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Hand Grenade on a Hot Day

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Hand Grenade on a Hot Day

Stories by Kyle Rood

Fall 2011 Honors Thesis

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I

Graffiti

Trent liked the old blast furnace. To his twelve-year old self, it was an area of endless opportunity and pride. It was glorious: its bigness, its oldness, the signs of people passing that lingered just long enough to terrify a kid convinced he was about to be caught. The chances were less than Trent imagined: the mills were long gone, all that were left were the rusted-out skeletons, more work to remove than leave to disintegrate into scrap and dust.

The only people that came were the kids. Young ones like Trent, exploring a kingdom of twisted scrap-metal and industrial treasure, and older ones exploring their own kingdoms in private corners of the mill buildings. The areas where Trent and his friend, Matt, trespassed to find circled hearts and initials, accompanied by words that both Trent and Matt pretended to know but really only knew the sound. One day they had seen Matt's older brother Bobby leaving with a girl. They spent days afterwards looking for his name engraved in some corner or another, some proof to feed their over-active imaginations.

Trent would find it fifteen years later, swinging a sledgehammer into the concrete foundation, knocking out the more valuable metals that had survived the years of squatters and scavengers, salvaging what could be salvaged. He found their names sprayed onto the concrete walls in blood-red drips. The word "forever"

splattered with the last speckles of a dying spray-can, Bobby and Maria in a heart above. Trent swung. Forever was a stupid sentiment to leave in spray paint. His hammer broke down the word, letter by letter, until it lay piled with the rest of the building, long ago diagnosed with death by the sores of graffiti.

Crown of Thorns

My brothers left tacks in my peanut butter and jelly, and Mom threw up again this morning. Dad hasn't been home since Sunday, and both Jeremy and Johnny say he isn't coming back this time. But they say that every time. Either way, they are making lunches again and probably dinner, and I hate it. I hate having to peel away each piece of bread or sniff the pasta sauce for the sour scent of hot sauce. I hate Jeremy shouting, "Wake up Sally-Sally-Sally-mander!" in the morning. I hate Johnny picking out all of my marshmallows before he gives me my Lucky Charms. I hate that they are the only family I've got.

On the bus, I pulled the tacks out of my sandwich. Sandy watched from over the back of her seat.

"Hey, can I use those?"

"What for?"

"Laura keeps saying I kissed her brother."

"Did you?"

"Just give them to me."

I did. Jeremy and Johnny would have gotten a kick out of it. Carefully, I licked the peanut butter off before I passed them up. Six – always six, at least they made it easy, no hidden sevenths, no phantom fifths. Sandy slipped them into her pocket. Only for them to reappear in math class, Sandy tucking them into the crevices of Laura's braids, a tiny crown of thorns.

In gym we played dodgeball, and Sandy dared me to send the ball high into Laura's braids. I did, and when Laura crumpled, blood already beginning to mat her blonde hair, I almost cried. But Sandy laughed and laughed, "Did you hear her squeal?"

Evening on the Diamond

Two brothers are practicing in an old baseball diamond full of crabgrass and dandelions. The younger brother stands at second and pops flies into center field, trying to land them close to the chain-link fence where his older brother strains to catch the errant hits. He even lays out for a few, the World Series-saving dives his younger brother loves.

Each dash from center to left or right is a full-blown sprint with eyes upwards, until one especially wide hit to far left field sends his leg down a gopher-hole where it cracks with a sound like a bat against a tight inside pitch. The younger brother sees his older brother's body pivot around one fixed ankle, feels a shiver run up his spine at the crack, and then hears the scream, louder than anything he has ever heard. And he is already running. The bat skids over to shortstop while he runs towards the fence and the tall outfield grass where his brother is lying, clutching the sharp crabgrass with both fists, his foot still caught in the gopher-hole. His older brother's shin is bent below the knee, and even though the bone isn't quite poking through, he can see where it's pushing up below the skin. His head swims, and this time the shiver that runs up his spine almost takes his dinner up all over centerfield.

His brother is still screaming, though by now the volume has died down a little, slowly turning into a ragged sob, which is almost worse – his older brother

sobbing at anything. They lift out the leg together, and both of them feel the bones shift a little. His older brother's scream comes back twice as loud, and they blow chunks all over their legs. Both of them sit in the vomit-covered grass. The younger brother knows he should run home, but his legs feel like the bones were removed when his brother's cracked; he can't do it, not by himself.

All he can do is help them both stand up, and with his brother leaning heavily on his shoulder, they slowly hobble out of the crabgrass into the infield, past second base where the bat is still playing shortstop. Slowly, they crawl around the low pitcher's mound, past home and finally, to the away bench where they both collapse. The younger brother cries, wishing that someone would come out of one of the houses and see how much he needs someone to help his older brother. But there is just two boys waiting for anyone, crying into the fine dust and crunched up sunflower seed shells while the sun twists their shadows out into the dirt.

Form of My Father

When I was twelve, shortly before my father died, he bought me a fly rod, and we went out to one of the small lakes that speckle the Cascades so he could teach me to cast. For the better part of a morning, we stood like windup toys on the boat ramp, our arms snapping back and forth from ten o'clock to two o'clock, while we watched the fish rise beyond the reach of my feeble casts. He told me how my grandfather, who I barely knew, had taught him to cast in their quarter-acre lawn. He was so tired of casting by the time he saw water that he rushed his first real cast and caught himself. A sharp hook stuck behind his right ear, and he didn't catch anything else for the rest of the day.

It made me glad to be casting over water, even if the fish were probably laughing at the tell-tale splashes of my line. By lunch I had grown tired of the tick-tock of my own arm, though I stayed silent to get my hands on the tiny, feathered flies that still had hooks attached. Eventually, as my father loaded our cooler into the drift boat, he handed me the leather fly-book while he took the oars. His hard hands stroked softly out to the reeds' edge where he promised big brown trout lurked in the murky darkness of deeper water.

As we tied the flies my father chose onto the end of our leader, he showed me the damselflies, their bodies bound together in their mating dance. The two of them

looping and diving together, like a bright blue bi-plane in some optimistic First World War livery. The male holding tight to the female even after death. Their slender bodies outstretched in rigor mortis, holding tight to the thin reed stalks just after laying their eggs. Though I can barely remember the rest of the day's fishing, I can see the hunched form of my father in the dim light, telling me how the damselfly lays its eggs on the reeds and dies before the eggs can hatch. How, in the next rain, the larva will hatch and be swept into the lake to grow up, unaware of their parents' beautiful duet, only discovering their bright blue secret when they break the water's surface to die.

Blood on the Chopping Block

Anna sat and watched the pungent petals fall from the wind-wracked magnolia. They swirled until they touched the spring-swollen creek then struck out like rowboats. Anna spat, thick phlegm sinking quickly below the surface, bouncing along the smooth stones and downstream.

With that, she left back through the soft mud, barefoot to feel the cool of winter still seeping out of the earth, back towards the debt-drowned farm her uncle owned where the hens were waiting to be checked. Anna was a lazy egg checker; tried to remember, but couldn't really brave the pecking and chicken stench every day. So when she found Lucy sitting proudly on three big, brown speckled eggs after two weeks of half-hearted checking, she worried but took them all regardless.

She grilled onions, chopped peppers and wondered when she had last lifted Lucy from her nest for a thorough search. When the vegetables were soft, she cracked the first egg and sighed at its yellow yoke; took up the second and even though she thought she felt the slightest twitch, cracked it open anyway. She screamed, clenched her eyes and only barely forced herself to look back down at the muscled skeleton, twitching at the bottom of the bowl. She carried it out to the shed. Laying it roughly on the chopping block, she brought the hatchet down and crushed the soft skull into the blood-stained stump. While it twitched, she screamed – screamed at it for its dividing cells, for its muscles not yet covered in skin, for its

sprouting egg-tooth it would never need, for dying before it even had the chance to be born. She screamed until both their shaking muscles stopped, and rather than throw it in the garbage tin, she brought it down to the creek. She set it to sail on a magnolia petal, to drift downstream and sink into the swirling eddies.

Going Downstream

It was hotter than anybody remembered, and Josh was wiping salt off his face with long, circling swirls of his hand, flicking the clinging droplets into the river that flowed fifty or more feet below. We sat on the guardrail, our feet dangling over a distance just high enough that no one considered jumping except a couple attempted suicides, who lived with some breaks and bruises. Jimmy was talking again, and neither Josh nor I was listening. I was trying to think of how to tell my boss I wasn't coming in today, even though it was the third time this week, and I was inches away from being fired. Josh was staring straight down, watching the ripples shift in that deep blue-green that only comes from really cold run-off; water that still remembers what it was like to be ice. Water so clean it would be bottled five miles downstream and shipped off to all the places we'd never see.

Jimmy is talking about the last jumper. He had jumped around this same time of year, though it had been a cooler summer, and nobody knew why he did it. Jimmy was saying how the guy hadn't talked since, and he was probably right. It's a small town for suicide, and you better make sure you get it right, or the whole damn town will be after you.

"I thought he would have moved by now," I said.

"Nope, he still lives over by my Gramps. Says he doesn't see him much. I think he's gotten hooked on meth or something."

"He's probably just got air-conditioning."

"Fuck, I could go for some air-conditioning."

"Do you think he knew he would live?

"Fuck no! Look down there; do you think you'd live? It's like fifty feet."

"Still, he hasn't tried since. If he was so set on dying, he'd have gone through with it by now."

"Maybe he just chickened out."

"Maybe he just couldn't think of any other way."

"Why not just leave? Anyplace has to be better than here."

As we talked Josh stood up and walked down the bridge, stripping his clothes off as he went, tossing them lazily over the rail. I saw his blue shirt fluttering down and turned just in time to see his bare ass arch upwards into the sky then float past; his junk uplifted in free-fall.

By the time we made it down the zigzag trail that cuts down the cliffside, he was standing in the thigh high shallows. The water dripped from his goose-pimpled skin, and he stared back at our open mouths; even Jimmy rendered speechless. My mouth worked silently, trying to shape the only question we could possibly have. But Josh already knew, "because the only thing that makes it out of this place is the water, and I'm going with it."

II

Hand Grenade on a Hot Day

"Today's the day the river burned in Cleveland," you said as we left the house to pick up some beer and hopefully do something with the rest of a nearly wasted Saturday. It seemed to have some special significance, maybe just because that's home for you, but I couldn't say it seemed like a day worth celebrating.

"You know what we should do?" you ask. "What anyone with time to kill does: break something."

Instead, we got a case of Redstripe and went to the old spillway that bridges the storm-water drain that Akron calls a river. We sat on the walkway with our feet up against the rusted railing, laughing as the ducks lifted off, startled by the quickening current. As we drank you began to roar every obscene thing you could think of, screaming back at the ceaseless sound of rushing water, the sound that threatened to crush us under its weight.

I told you how when I first moved here, a drunk set sail down the river on a pink plastic innertube and as his friends called to him to get his drunk-ass out of the river, he went right down the chute between the pylons. Search and rescue didn't even find the innertube for two months and never found his body.

"Sad fucker," you said and toasted him with your empty stubby bottle, sending it down after his howling ghost. Before we left, we both pissed down into his watery grave.

While we drove back, I drunkenly thumped the steering wheel to the bass beat, and you sang along not quite so out of tune that I wanted to make you stop. As we passed the halfway house where we had lived four summers ago, you threw your last half empty beer from your lap onto the porch and shouted, "Hand grenade!" Pausing just long enough in your wailing rendition to hear the glass break through your drunkenness.

Up in Smoke

The day Joey put his fist through the window, it was almost sunny. Not cheerfully sunny since that might have changed things, but the first true day of spring. Bright and crisp, with moments of daylight casting the sort of sharp-edged shadows that seem to clarify things. Enough, I guess, to put a fist through a window.

Joey wanted to blame it on Anna, but it wasn't really her fault any more than it was anyone's. She'd gotten fed up and left just like anybody would have, and Joey has always been a little crazy anyhow. His mother even threatened to kill him once. He ran away from home because he'd been caught cutting the gin bottle too many times, and he tried to stay at my house. Before the death threat, he stayed with us for almost a month. Mainly sneaking out into the woodshed to get high and joking around with my dad. His mom called everyday until he went home, and by that time, I think he deserved whatever he got. You don't ignore your mother for a month and just expect everything to be peaches.

He claims he never got over it and left for good about a week later. Didn't come back to our house; he got a place for himself and lived there for awhile. Met Anna, smoked more dope, drank more beer. She left one day through a three

hundred dollar cloud of resinous smoke. Every last ounce of dope she could find in the house, burning in the front yard.

Joey only blamed it on her because he'd run out of excuses. With all his dope burning a hole in his lawn, and the sun steaming through the tumbling smoke, all those crisp little shadows fluttering across the window, bringing everything into perfect focus, there wasn't anything left. Nothing he could do but blame himself or punch out the shadowy wisps of smoke.

The Smell of Shit

Henry didn't work today – paid vacation and all that shit. I resent it. The drunks at the Episcopalian church tell me that resentment fuels my disease, which is just more bullshit. I don't have a disease; I have a drinking problem. Henry doesn't – something else to resent but that I'm really ok with. Henry's on vacation, so why not me too – take the day off and hit the bar. He goes whenever he wants; I go when I get fed up with all this shit.

Jimmy the bartender says I can't come in anymore. Apparently, I trash up the place. Jimmy's all right, though. He sells me a bottle, and I take it up to the reservoir instead. The reservoir smells like shit because it's full of everybody's, including mine. The stench lifts off the shit-brown water like morning breath, kicking me in the mouth, the nose, the eyes. I'm told that I resent myself, and I do. I resent breathing the stink of my own shit.

Once I'm drunk, I don't resent so much. I can talk with Henry when we're drunk, play darts or pool; shoot the shit, so to speak. But today, he's still a prick for

having off work. I'll probably get fired for not showing today; he got paid for it. I wouldn't resent that; I wish they'd kick me out of that shit-hole.

My old man told me a story once about how he used to work as a bouncer in some piece-of-shit bar. One day, some buddies of his walked in and were playing around a bit. My old man's watching, and everyone's getting drunk. These guys horsing around, knocking each other off barstools and stuff, when one of them gets bumped by this big guy trying to slide passed. These guys go off the handle, thinking maybe they'll start something, but Pop is already there. He steps in just as one of his friends takes a swing, takes it right in the gut. They all take off, and this fat guy who Pop just took a punch for just shrugs. No "thank you," nothing, and my Pop, well, he doesn't resent nothing, just lets loose that punch he took and knocks that guy clean out of the bar. No resentment – just passing along what wasn't meant for him.

Do You Think I'm Easy?

The only person not sweating is Jimmy the bartender, who is smiling as condescendingly as a person in a bowtie can. He is mixing with both hands and talking out of both sides of his mouth, but his hair hasn't even fallen from its perfect coif.

Beads of hot, sticky sweat are slipping below my collar and down between the mostly visible breasts of the woman next to me. Even my beer glass is perspiring. I drink a shot of whisky first, setting it down and forcing the glass away in one quick movement. The woman whose bra is showing watches, and I pick up my coat to move away down the bar.

"Your bra is showing," I say, and she responds at once.

"Oh, you noticed," which, of course, makes me feel like an asshole, an idiot and a pervert all at once. I sip my beer.

"Do you think I'm a tramp?"

"What?"

"Because my bra is showing, do you think I'm easy?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you meant it."

I sip my beer again.

"Would you like to feel them?"

"Now?"

"No, pervert, later."

"Not really," I lie.

Four beers later, I leave in her car. The two of us pass a joint across a console sticky with soda, exhaling out of the open windows. By the time my pants are wrapped around my shoes, I am wondering if I ever asked her name. Later, as the two of us are lying in her bed, and her bra is peeking out from under my shirt, she says, "I knew you were lying." And there is nothing I can say to that.

A Moment of Recognition

Trent buys a packet of cigarettes even though his wife has asked him not to again and again. But it's cold outside, and he hates waiting in the stinging snow below clouds that cast a persistent shadow of icy flecks. Snow that blows sidewise through the glow of the streetlamps, a shifting static distorting the streets.

He would like to be home already, but his bus doesn't come for another forty minutes. He puffs on a cigarette and begins his long circumambulation, his restless feet cracking the salt-corns that litter the sidewalk. He will smoke half the pack before the bus comes, the butts falling behind him as he circles the city blocks, glowing orange fireflies extinguished the moment they hit the wet ground.

*****

Sarah stands on the street corner below the blue bus sign. Though she knows the bus won't come for half an hour, she doesn't budge. She's happy to watch the glowing cones of snow below the streetlamps, warm in her high, rubber boots and thick peacoat that dusts the snow from the tops of her knees. She is patient enough to stand and watch the cars go by in sporadic bursts triggered by traffic lights.

She hums the fragments of bass that reverberate from the cars. Each top forty song carrying its own dimly distinct barcode of sound; a code she's learned just from waiting at bus stops. She listens to jazz when she's alone and plays sax. As

she waits, she imagines she is a street performer and wonders if she could do it: play all day just for the chance of some change in the bottom of her crushed velvet case. She doubts it. Bar shows scare her nearly catatonic, even the footsteps of fellow bus riders startle her. Instead, she counts snowflakes and imagines they dance to her smooth jazz grooves.

*****

Josh lights a spliff in the alley, a little buzz to get him home, to get him through the next twenty minutes of waiting, watching each bus pass except the one that would take him home to the suburbs. His neighborhood used to be secluded and safe, but now houses both a grow-house and a meth-lab; cheap dope, though he still wishes it wasn't in his backyard. Just a few miles away, and he wouldn't complain.

It's late enough, he can take a stroll with his lit-up weed, smiling as he puffs along like a slow train of dope smoke, leaving a hint of illegality for all those prudes and beckoning some cool cat to pop out and share some nighttime revelations. It never happens. The only people who look his way ignore the skunk scent and let him drift lazily by. As he rides home, someone will whisper to a lover or coworker about how that guy in the back is totally stoned.

*****

The driver is tired – tired of left turns at traffic lights, tired of the constant ding of his thumb on the ticket-counter, tired of the tireless voice that rings out behind his head, “71C Highland Park”. He ushers them on: the cigarette smoker, the jazz player, the pothead. Josh draws himself up into the back, settling into his cocoon of dopamine. Sarah sits just below the split-level, head heavy against the dirty window glass. Trent stands, too restless with nicotine to sit, his fingers fidgeting with his coat sleeves. As the bus pulls away, each falls back in perfect unison – their only moment of recognition.

If Only

The two of us are in a bar, and you just said something like, "If only they would throw up a little new paint and reupholster the bar stools, I bet this place would be really nice." Which I guess you could say about most places and people too. In fact, just in this bar I bet there are at least a half a dozen people about whom you thought, "If only she would put on something decent and wear a little makeup." I remember an occasion not too long ago when we were lying on our backs in bed, and you said exactly, "If only you would shave that stupid beard, you'd look so much younger." And of course I did, though I said it was because it was getting too hot, and I was breaking out underneath all that hair.

I do my best to avoid those comments. I keep my shirt tucked in, and I comb my hair, if only because you always wear makeup, and I'm afraid that you'll notice that under my mostly polished exterior I am, in fact, one of those people that you would say, "If only..." about every time you saw me. Then again, I suspect you might be too underneath all of the layers of concealer and mascara.

So why don't we both just shut up and drink our beers, get a little more drunk than we should? Let our skin-deep respectable veneers crack a little on the crowed

dance floor. Why don't you leave your lipstick smudged on the rim of your beer glass and let your mascara run down your face with your sweat? My shirt will get untucked, and maybe after a couple more my trips to the men's room, my fly will come unzipped. Why don't we let everything come loose? Neither of us will notice until we're at home, and I'm licking the chemicals off your face, and you're reaching down for an already unzipped fly. Why don't we?

Die Trying

Jessie is having lunch at her desk, the corpse behind her covered by the white sheet that Jessie usually just leaves balled up in the corner. She's a forensic pathologist and likes the company of someone's memories draining out onto the dissection table. She says it gets lonely down in the basement without the bodies to keep her company. One of the other pathologists actually talked with them. Real conversations, not just about the weather or Yankees, but real personal shit – his kid getting busted for doing coke in the school bathroom, the affair he was having, his mother-in-law. He moved to Tucson a few weeks after I showed up, and I couldn't have been happier.

"Why the sheet?"

"My ex. Just too fucking weird."

"Where'd they find him?"

"In his bed with a needle still in his arm."

I peeked at the toe tag: Kennedy, Jeremy. Big feet, probably size twelves at least. Good and clean, trimmed toenails, no bunions or toe jam, surprising for a junkie. Their hygiene usually goes as soon as the needles start coming.

"How'd you meet?"

"Med school."

"Let me guess, anesthesiologist."

"What else?"

Addiction: the scourge of anesthesiologists everywhere. Always having the good stuff around, most of them start to want a taste. It's weird how that works; makes me wonder if maybe they know subconsciously before they get into it. Something inside of them puts them on the path to that sort of access, like cops who beat up black kids for doing forty in a thirty-five.

"How long were you guys together?"

"Few years. We broke up while he was doing his residency. Someone should have known better and told him to go be a pediatrician or something. Last I heard the hospital had him on a leave of absence to get his shit worked out; I have a feeling this wasn't exactly what they imagined."

My parents hadn't seen it coming either. Their son going off to the big city for a clean new start. They believed me, right up until the night they got a call, me too drunk to stand with two black eyes and an assault charge, slurring into the phone. Dad drove all the way out in one night, eleven-hour drive that he did in nine. Mom stayed home. He drove all that way and wouldn't even pay bail. I had to get a

friend to loan me the cash. We had dinner though. He never asked me what happened, but someone must have told him because all night he couldn't take his eyes off that steak knife.

I pulled back the rest of the sheet. "Good looking guy."

"Looked better when I knew him."

"There's something about a junkie, you can always tell. Something about being so desperate you'd stick a needle in yourself just to be someone else. They just look … dead. Worse than dead: walking-around-dead. Most of them look deader than this guy. I guess nothing makes you look deader than being dead when you're still alive."

"A lot of junkies in jail?" She's almost smirking.

Jessie knows the whole story: the bar fight, the jail time, the hours spent in AA meetings in a place where booze is brewed in toilet bowls. Even knows stuff I don't remember, stuff from the trial I never tried to find out. She even talked to the guy. She was hiring a bar-fighter to cut people up, and she wasn't taking any chances. I guess she decided I was all right. She didn't even flinch the first time she

handed me a scalpel. Thinking back, I know she didn't have to worry. It was just the booze, I don't even remember doing it. But between that and this job, it makes me wonder; do I just have knifing in me?

"Jessie, do you think there's just something in people that gets them into trouble?"

"You mean like addicts? Sure, some people just have that drive. They're going to get into something even if it kills them."

"Do you think they ever get over it?"

"Well, I guess you either figure it out or die trying."

III

The Barber

By the time the Ben and I moved into our two-bedroom walkup, the local barber was the only one who knew anyone. The rest of the neighborhood didn't know how to be neighbors, and as students, we would all be gone within the next few years, along with the bartenders, waitresses and mini-mart clerks. All of us moving on to the rest of our lives. Everyone except the barber, who knew and had known everyone, including my girlfriend, even though he only cut men's hair.

When he wasn't cutting hair, he sat on his porch in an antique barber chair that acted as his only advertisement. Tilted as far back as the chair would manage, he smoked a seemingly endless supply of cigarettes that collected around his feet. He talked to everyone, calling out around the filter clenched between his teeth to both clients and neighbors.

He liked to tell stories about the people who had lived in our apartment, an endless stream of strangers who he turned into our roommates. Was that where the redhead, Anna, had thrown a frying pan of asparagus at her boyfriend? Was this Jeremy's room or Kirk's? Soon, they were more real than the people next door, who we barely saw.

One day the barber was gone, and later we learned he had died at the hospital after catching pneumonia. I felt that had we known, we might have visited – stood

at his bedside for one final story about the dent in the refrigerator or why the hot water faucet was missing its H.

A few days later we went to the funeral, along with at least a hundred of our neighbors – a remarkable crowd for a man who had no family or close friends, other than a fellow barber who had known him all his life, though they lived on opposite sides of the city. The service was presided over by a young priest with a shoulder-length ponytail, and the sermon was so general as to seem almost cold. Even the barber's friend, who had driven across town, only provided a eulogy of his friends great passion for hair, leaving out a gift for raising the ghosts of not simply the dead but the past.

I shifted in my seat in the silence that followed, wanting to rise and remember that gift but not knowing how to thank the dead for bring back the lost and living. Eventually, the coffin was carried out to the hearse, and the rest of us spilled out into a cold drizzle. Our little clumps of umbrellas, in twos and threes, drifted across the streets, slowly heading back to our separate, empty rooms.

Childhood Fortė

The window across the street frames a woman. Her red eyes hold back tears, her fingers grip the counter edge, her open mouth is taut with sobs. Her husband is behind her, untying his boots at the kitchen table. She doesn't complain about the mud he tracks in, just wishes for once he would pick up the mop and scrub away the tracks he leaves. His mouth is set in grim determination, born from a day spent wishing he could come home to just his beer and dope, and when his mouth explodes there is barely kindness in the deep wrinkles around his eyes. He works hard enough, he says, but so does she – her constant cleaning and cooking, balancing the books, keeping their household from sinking below the rising tide of debt. Her eyes at the counter are sad, even as she turns and screams; her anger so strong it arches her back against the sink.

Just a few yards away another glass-paned rectangle frames a little boy, maybe six, who will never be beaten or even screamed at; who will be told over the dinner table that nothing is wrong, that nothing is his fault. But that doesn't matter; his eyes are already brimming with tears. He tried pulling the pillow tight across his head, but that just dried his eyes. Instead, he sits cross-legged on the bed with a book of nursery rhymes, the kind that sobs out tight little beeps. While his parents

anger creeps through the crack under his door, he holds tight to those little candy-colored buttons. His face clenched tight with tears and concentration, not just silencing the angry shouts but drowning out the screaming six-year old inside of him. The one that can scream louder than any mother and can't be muffled under thin, down pillows. The voice that says, “How can you matter? How can they care about you, when you're so small and helpless? How can they love you, when you don’t work or cook or even make your bed?” As he keeps his finger pressed against the plastic, the tears begin to dry. The plastic beeps are better than ice-cream, soda-pop or candy-corn. They are better than the pillow's muffled silence, better than his mother’s gentle caress or his father’s rough hug.

The Physics of Violence

A 165 pound man and 190 pound man circle in a courtyard. How long before the two men collide?

Balance the forces: two bodies caught in orbit by the gravitational pull of violence, pulled apart by nerves. The force of the thickly padded fist equal to the fear of impact on the fragile tissue below the skin. The glove not yet pulling the arm forward, just flexing little half-hearted twitches of nervous muscles.

Solve for rotational velocity: first one way, then back, bumping against the table, the chairs, brushing the rough brick – the coefficient of friction of everyday objects. The bigger of the two swings first, his weight back on his heels, and hits nothing but air. Both bodies held out of arms' reach. It could go on this way all day, big, blue and red fists floating safely along their empty orbits. But the smaller one steps in quick, his little steps like Ali's, whose swiftness changed the equation back when Sonny Liston's mass lost to velocity.

Solve for the force of collision: the thrust of his fist is equal to the sound of contact, a tentative jab followed by a solid thwack. The sound provides the necessary catalyst, tightening the circle until… bam! A right hook to the jaw, and his gloved hand feels the tiny spurt of blood forced from the cheek through a gap between the teeth; velocity is equal to pressure times area. Behind the gloves his

eyes go wide, the unexpected firmness of flesh jolting them open. Then a jab below the upraised arms, deep into the softer stomach, and the body pivots around the axis of least resistance.

Rebalance the equation: The force of his arms now pushes the gloves, the equation unbalanced by the heavy gasps laden with droplets of spit and blood. The magnetic attraction of his fists to bare flesh is greater than the force that fragile flesh can bare. The equation only balanced by the application of force against the ground – tapping out.

Eyes Wide Open

"Emmy, come back; it's cold."

"I want to watch the snow fall."

Carl got up, his bare feet on the hardwood floor sending shivers up his legs. He pulled the comforter off the bed with him. Emmy was facing the window, her black hair down across her shoulders. Her bathrobe was worn thin enough to see her slim legs silhouetted underneath.

"What are you looking at?"

"Just watching the snow pile up."

He looped her in his arms, pulling the blanket around them both. He held her, watching the snow settling slowly on more snow, everything already shapeless under the yellow light of the streetlamps. Their breath fogged the window slowly, crawling up from their reflected mouths to their reflected eyes. Emmy ran her fingers through it. Three, thin, dark lines bled out of candy-red nails. Carl made a heart. She smiled, turning in his arms.

They kissed. Emmy pressed tight against the window. Carl watched out of the corner of his eye as the snow fell. Swirls of white wound tightly together in the air while a man walked by with a briefcase, clutching his hat. With his head tilted

low into the wind, he didn't see the two men coming towards him. The first one sucker punched him. Carl could almost see the man's breath part the snow. He fell hard, and the two figures scooped up his briefcase and hat. As they fled he lay face down in the snow. Carl jerked.

"What?"

"Someone just got mugged. I should call the police."

He left for the phone; Emmy stayed with the blanket, staring out the window, watching the snow slowly turn the man's coat from black to grey.

"The police are coming; I'm going to meet them downstairs."

She stayed silent at the window. He pulled a sweater over his loose t-shirt, tucked his flannel pajamas into his snow boots and put his navy-surplus overcoat on top of everything.

"Love you."

"Don't forget a hat, it's cold

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When he came back she was in bed, her eyes fixed on the window.

"He'll be fine. They took him to the hospital, but they said it was only a precaution."

"Do you always kiss with your eyes open?"

"What?"

"At the window, you had your eyes open."

"I guess, why?"

"I don't know I feel weird…vulnerable. I always figured you had your eyes closed too."

"I like to look at you."

"But all this time I had my eyes closed, and you were looking at me: it's strange. I feel naïve or something, thinking we were together in some dark place."

Emmy rolled over. Carl's jacket dripped snow. He pulled off his boots and set them by the door, then crept into bed.

"Goodnight, Emmy."

"You're cold."

What's It Worth?

"How long do you think we'll have to wait?'

"Who knows? Hours."

"Do you actually think we'll be able to get tickets?"

"I'll wait as long as I have to."

That was easy for Ben to say. He'd come prepared, layers of sweaters and sweatshirts piled on top of each other, topped by a poncho with Pitt's yellow logo scrawled across the front. He even had a sign he'd laminated against the rain. I'd come along on a whim. No preparation, no long-johns, no flapping plastic, no sign. I like basketball enough to watch regularly, I went to a bunch of games back when Ben and I were at Pitt, but do I like it enough to stand in cold, pissing rain? Probably not.

Ben was shouting again, "Tickets…Tickets" drawn out into two long syllables. He'd been trying to come up with a jingle, but his lyrical prowess failed to get him past–

We're just a couple alumni,

Thought that we would stop by.

Trying to get some tickets…

and then nothing.

"I'm going to grab some coffee, you want anything before you freeze out here?"

"Nah, I'm good. But if someone comes by with tickets, I'm not buying for you."

"I'll take my chances."

I sat in the window across the street and watched Ben's poncho billow. Twenty-three people walked past in one change of the light. Twenty-two didn't even look up. The last one pointed to a cup, asking for money, then shrugged and walked a littler farther down. I could almost hear their voices:

"Hey man, could you spare some change?"

"Love to bro, but I've got to save everything I've got in case someone comes along asking three hundred and forty-seven fifty for his tickets."

"Let's go, Pitt!"

Ben looked like he'd started caroling again, and I finally completed his jingle for him–

We're just a couple alumni,

Thought that we would stop by.

Now we'll pay out the ass like idiots,

'Cause who gives a shit if it's worth it.

Someone Else's House

When my parents finally moved, I figured I had already learned what most people learn moving in childhood. I had already moved twice, once for undergrad in Bozeman, Montana and then again to grad school in Boston. While I was still in Bozeman, I stopped thinking of our small house in Oregon as home. By the time I made it to Boston, it was just my parents' place.

My parents made the right decision. They didn't need our old house: their gay son and bohemian daughter were not the child-rearing sort, and the house was bigger than they would ever use. I barely visited; twelve hours of travel was too much for anything but major holidays. My sister lived in town and came over for dinner but went home to her own cocoon of silk prints and earth-tones. I had slowly taken everything I cared about from my childhood. The rest had mostly deteriorated away, like the swing-set my grandfather had built in the backyard or the holes I had rampantly dug, filled up years later by my parents' empty-nesting urge to plant trees. The house itself was both too old and too new, a child of the mass-produced nineties; nothing about its cookie-cutter homeyness made it home.

I couldn't come home to help them move. My sister brought two of her old school friends to help with the heavy lifting, and they cleared out in two days what

it took us twenty-five years to accumulate. I didn't see the house completely empty, but my sister said that all we left behind were the scars of two decades of childhood abuse, which made me think of our house as an abused spouse lucky to have us gone. By the time I came back for Christmas, my parents had already put the first marks of use into their new apartment: nail holes from mis-hung pictures, hardwood dings from dropped dishes, even a dent in the garage from pulling in too far. It was already their home, and I was as comfortable there as I had been in our old house.

A few days after Christmas, my sister and I drove out to see what she had taken to calling the "ol' homestead". Someone had moved in already, and I had no desire to knock on the door and introduce myself the way my mother had at her childhood home when I was eight or nine. Instead, we watched as an older man wandered out to check the mail, stretching at the curb before he went back in. His steady footsteps along the flagstone walkway comforted me; he was already as at home there as I had ever been. As we drove away, I mentioned that it felt like seeing an ex having dinner with someone else and realizing you really are happy they found someone. My sister shrugged, "They don't take good care of the lawn anyway," and laughed, but I could tell she didn't think it was funny.

It's Not Alright

She woke up to the sizzling sound of Carl making breakfast.

“Hope you're hungry.”

Emmy shrugged.

“Still mad?”

“I wasn’t mad.”

“I’m making bacon.”

“I could eat a little.”

“That’d be good, I’m getting fat.”

Emmy smiled. Carl was hardly fat enough not to be considered bony. She kissed him. She had always liked the color of his eyes, a deep pine forest green, but up close for the first time, she could see the little flecks of gold that ringed the pupil. "Little flecks of sunlight in a forest," she thought. After a moment, his eyes flicked up, then down, then finally lingered off to the side, watching the bacon.

“Why can't you look at me?”

“I’m just not used to it. It was like you were staring at me.”

“I was just looking, I never noticed the gold in them.”

“Yeah, my dad’s are like that too.”

“What are mine like?”

“They’re blue.”

Emmy waited. “Just blue, nothing else?”

“Well… They’re a deep indigo in the center, almost a burst of something, and then they fade out to pale blue, like summer skies with little flecks of blue jays.”

“That was awful."

“I was just trying to say something nice.”

“I know, I’m teasing.”

She kissed him; his eyes flicked.

“You did it again.”

“I know, I tried.”

“It’s alright, you’ve been staring at my eyelids for so long it's probably a bit of a shock to see eyes staring back at you.”

“It’s not alright. I should be able to look you in the eyes.”

"Don't worry about it."

"I should eat. I'm going to be late."

He ate in silence; she watched him across the table. His eyes never came up once. Instead, they stared down at his runny eggs. When they kissed goodbye, his eyes were shut tight.

Addicted to Your Memory

I was unpacking my few books into this new, slightly smaller apartment, the cardboard boxes littering the floor, when you finally made it back into my life. Not in person – just the old journals that you had abandoned like snake skins once they were full of your sloppy, slanted script. I put them back into the safety of their box and kept unpacking.

But they kept calling to me, your voice within the soft leather covers echoing to itself. I wanted one more peek, one glance back through the window that you pulled the curtain on long before you packed up everything and left. I wanted just one more whisper, but I knew I shouldn't. So I taped you up, just your words rattling around in that box and left to unpack the dishes.

I hadn't realized how much had been yours. I didn't know I lacked a soufflé pan or a colander. I didn't know you had brought so much, only to leave with it again. The writing desk that you complained I jumbled up, the reading lamps I left on after I inevitably wandered away from another book that wouldn't fit on my anemic shelves, the literary atmosphere I couldn't tolerate at all. All of which just brought back your laughing irony, taped up in that box in my new bedroom.

I tried to hold out, but what did I have left to unpack but utensils and the books you had left me that I couldn't read? I sliced through the tape with a kitchen knife, struggled with the knotted leather tie until giving up and cutting that too. I opened the first one and fumbled to a page that was just a poem I had read before and hated.

Misery

The highway above the Oregon coast was built before interstates were straight shots to anywhere, and at night it always seems like the turns come up too fast for a Subaru that rattles a little above fifty. Katie is watching the trees blur by out the passenger window, while I try to see whatever is just beyond the edge of the headlights, hoping that it won't be one of the deer whose eyes she keeps seeing just off the side of the road.

The CD player is turned down low, playing something by the Talking Heads while Katie hums along, when around a turn the darkness breaks into the taillights and flashers of a little Toyota. An old man stands by the open door, his arms waving above his head. We pull in behind his little island of light, and only then do we see the deer. Its hindquarters are dark, glistening with blood in the headlights; both legs are broken. Katie is already out of the car and talking by the time I turn of the engine.

The Toyota is totaled; the front right corner is caved in all the way back to the wheel well, the radiator hissing out onto the pavement. Katie tells me to call the highway patrol, and by the time I'm off the phone, she has a blanket around the old man's shoulders and a cup of coffee from our thermos, his hands still shaking too much to bring it to his lips.

The deer is trying again and again to wrestle itself up, but the broken legs buckle every time. Eventually it collapses completely and lays there, snorting blood out onto the pavement. Its eyes are bright in the headlights, though it is too weak to even raise its head. I watch it from the front bumper, the big, brown eye staring up unblinking, blood bubbling around its nose and lips. It dies before the state trooper pulls up with a tow truck. Katie helps the old man into the cab before we leave the trooper to lay out flares and drag the deer off to the shoulder.

Katie is quiet for a long time when we get back in the car. The Taking Heads CD played out while we waited, and now we drive in silence until Katie says that when she was seven she woke up to a gunshot in their front yard. It was her father killing a deer wounded by a bow hunter who had hit it high in the flank, missing all the vital organs. Instead, allowing it to spook and run for miles, until it collapsed in the bushes alongside their house.

Her father had gone out to warm up the pickup and seen its ragged breathing, the shaft of the arrow caught in the branches of a thick manzanita. Not thinking about waking his sleeping daughter, he brought out the hunting rifle, loaded just one shell and fired. Waking a little girl, who ran out barefoot in the cold and saw her daddy standing over a deer, the rifle still in his hands. She screamed and ran back in. Later he came in with the broad-tipped arrow, pulled from the flank and cleaned. He showed it to her and told her how the deer had been running

for so long; how its wound had bleed just enough that it was dying but dying slowly, each ragged breath one more moment of misery.

In the silence while Katie flipped through the cd book, I thought of how I was the only one watching the deer as it died. Katie too busy with blankets and coffee. The old man too frantic to sit and watch an eyeball glaze over.

The Bones Beneath the Skin

Today I forgot my umbrella again; so I was waiting out the rain under the striped awning of a building whose walls were covered in black and white fliers for concerts and parties. One was repeated over and over again, a portrait of a young woman, marching down the wall. The contrast had been darkened until everything was pitch black but her nose and cheekbones, which were bright white, as if the bone was showing through where her skin had been rubbed away.

Reminiscent of a coyote skull I had seen while hiking with my father, with its dark grey hair and patches of polished white bone where the skin had been weathered away from the cheeks. The ribs showed too just along their raised ridges and the tail bones beneath a few wisps of hair. I was ten, and it might have been the first dead animal I saw that close. My father crouched in the cold, hardened mud, examining the shriveled body like Hamlet with Yorick's skull.

He always loved dead things and couldn't help but stop, even though his son was scared of the way the lips were pulled back from the teeth, and how the eyes were not eyes at all, but sunken pits in the dark damp fur. I stood behind him while he studied the way the head had fallen, how the front paws were curled below the chest. He noted the tongue pinched between the sharpened teeth and that the fur was thin and grey, an old fox curled up to die in the shelter of the dense sagebrush.

As his eyes finished, his fingers reached out, and I shuddered as he touched the polished bone exposed below the eyes.

Alone in the rain, I reached out and touched the paper skull plastered against the wall by the rain, and I shuddered again. The cold, damp paper against the brick was as smooth and hard as any bone, and for a moment, I could feel my father's fingertips, pressing gently, then reaching to touch the high rise of his cheekbone beneath his skin.