“I’m tired.” Terry says. Meryl looks over the horizon, a thousand yards in the distance.

“Come on,” Magda whines, “it’ll be fun.” She flashes a toothy smile and pans around the semicircle of faces.

“Just for a little while,” she says, lightly. Meryl shrugs, what appears to be a neutral position. You straighten your shoulders. Terry looks uneasy.

“What’d you say?” Magda wants to know.

“For just a little?” And Terry shakes his head.

“Actually, I think I’m going to head out,” he says, “it’s getting late...I’m exhausted.” he smiles softly.

You see Magda’s lips turn down in a quick and dramatic fashion.

“Goodnight, Magda.” Terry says, and opens his arms to embrace her. Magda remains fixed in place with her elbows crossed, like a statue. Terry wraps his arms around her.

“Anders,” Terry says, and chuckles, as if there were something funny known to no one but himself, “it’s been a pleasure.” He clamps a hand down on your shoulder, smiles, and shakes his head.

“See you on Monday,” he says, “This time, I’ll bring the sandwich.”

Meryl steps forward and lets out a perfumeey little cough, “So glad to finally meet you, Anders.” she says, “hopefully we’ll meet again soon.”

“Sure,” you say to her, not because you are unappreciative of the gesture, so much as a little taken aback—unsure if you should be introducing your own exit, among it all. You pat Meryl three times on the back, “—sometime soon.”

Swiftly, she turns and walks off. Terry casts a small wave in your direction, before slowly following after his wife. You look at Magda, standing before the ANTIQUE FUNHOUSE/ FUNHOUSE sign, smiling at you like you’re breakfast.

“Hey, Terry!” you call after him, and say “—just a moment,” to the side, for Magda. You turn around, and begin to skip back.

He looks to you. You halt, out of breath, “Hey wait,” you begin to say, “I—just wanted to say, thanks for inviting me tonight. It was good, to get out, to get my mind off things, you know, for a little awhile—

“I don’t get out enough, probably.”

He smiles a small smile at you that reminds you of your father’s,

“Anytime, Anders” he says, “anytime.” Terry waits, in case there is something else you have to tell him, and after a moment—smiles, and begins to turn around.

“uh—” you start. He stops.

“How is...everything? With your life?” you ask him.

Terry’s smile slips from his lips but inhabits around his eyes, “We are getting divorced, really.”

“Excuse me?”

“Which is for the best, probably. Though she *is* taking our television,” Terry says, “and the cat.”

You’re not sure what to say, or if he’s being serious, but don’t want to offend him either way. You decide to ask him what the cat’s name is. Somberly, Terry looks at you,

“Mittens,” he says, “our cat’s name...is Mittens.”