

Peanut Shells While Walking

A novel | Ian
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Dedicated to my Mother

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If you think hard enough about it you can see your own death. I see a dark room looking patiently down a long corridor. The shades are carelessly drawn. Light slips in, indifferent to the overpowering darkness. There are rooms to the sides of the corridor. A different person lies in a bed, in the middle of every room. All of them, lying still as stoics, experiencing everything that I am. I lie in the middle of the darkest room at the end of the hallway. The room is bare save the pictures on the walls that tell the story of my life. There are pictures in every room. They tell all the stories of all my lives. The light coming from the corridor is grey. It holds my eyes. My teeth are close together, my brow furrowed. My hands hold the bedding tightly. I do not want to go. The room begins to blur. The colors move together, they come right at me. I close my eyes, but they won't quit taking in the room. The colors funnel down the corridor, spiraling in myriad patterns. They rush into the room. My eyes are wide open. I see purity in the darkness. The simplest of moments passes before me, right in front of me. The colors take me in and whirl me away.

Some people say life is short, but it's not. It's long. There are so many lives lived inside each one of us. As silly as it sounds, there are lives being lived in the recesses of our minds,

stumbling through shallow streams and swirling in currents - uncontrolled. Just swirling - always the swirling, all the time.

I know now that every time I present a different aspect of my character, a different aspect of my personality, every time I do that, I open up a new world within me. Shakespeare called it a new age. I open up all the minutes, the seconds, hours, millennia, the masks, crass, and sassafrass, everything, an entire world. A whole new existence that continues after the presentation...

Put it this way: Humans try to present the aspects of their nature most appropriate for each interaction they engage. One might speak shrewdly to accomplish what must be accomplished in a business meeting, while at another time he might nuzzle gently when reading a story to his child. And the child may present a tough demeanor in one moment, a timid demeanor in another, not because he wants to, because he has to, because he has to make it through the night.

And when myriad aspects of one's nature are created, when they have been presented, when they are sent out - what then? Where do they go? Do they exist only in the moments in which they are presented, or do they maintain, somewhere in the consciousness, always seeking another chance to be? Do they exist in isolation from all of the other personalities that have been presented, or are the personalities, the worlds, swirling together? Can they ever align, eclipse one another, and emit a singular presentation, a singular soul, a singular humanity?

Listen: Each personality, each world I present continues on within me regardless of whether or not I am conscious of it.

Each one meanders about on a daily basis. Sometimes, many times, really, in fact, every moment, each world merges with all of the other worlds that I have created. Each decision, each emotion, each moment passes through every world within me. And the worlds take in the decisions, the emotions – in every passing moment. They spin it all around and it all passes through them. Then they spin away. And other worlds deal with the consequences without even knowing how.

And the different aspects of our character, the different people we have presented grow as we grow. Sometimes they become bigger than their role. They forget that they were created for a reason. Sometimes the characters within, the characters we have created try to take over our entire consciousness. Sometimes they do. They take over and they control the consciousness with ease. And when that created character and the world he lives in moves behind my eyes, for just a moment, I am in that world with him, no, I am him. I am everything within him.

And oh so many worlds present themselves to our consciousness. Oh the people we could be, oh the people we fear we are, oh the in-between. And we keep on creating. We keep on presenting. We keep on keeping.

Although it is rare, each time we let go of a world it falls and shatters like worlds do sometimes. And its energy pulses outward in rhythmic waves. It shoots into your skin. It becomes you. And you are no longer mediated by the world, by the character – you, are no longer mediated by the presentation. You - are.

And what we are, dear friends and readers, is human.

Emerson Marin, human being, has tip-toed through the solar system within him. A solar system, or that which makes up all that a person can be conscious of, consists of myriad worlds, one beacon of light, moons aplenty and a grand battalion of worthy onlookers. And we have all of that inside of us in one way or another. If our souls are anything, they are mysterious snippets of such a solar system. And souls of mischief one and all and all for one and one for all.

Now: All of the worlds within Emerson Marin's solar system do not move symbiotically. The word symbiosis could very well stem from the root 'Sym', or together, and 'bios', life. As such, the worlds of Emerson Marin may simply just not move together, they just might not create one singular life. What they may create is a multifaceted nature, myriad senses of self, myriad humanity. Such is the suggestion put forth today. On other days one might suggest that nothing moves symbiotically or that all things move symbiotically, but those are other rhymes for other times.

Instead, the time has come to oblige the uncertainties lurking in the corner. They will take shape as time turns round. And when time comes round to hollow you out, at that time, in that moment, you will most certainly know the shape things have

taken. You will have no choice but to see precisely what you have become, what you will leave behind.

And Einstein said two people will only agree at which speed time ticks if they are standing next to each other. Distance only works to change the truth of time. Thus, time is forever relative and we may never know the precise o'clock. We may never really know when time will come round to hollow us out. And eventually we learn to be afraid.

Make believe that you won't cry dear friends. Make believe that when the hollowing darkness moves within you that you will be able to control it. Make believe that.

Mothers cannot even prevent what is to occur shortly. They would if they could, oh, dear friends, they always would if they could.

To be brief: There is no 'why'. We are fossils. We are all just trapped in amber. Trapped in a maze of delusions we take to be our own thoughts, needs, and desires. And in this maze we will, most assuredly, die. Pleasant, isn't it? No, of course it isn't. It's horrible and terrifying. It's what puts monsters in children's closets and beasts in our souls.

Ironically, it's the inevitable fear we all share that has the power to bring us together. So what do we do with all that power, all that energy created from being afraid? Where in the world, in the worlds, do we send it? Seemingly, we keep it to ourselves, so we have it, for when the beasts come. And they will come, but we won't recognize them. And what good will all that stored up power do us then, when we don't know how to use it and we scream silently into low hanging moons? What good will it do when we realize we will die inside the maze regardless of the path we choose to walk, that it will not matter if we find anything or if we just roam aimlessly, without plan or purpose?

Why do we run into walls we can't break through? We can't eradicate the walls of the maze. They are made of a substance impervious to our desires. And so we must stop. We must stop scurrying. We must forget about cheese and paths and things that beckon in the night. We must stop and we must look at the maze and appreciate its beauty. And that is all there is to do. To stop and appreciate and let that be that.

Emerson Marin probably thinks that I am an idiot because I worry about these things. I don't really care what he thinks because I created him and can destroy him. Emerson Marin is dead. Emerson Marin thought he was dead and now is eating breakfast in a stale Seattle saloon with strippers, singing along to an American show tune, laconically gazing the day away. I am in an apartment building on Capitol Hill in the Emerald City and Emerson has no idea where I am. He doesn't even know

that his shirt just changed from black to red, but I do because I changed it. He will mention very little of this soliloquy to the strippers, no - he will not mention anything at all.

What Emerson will probably do is return to his room, which overlooks a small Edenish garden. He will put on a suit. It will probably be brown or maybe taupe because it sounds fancier, then he will step outside of his room and pretend that he did not spend the entire evening at a Moulin Rouge for poor people, which he thinks Frenchies refer to as a whorehouse. And so it goes.

He might cross a river and think about where the water comes from. Emerson and I are very similar that way. We always wonder where the water comes from because it is always moving and never standing still and seemingly creating a great ruckus to the dry land that is earth that we walk on. This will cause him to sit anxiously on dry earth and watch water move. There he will smoke a cigarette.

Emerson smokes shitloads of cigarettes because we are all just fossils, trapped in amber and there is no why anyways, etc. Plus, they taste goofy and make him look goofy and make him think he is someone else for just a second.

The cigarette butt slides either between his laces or in the river depending on who he is at the time, arborist or nihilist, and then his feet take him to wherever my fingers say and he sits there contently because he knows not how to sit any other way.

Emerson Marin is a character that I have created, that I have caused to live with the delusion that he is a singular soul. A singular soul who knows not of whatnot and there is no why and he can't even feel the amber anymore, etc.

Sometimes lovely young women don't like to think they are going to die, so they attempt to hide their faces from rays of sun that surely, with time, will shrivel them into prunes. Sometimes Emerson Marin likes to call such people fucking imbeciles so he can differentiate himself from said imbeciles and walk in the sun without worrying about anything.

And people do this all the time. They categorize, differentiate and separate their notion of 'self' from their notion of 'other'. Then they call 'the other' names. They call 'the other' names so as to solidify their notion of 'self'. As if classifying a thing allows one to understand it. And people use words, simple words, to do all of that complicated stuff. And fear fuels each word that facilitates such thorny endeavors.

Oh, silly, silly words – how they divide those who speak them, how they play with us all.

Now: It must be known that Emerson Marin would never come close to uttering the words fucking imbecile, especially if directed toward another person. Those words come to him

and he pushes down all that needs filtering and shares clumsy smiles with people in suits. He dresses casually, sometimes only in the robes god gave him, but he understands the profundity of presentation. He learned it with a smile and it has not left him, not yet.

It will soon. He shall not keep such rare artifacts for the entirety of this little ponderance. That would be missing the point. The point is that Emerson will fade away. He will sift into the wind, he will digress peacefully. For that I am grateful. But let me return to pretending that we exist individually of other things and people and ideas. Let me return to Emerson Marin and his present state of affairs...

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Emerson Marin, human being, pastor and friend of the dying, walked briskly from the back of the brick church house he called his home. It was hot. His hair wept slightly above the brow and he wiped it back with a sweeping arch of his arm. He moved slowly.

Emerson's sermon spilt from his mouth in quietly uttered gusts of air. He pinballed: Swaying slightly from wall to wall. And up the stairs he drifted, all the way to the pulpit.

The small choir of elderly white women smiled politely at Emerson and he nodded in their direction with a timidly upturned smile. The congregation discontinued conversation and stared blankly at the small, southern preacher. And to those blank stares belonging to deaf and dying human beings Emerson Marin said:

"You gotta learn how to fight!"

The country slang came out through his slender, whiskey tinged breath. He meant it when he said it friends.

A few more members of the fearful congregation of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Travelers Rest, South Carolina gave worrisome smiles to one another as they filed through the door. Then they were silent, listening, always listening. And he began again to speak:

"I am Emerson Marin. I've never been called anything else. Through me light shines into the eyes of those that can hold it. I have been passed through light. Friends I have been passed up by devils. And to them I gave mercy."

(Praise mercy) said the congregation, slinking into the sticky backs of their chairs.

"I have beheld the truths of guilty truth sayers. I have held them in my hand and bowed my head. I give praise to those thoughts. And such thoughts and the people who think them must be thought of as friends."

(Praise friends)

"Make me not that motionless voice in your ear. You can do more than just let me sit there. Push me out and find that which you seek. It is within all of you, friends, it is within you now, god and love and all that you need is in you right now."

(Praise now)

"I will come and go you see. I don't make it out. None of us do. No one knows why. Forget all that you will hear. It means nothing more than the second it took to get into your mind."

(Praise minds)

"Think about your time. Go ahead and do what you wish without slowing, if what you wish to do is what you're doing. Find the time to rhyme."

(Praise rhyme)

"Folks my name is Emerson Marin. And together with the lord and savior inhabiting the worlds among us we can bring sound back to static. Help me say, sons and daughters help me say that which needs to be said. I am here to say the words that need saying."

"I, Emerson Marin, have worlds of truth within me. They move behind my eyes and the lord and savior above us moves with them. In fact he moves those worlds with his hands. And when they all line up, when they move into alignment, it's like a solar eclipse inside of my consciousness. And at that moment all of the worlds disappear and darkness covers all things... a vast, penetrating darkness".

(Praise darkness)

"...And when he moves them, when the lord and savior moves the worlds within me and places them behind my eyes, he sets my soul in motion."

(Praise motion)

"When he moves them, when he brings the light of other worlds into my eyes, when he turns the world in front of me dark and all I see is energy beaming from my pores, it is then that I have been reborn. And sometimes he shows me heaven. And sometimes the very lord and savior that moves your souls, sons and daughters,

he shows me hell. Those are the cold whispers! The gusts of blood that make you believe: You gotta learn how to fight!"

(Praise the fight)

The decaying congregation gave worrisome smiles to one another as they filed out the door. What little they heard of Emerson's words they didn't understand. But they came to the church to find something and they had found it. It lacked the security they sought, but unsure, they said nothing to one another about it and moved on.

"Onward and upward," said the pastor.

Emerson Marin smiled warmly at the members as they passed by. He felt like a child after a birthday party, the laughter still inside of him; the high of it all slowly fading away.

Months before that particular sermon Emerson began an interpersonal expedition. The explorative endeavor was not intentional, but what is? It was a cold day, a bitter, bitter cold day. And on that day Emerson Marin embarked upon a quest that would change his life forever. Now, of course, Emerson had no idea such a thing was occurring. The calendar on the wall said he had an appointment with a psychiatrist. The choir ladies felt this necessary when they saw how much Emerson sweated during his sermons.

“Sweat is the devil inside of us just trying to get out, little by little, they told him.”

“Go see what in the devil you’ve got in you,” they said.

And so he went, and so it began.

Words came easily to the children playing in the cool mists of the park. They knew of no balance between serenity and regret. They knew only of the will to believe.

Emerson watched them believe next to the bus stop, huddled in circles of friendship, wrapped in the love of mothers.

He walked next to the coy pond and saw a frozen goldfish swimming peacefully under thin layers of ice.

“It’ll never make it,” he said out loud, with a raised brow’s humility.

The psychiatrist would not appreciate tardiness and Emerson knew he needed to spend less time pondering the sight of dying fish. He started to run.

Emerson Marin looks stupid when he runs. He flails slightly and has a nonchalant way about his torso. His hands never leave his side. Such feeble idiosyncrasies never bothered his parents, but people his own age often wondered about his

legitimacy as a human being. In no other real way did he possess qualities of a less evolved person but this. Everything else was, unfortunately, human as all fucking hell. Regrettably for Emerson, the running was enough to embarrass the good lot of us.

And so did the onlookers of the sight comment to their friends and loved ones. They sipped morning coffee and cradled the words slightly before letting them out. Soft smiles came to their faces, morning smiles, smiles that echo the afterglow of a dream.

That kind of light moved through Emerson. Not just when he ran, but when he jogged, when he skipped and when he walked casually, then too. There was a flow to him, a carelessness that went completely unnoticed by his eyes. In his perception he was wound tighter than a baseball's core.

He brought that kind of smile to the receptionist as he muttered under worn breath, "Emerson Marin to see the queen."

"Hi Emerson," Shirley Ringwald mouthed back.

She put down the phone and turned her full figure to face him.

"How are you this morning? Looks like you're jogging now."

He thought she sounded overweight and directed his eyes to the pen on the counter. He picked it up and drew a horse shoe in the air next to the attention bell.

Emerson smiled a horse's smile.

"Here to see Violet please, here to see Violet."

He let the words go through pursed lips, eyes dashing around the ceiling.

His hands shifted nervously in his pockets. Fat made him feel as if there were something in the room to comment on, but because of the social implications surrounding comments about other people's fat he refrained. This refrain made him nervous.

He sat sternly on the chair that faced the fish tank. Little by little the fish food fell down to the bottom. He watched the little ones race through the algae covered houses to eat it. They weaved in and out of the water. Emerson's eyes blurred as he tried to focus on too many at one time. The food fell slower, the fish swam closer together. They moved like liquid. He pushed his eyes farther into his head. He felt the product of their motion. It moved him.

It was at that moment that he saw the storm. And he felt the release of it all in the slight drop of his chest as Shirley called out condescendingly, "Emerson the *queen of Violets* is ready for you."

The queen walked confidently to the doorway Emerson was to step through.

"Good to see you," said Violet Rosenfeld, M.D..

“Good to be seen,” said Emerson Marin, human being.

“Where have you been? You were supposed to be here an hour ago, are you trying to hide from me Emerson?”

Her smile seemed motherly, as if she had to labor to keep it on her face.

He noticed the smile’s insincerity. It stayed on the Dr.’s face for too long. When smiles come they come like roses. They have their moment and when their moment is done so are they. If a person keeps a smile longer than required the person seems needy. Emerson wondered what she needed.

“What have you been up to since you called for an appointment?” asked Dr. Rosenfeld as she made her way behind a slim, black desk.

Her glasses had been hanging around her neck. They now made their way to her eyes. She brushed back her hair with the other hand. Dr. Violet Rosenfeld was ready to begin

“The lawn mower doesn’t work,” muttered Emerson.

Emerson’s eyes surveyed the room. He didn’t have time to fully answer the question Dr. Rosenfeld had slyly slipped into her last one. That question being: Just how crazy are you shithead? The answer to that question still swam around in Emerson’s mind. He had come close to answering it a few times, but never took the leap completely.

Dr. Rosenfeld relished the opportunity to treat a pastor, a man of God and faith. She knew Emerson lacked a scientific understanding of the world, that all in all he was as simple as people get. For that she punished him with erudite diction and tautological reflections.

“The lawn mower huh,” replied Dr. Rosenfeld with a go-fuck-yourself grin. “I know how that goes,” she said. “I have similar concerns about ours at home, but it just keeps on pushing. It is just relentlessly perseverant.”

“The grass just keeps coming back,” said the pastor.

She laughed again as if Emerson expected her too. He expected many things from this woman. Laughter had not yet made that list. On that list were the following: A reassurance that he still had control of his thoughts, mildly flirtatious menopausal advances, and a comfortable chair to sit in.

A comfortable chair, ladies and gentlemen, is never to be overlooked. How many times do you actually sit in one?

Emerson knew exactly how often he sat in one. He knew that the chairs he kept in the church created an arch in his back and that that his couch lacked the firmness to fully coddle his slumping body.

His body slumped back as he thought of smooth Alabama sunsets. He had never been to Alabama in person. No, Emerson Marin had only thought of Alabama. In those

thoughts it looked miraculous and easy and like a drowning red balloon.

He asked the psychiatrist, "Have you ever been to Alabama?"

"No," she replied. "Most of my family migrated from England and then settled in the north. They still live there, some in Boston, others in New York."

"New York is full of 'em," Emerson said with the same smile that he received minutes before.

He gave it an extra few seconds on his face. He wanted it to be seen.

"Full of what?" asked Dr. Rosenfeld.

"Full of people who can't see rainbows," answered Emerson Marin. "Full of people who see rain and light and nothing in between. People who take their own lives."

"What makes you say that?" said Dr. Rosenfeld.

"Because when you see a rainbow it never leaves you. Somehow the colors stay on your face. They don't live there, but they like it so much that every once in a while they come back and just sit there. The only person I knew from New York had the shrillest of complexions and I just don't think she took the time to feel the colors on her face. Those people, they just all try to kill themselves with unhappiness and they don't

worry about who they leave behind. Have you ever felt colors on your face Dr. Rosenfeld?"

"Emerson we all have a different shade of the same complexion," she replied coyly, slipping in her sordid smiles.

He pondered that thought. Never before had Emerson Marin seen two people that he thought had the same colors on their face. Skin tone, race and ethnicity did not come to his mind. He thought colors were represented by the way the face moves with the light that surrounds it. Colors can be picked up by the face if the face moves the right way. Much like the way they show up on canvas if shone in the right light. He wondered what kind of light he could lift from the room.

Emerson stood up and tilted his head until it almost touched his shoulder. He winced and wondered if the pain would lead to some sort of epiphany. Like most things that don't kill us the pain didn't do a damn thing but give him a crick in his neck. He cracked it and sat back down; his face gray as the seedless clouds of the Seattle skyline that overlook his former college; so many years, so many slants of lights away.

Dr. Rosenfeld noted his actions. Her paper sat loosely in front of her on top of a leather bound notepad. Her legs crossed in an acute angle that seemed perpendicular to the arch of her back. Her hair wound itself tightly into a bun and only every so often did a single hair escape its coil.

Dr. Rosenfeld lifted her glasses to the lower bridge of her nose and leaned in towards Emerson. She knew the power play that this action created. She knew it could have very well been a seductress's cheap attempt to distract a lonely man. Her degree on the wall from NYU assured it. Degrees do things like that all the time. They tell us exactly *what* we need to know.

Emerson thought Dr. Rosenfeld never told him a god damn thing worth knowing. In the phone call, the only communiqué they shared before the day's appointment, she claimed he was heading for a fall, she claimed he would head for the most bitter kind of fall, a Holden Caulfield kind of fall. She said he needed to come in as soon as possible. It's more like a casual stroll down a staircase he thought, as he eased his way deeper into the couch.

"Where do you think freedom comes from Dr. Rosenfeld?"

"More often than not it comes from the individual," she replied matter-of-factly.

"How many times have you seen freedom in the faces of your patients Dr.? I have yet to see it and I search my face much more than you."

Emerson's tongue bit the wind as he breathed in the direction of Dr. Rosenfeld. The words seemed not to affect her state of focus. And more so than before, Emerson's arousal brought itself into the slender pit of his stomach. His pain came rushing back, a curdling babble of lost sounds.

After ten minutes of stagnant, silent attempts to think of something better to say, Emerson asked Dr. Rosenfeld if he could have a cigarette. It went exactly like this:

“Dr. Rosenfeld, I want to smoke.”

“No thank you Emerson,” she said.

“I want one,” he said.

“No thank you,” replied Dr. Rosenfeld with a warm smile.

Emerson felt like a child again. He sometimes felt like a child at the times he was supposed to feel like a child. That is what children are best at. In a way it comforted him that Dr. Rosenfeld denied his request for freedom. It made him feel like home, like softening ice cream. He decided cigarettes did not go with ice cream and satisfied his desires by sneezing.

“Gesundheit,” said Dr. Rosenfeld.

“Thank you,” said Emerson Marin.

“Have you ever been hypnotized?” asked Dr. Rosenfeld.

“Or should I say, have you ever been in a state of hypnosis?”

“No,” said Emerson.

All he could think about was the time Lauren Malloy’s mother accidentally left her bedroom door slightly ajar at the high school party she liberally threw for her daughter. He had seen lust in older eyes that night. The eyes bore an expression he knew his mother could make, an expression she made in rooms far away from her family. Such an expression can leave scars on people. It left scars on Emerson Marin. That was all he knew of hypnosis.

“What does it feel like?” he asked.

“How do I know if I am under hypnosis? Do I feel like I’m asleep, or like I’m dead?”

“There won’t be any sort of pain caused to you Emerson. Don’t worry about what will happen. Anxiety overtakes you when you worry about that which has not occurred yet. Remember what we talked about on the phone?”

On the phone Emerson described the scene that erupted on his Friday night the previous week. His determination to find a woman came through his body full force the night before and he politely asked Paulina McBride, a member of his congregation, to go to dinner. I should say, he wrote on the back of a hymn book the following words: Have you ever been to Mackenzie’s Roost on Dravus Street, underneath the willow trees that cover up the end of the lake? She had thought him to be Woody-Allen-like and agreed to meet him. She agreed to a

casual dinner with her pastor. He agreed to a date with a much older woman. He smiled right up to the time that she agreed. He liked that he had made the date.

That is what single people are supposed to do dear friends and readers, make dates and go on them.

Unfortunately, for Emerson, he spent the two hours before the date sitting around the church thinking of ways to get out of it. He finally wrote a note on the first page of an old bible, ripped it out, stapled it to her front door and ran away, his arms flailing in the wind. The note read: Maybe you don't like Mackenzie's, you probably would like to sit on the deck, but it's November and the willows are weighted down. The deck is probably closed.

He figured she might find the message before she left. And if she didn't it wasn't meant to be anyways. He said a small prayer and looked deeply into the diminutive canvas that sat above his bed. It depicted a man from the painting *The Potato Eaters*, except in Emerson's painting the man's sorrowful stare landed on a small, black cross, and his skin was a dark brown, smudged with coal and sweat.

Emerson told Dr. Rosenfeld about the painting for fifteen minutes and barely mentioned the part about the date that never happened. Dr. Rosenfeld thought of prescribing benzodiazepines for his anxiety. She prescribed the pills with a shaggrin before he came to the appointment. She did it with a quick flick of the wrist.

Now: Emerson Marin was about to be hypnotized, and all he could think of was that small, black cross. He wanted to know what the man did in the painting. That is, did he ever find God? Emerson leaned back in his chair. Slowly he searched for the answer to his question. He looked deeply into the back of his eyelids. And as Dr. Rosenfeld's voice grew faint against the drumming of his heart, he breathed deeply into a world that echoed his own misfortunes, a world where the black cross beckoned with a mother's touch.

Dr. Rosenfeld touched his hand and whispered into his ear, breathing in the silence of his misplaced meditations.

"Have you been thinking about all the different faces of your anger?"

His voice slurred in his head before he moved his lips to make the words. The words themselves, the thoughts of the letters, were wavering.

"I can't stop thinking about the people that I tend to," he said.

"Tend to?" questioned Dr. Rosenfeld.

"When I see people I see what inside of them seems to be fueling their actions. Like when you meet someone and after three seconds of talking to em you know that they grew up without a father. Then I feel like I have to play the part of the person that understands. Sometimes I want to play the

fatherly role. This is a ridiculous thought to have when talking to people that I don't really even know," said Emerson.

Dr. Rosenfeld took her glasses off. She sat up and brushed her hair back. Emerson's eyes quivered and closed and he felt the cool breeze of the dimly lit room.

"These thoughts," she said. "Do they allow you any time to focus on yourself? Like any time to really analyze what you want to do in those situations and why you want to do it, instead of thinking about what other people might want?"

The letters swirled into the light on the outsides of his eyes. The light pushed the blackness outwards in rhythmic waves. They moved with the sounds, the thoughts, and the breeze sifting through his nostrils as they slowly drew in the air.

"There is always a mediator. There is always something in the way of my experience. When I think, I am never alone. In the middle of a crowded room I am a circus of emotions and needs. I smile the grin that I see on faces inside my mind. My lips move to the sound of other voices. And when I dream it's like the world I have worked to know is somebody else's altogether," said Emerson Marin.

9

Elliot Kingston happened to have sex with his beautiful Latina maid when he was nine years old. It was not necessarily by choice. That is, the choice was not necessarily hers. In fact, Elliot not only guided the moments that they spent together in the basement bathroom of his parent's house, he owned them. Elliot said things to her that people don't say to other people when they think of them as people. And when people are afraid of something, they use the most ridiculous of words.

Elliot Kingston was by no means societal hiddlygoo. His Mother, Barbara Kingston owned more than her fair share of stock in the Coca-Cola Company and thought herself to be god's gift to high society. She was once overheard at a garden party saying, "My servants are exquisite, not a person has scoffed at my ability to play bridge with class, and my husband's polo club just won the presidents cup for the third straight year, I'm god's gift to high society." The words came out through squawking guffaws and a swallow of a green olive.

Now, Barbara Kingston's propriety and carelessness is poignant on more than one plane, which I will now, dear friends and readers, attempt to display.

Barbara Kingston employed a seamstress that other people thought was a maid because she stayed in a room at the Kingston Estate, 4239 Crescent Avenue, Greenville, South Carolina. The seamstress, formerly known to her parents in Nicaragua as Carlita Gonzalez, fled tyranny and political oppression in her small country to come to America. She left behind a small chest of drawers, a family of four, and a 12 gauge shotgun that once banged a bullet through the head of her late husband.

Carlita's dead husband, Eli Ramirez, held a high ranking political position in the Nicaraguan parliament before he met his demise. The story goes that he sealed the deal with an oil tycoon from Texas and thought the deal established him as the official ambassador to the United States of America. Being that this gave him political power beyond his wildest dreams, riches galore, and a big smile, he decided to visit a street corner of ill repue and purchase himself a vagina.

Vaginas in Nicaragua are quite cheap and though Eli believed he owned one at home for free to use whenever he wanted, he went along with the idea anyway. He purchased Melona Rodriguez and fizzled her shit for about five minutes before squillywagging in her honkey tonk. He thought nothing of it and returned to plant his lips all over his wife and children, informing them of their good fortune. Little did he know that Carlita Gonzalez, his wife, wore perfume, had been wearing perfume for many years and knew its smell well. She knew the smell so well that when her stinky husband came home from

his romping around, she did not even blink an eye. She knew she was tired of smelling other people's smells. She was tired of his power, of his political position; she was tired of providing him with the comfort of giving a shit about it. So, when the children were asleep, she calmly walked into his room and pulled the trigger right next to his sleeping, smiling little head. Hours later she was on a boat, leaving her children to suffer the pangs of homelessness and the disease of Motherlessness.

Now: It might seem strange that a woman of such fortitude would leave a family, but I assure you friends that this happens all the time. Yes, everywhere, all the time.

And when Laura Hedges turned like a drunken sorority sister and asked Barbara Kingston how her sex life was and if she had orgasms, she replied by cackling, "Yes, everywhere, all the time." And so it was.

Minutes after stating something that they both knew was a bold faced lie, Mrs. Kingston turned her attentions to a young girl sewing a skirt on the country club patio. Her skin was beautiful and soft looking, curvy and wet, but as clean as god would want it to be. Mrs. Kingston walked over to the beautiful girl and lied. She lied about needing a seamstress of her own to live with her. She lied about needing someone who could be told exactly what to make so as to stun others at all times with her wardrobe and social grace.

Carlita Gonzalez accepted the offer and moved in immediately. She occupied a room in the East wing of the mansion, the same wing where Elliot Kingston sat, lonely and fat, in his room most of the time.

When Elliot found out that a beautiful foreign woman would be living next door to his little room, and that he was not to disturb her, touch her, or talk to her at all, he got a chubby in his pants; something most nine year olds simply cannot experience.

For months he looked at her from afar thinking thoughts he downloaded from the internet. He had never seen a real woman doing real things such as sewing a dress. He never knew that sometimes they swore when they poked themselves with pins and that they sucked their fingers afterward. He aroused himself time and again with the thought of her doing chores around the house. He lavished the idea that she was something more than an untouchable in a satin gown.

Ironically his Mother had the exact same thoughts. Her husband's lengthy travels left her with thousands of careless nights. On those nights she did careless things. She let her hands roam her silk skirts hoping the seamstress would find her naked in the bathroom and lick her little piece of flesh that flicker flickered in the night. That little piece of flesh would go nuts making Barbara Kingston go nuts and in her dreams the seamstress loved it.

In reality, Carlita did not talk to either Barbara or Elliot. She cried over the fact that she left her children in perpetual darkness, she mourned her husband.

She believed, as many pretended to, that the Kingston family was beautiful. To her, they echoed radiance. Even the younger children seemed to exude it. Even the younger children looked beautiful, so well put together. As if the good lord and savior shaped them himself.

After months of revolving through a diamond coated world with this belief, Carlita lapsed into a state of personal nothingness. No sound, no voice, no self. Nothing of a Mother. Nothing of a woman. So, when Elliot knocked on her door one night with tequila and a smile, she did not turn down his offer. She drank the bottle and let its contents fill up the nothingness within. And many people do. Yes, they certainly do, everywhere, all the time.

After moments of stale sleep and dreams of glitter and gold, she felt Elliot's consistent advances climax quickly within her and then woke without warning. After a hazy observation of her state of being she felt a melancholy that humans are simply not meant to feel. The burdens of her past sat within her. They heaved their heavy load on her thin, sleek shoulders. But the past did not come in total, not all at once anyway. As she crept away from the ecstatic fat ass that lay before her with his pants around his ankles, she reflected only on the moments leading

up to the murder of her husband. They were the only moments present. And those moments became her entire past.

Baffled, and now aware of what happened to her, she hurried to the bathroom and shut the door. Vomit came out of her mouth as quickly as tears started to pour down her cheeks.

An entire lifetime had summed itself up in a three minute interval and placed itself on her back. She felt the pull of the trigger. She felt the sting of metal pulsing at the speed of light through her skull. And with that pain a return to innocence, a return to the creator. And that, quite simply, is all a human can endure.

The semen still sat within her. It would never leave. It would be destroyed as it was created, in a spasmodic moment of misplaced beauty. Such moments need to be destroyed.

Carlita could not allow the misplaced creation to reside in her any longer. Action had to be taken.

The act of murder creates an in-balance in the world. It creates a need for something to be born. Carlita Gonzalez would be born again. She would come to this earth again as an angel, an interpretation of beauty only found in dreams. She longed to be nothing more than a dream.

And with rancorous passion she took a razorblade from the top drawer and cut her neck from end to end, sending a vacant expression to the mirror. Her eyes wandered through the glass

in tearless disbelief. And slowly, her body slouched to the floor. Then she was gone. Such was the life of Carlita Gonzalez. Such are the moments that define humans.

The bathroom door stayed closed for a solid twenty four hours before another of the Kingston's attendants noticed the foul stench of misplaced flesh. When Mrs. Kingston heard the news she asked that the bathroom be sterilized and that all of the items touching the blood of Carlita Gonzalez go straight to the dumpster.

Carlita's soul never got the chance to see the bloody imprint of a person lying flatly against the floor. It escaped her body as the semen entered it.

A body can only have so much unwanted life within.

Her soul wanted to leave for months. It wanted to leave and embrace the children she left behind to die. She'd locked the pathways to that soul so many times; it took a while to fully leave her body.

Elliot's fat ass sat in its room, staring blankly at the television screen. The eyes of the body were more beady than usual; they bore a hole in the mesmerizing images on the screen. He tried, time after time, to lose himself in the energy of the television. He knew the energy came from somewhere and in that

somewhere more important pieces of this sordid puzzle bumbled about. Elliot laconically attached his perceptions to the images he saw, he gave himself up fully to their devices.

People do this sort of thing from time to time when they are not able to accept the situations that surround their decision making. Elliot was by no means comfortable with his present processes of thought.

Barbara would check on him for months following the incident with little regard for his well-being. She made sure he went to school and made sure that he was attending all the events that required his attendance. And though his body sent itself to places no little boy should see, though the pictures of those places tried to embed themselves deeply within his being, they were never fully imprinted on his little brain. No, instead was the image of a beautiful woman twice his age, her body, limp and lifeless, wrapped around his cock.

He saw Carlita's closed eyes, her wearied face. He remembered the look she gave him before taking the bottle of tequila - it haunted him. Seeing a woman on the brink of losing her soul would haunt most people, I suppose. But Elliot's haunting was more subtle, an effect of his loveless, lifeless conditioning. Slowly, and with continual resurgence, he felt the hedonistic joy of believing all women gave their souls away, right through their vaginas.

The crowd stood still. Heads pointed toward the ground. Together, in fellowship, the people searched for something that would make them feel forgiven. Samantha searched as well, but not as she'd been instructed. Her Mother told her to stand, to pray, and to look as though she cared about god.

Sam didn't try to disobey. Most nine year olds don't. Most of them just seem to flicker flocker with the wind and their brains drift away casually, with the rhythms of the earth. In this instance Sam's brain brought her eyes to face the skylights, to a certain slant of light cutting through the glass. As such, her eyes had not been facing the ground. They needed to be. Propriety believed that eyes were not to wander. Many words are strict like this. Many words condemn those who utter them to a fearful, fearful existence. Her Mother's was one such existence.

Her Mother smiled to Linda Bartucci, Samantha's school nurse, and the woman next to her on the pew.

"Kids," she said.

"Kids," whispered Mrs. Bartucci.

Samantha turned a reddish hue and embraced her Mother's emotions with a glance. She met a mortal, afraid of forgiveness. She saw a commercial for a wife, skimming off the top of serenity with opened toed sandals and a matching hat. Lately the hats seemed to have more and more flowers. How

pretty they were; bound for the sole purpose of beautiful expression.

Sam felt the expression. It festered in her tender, nine year old frame. She knew it from her Uncle's funeral. Yes, she knew about dead flowers.

"You throw them in one by one to honor the dead, her Mother had whispered to her at the wake. You bow your head and you pray and you throw them in."

Samantha remembered what happened when one bows her head. She talked to god that day at the wake. She asked for forgiveness. She asked to be forgiven for not feeling anything at all. Without intention or folly she requested the service of the lord and savior. I'm not joking you dear friends and readers, this little girl of nine attempted to contact such a deity. Well, he did not talk to her that day. Not even a word. And she had done her part. With honor and acceptance she had danced to her Mother's tidy tune.

She stood in church four years later, a measure late in a symphony of emotional expression. But she remembered the dead flowers, how they were sacrificed and how she was supposed to pray to someone who did not have the patience to talk to children.

Now: flowers were sacrificed again, orbiting around her Mother's head, calling out from beyond the grave. Hoping, like a child, to be taken off the stage and laid down in the garden of

meaning and certainty; hoping to be put to rest, to leave a world of perpetual presentation.

And with that thought, Samantha ripped her Mother's hat from her head and attempted to deliver the flowers back to Eden. She tore and pulled, aggressively trying to return them to a state of pure representation. Beauty...just beauty. She felt it inside her as she tore. Beauty...just beauty.

Suddenly her ear bore the weight of necessity. Her Mother had it, firmly tugging the child along after it. And out she went, now the center of the stage, her Mother hastily smiling and motioning elegance at the crowd. They watched her dance to her Mother's tidy tune, through the pews, down the aisle, and away from the stage. And only the holy could forgive the scrutiny that lay behind those nine year old eyes; eyes that masked her contemplations; that stayed in the emotions of a young girl for years to come...for years and years to come.

After church Sam was sentenced to the house so her mother could prepare for the birthday party. It was Sam's ninth birthday. Flowers needed to be picked up from the market downtown. The flowers were expensive. When the florist asked, "What's the occasion?" Sam's mom replied, "My little girl turns nine today, she is such an angel."

"That is adorable, said the florist. She will be the classiest nine-year-old in New York City."

"I know," said Sam's mom as she squinted her face and made a cat like movement with her head.

She left and felt like a good mom. And maybe she was. What brings more beauty to a room than flowers?

Sam waited at home watching cartoons. She knew that her mom left to get some sort of birthday object. Staring vacantly at the television she watched Tom chase Jerry from the kitchen to the living room. The cat and the mouse couldn't talk. She liked that the show didn't try to make them talk. It made it more like her house. And like the silent cat and mouse, she felt like she was always by herself. The woman who talked to Tom always needed to leave. That made sense to her. And Sam would sit there, alone, giving attention to the cat that needed it. For soon he was to go bat shit insane, always chasing a much smarter mouse.

Her mom opened up the door. The woman had returned and the mouse scurried back to its well kept hole.

"Sam, look at how beautiful these are."

She showed the flowers to her.

"The woman at the market said you will be the classiest nine year-old in New York. Now how does that sound little princess?"

“Sounds good,” said Sam.

“Good?” questioned her Mother with wide eyes. “Oh, hunny you ought to believe it, these cost an arm and a leg and you should be thankful that you are fortunate enough to be treated this way.”

“Sorry,” said Sam. “I’m just tired. I was sort of sleeping when you came in.”

“Oh sweetie, that is just fine. That does sound like a good idea. Why don’t you take a nap so you are fresh when everyone gets here? I will be putting the finishing touches on the backyard and myself, she laughed. I bought a dress from Neiman Marcus and it is beautiful. Wait ‘till you see it hunny, you are gonna love it.”

“Okay,” said Sam.

“Okay,” said the Mother.

And she walked up the stairs smiling to the sound of the collective chorus singing in her head. Light beamed through the window, the chorus came to crescendo. Its sound echoed in the distant expression Gladys Merriman held on her face. And as Gladys walked soundlessly to the top of the stairs thinking of a soprano’s meow, Sam Merriman turned her head to the television and found a comfy spot next to a mouse hole. She pulled a blanket over her head and went to sleep, a misplaced moment in a symphony of expression.

Soft winds seemed to comfort a worn out maple tree that grew in Sam's front yard. It was soul food to the neighbors. It was a hollow sign to Sam. One that told her the words were coming soon. The words never stopped once she passed that Maple tree. They moved through a hard wind, cutting the silence between Sam's thoughts.

Sam walked down the stairs and past a wall sized window. In the window she saw the maple's leaves playing delicately with the tree. She saw them flicker flocker back and forth, holding on for dear life. She continued down the stairs to the sound of her mother's heels against the hardwood.

"Samantha you are going to look like one of the boys walking like that. Where the hell did you get that dress? And why the hell does it already have dirt on it. Aren't you a fucking sight to see!"

Her Mother came into view, a whirlwind of good ideas.

"If you don't look like a lady you'll never have a husband. Then you'll be just like me, a fucking single Mother who can't even keep her bitch of a daughter looking like a girl."

Sam's Mother was always full of good ideas and on her birthday the ideas became so much more important, more immediate. Sam ran upstairs to the bathroom. Her Mother stayed downstairs scoffing and shaking her head, angry at it all. Sam thought about her mom's good ideas. She wished the

dress would rip off. She looked into the mirror and wished that.

Friends and readers, Samantha stood on her tiptoes when she looked into the mirror. She wore ballerina shoes with pink soles and lacy ruffles around the laces. Her white dress carried traces of dirt at the bottom. Next to the bow in the back of her head was a small flower that she put there herself. She was a perfectly placed creation in a perfectly placed place at a perfectly timed time. She stared deeply into the mirror. She looked at everything that made her ready for her birthday party. Then she turned on the water to wash it all away.

Sam's face lingered in the dirt and the water covering her hands. Most of the dirt found its way to the rings of the sink, but the heavy stuff remained around her eyes and across her chin. Her ruffles were so pretty. They matched the unknowing look on her face; the one that couldn't reflect. They belonged to her; the look and the dress. Her Mother had not seen her take it from the lost and found at school. She didn't see her try it on for the first time. No, her Mother missed those moments. She missed the moments that made Sam. And as she looked into the mirror, Sam noticed herself being made. She could see her eyes swirling, the cold, blue mercury spinning wildly.

Thought and speech are less than lucid interpretations of this world. They come together as haphazardly as water to shore. If thought about singularly, they are drops of water, just randomly pushing up against granules of sand. And when they come together they merge, they combine into a synthesized moment, as if it was planned that way.

When Dorothea Womack gave birth to the largest, blackest baby Alabama had ever seen, she wondered why it had come to her. Why had this bulbous baby with skin like a trick or treat night come to her womb? She spoke to the nurses with a calm tongue, though she felt no ease inside her tired body.

Dorothea slept a lot the first few years of his life. Rufus would crawl around their fields and watch other neighboring children of similar complexion. The community pretty much took care of itself and as long as he was fed and happy he could survive outside of her doorway. It wasn't until he reached the age where school busses came into play that her rest was broken.

School busses were the vehicles for cultural removal. They proposed picking up the largest, blackest baby Alabama had ever seen and moving him to a school with some of the smallest, whitest children Alabama knew so very well.

Dorothea Womack never understood the reasons behind this removal. Unfortunately, she did not get the chance to question the idea on any level. She was told that if she wanted that child to be educated, and of course she did, then he needed to be

removed from her doorway. He needed to be removed from the safety of his surroundings.

Maybe that is what education is, she thought? Maybe all he needs to grow is to be somewhere where he needs to struggle a little bit. Yes, that's right. He needs to expand his view of the world. And so he would.

Such expansions take place within us all, with every searching glance and momentary glimpse of that which is human.

The optimism stayed with her for Rufus' initial couple years and it wasn't until he was nine years old and in the third grade that it left her completely.

When she saw his dark face get off the bus, it looked as if it were melting down toward the rest of his body. His eyes had the fear of four hundred years of confusion and sacrifice pouring out of their stare. She didn't have to think to know the kind of pain that caused such a grimacing complexion.

Dorothea thought of removal as she ran to him from the safe doorway of their home. She thought of how she came to stand on the red Alabama clay. And when she spoke, she didn't think to tell Rufus he was simply god's misplaced creation, thousands of miles from the spot where he was intended to be.

And her words and her thoughts drifted together. They passed through each other, twisting into meanings she couldn't fully understand. But she had to be strong. She told the boy that to be misplaced is not a curse, but rather a fated excuse for this cruel world to have a scapegoat. A scapegoat for what, she did not know. And as she began to speak, the fear of her own misplacement ravaged her words and scattered the perplexity of the situation into what can now be referred to as a lucid dream:

"And then he spoke," said Dorthea Womack. "Free at last, he said, free at last. The prophet, baby. See, in the beginning the prophets had to lay still. He stood right up, child. Right up where the people could see him, and they watched as he changed the way their eyes saw the world."

Dorthea thought about the words she spoke. She thought...

...I knew his face had been lashed by the winds of confusion that fill the sails of our people. Our red sails. They crossed pale seas, struck em crimson with falling bodies. Pale seas, red with blood, on an ocean of blue, they painted the flag I salute. They painted the picture I live in. Doomed to my fate within the twisted colors of another's brush, pinned to the wall, framed, a colored version of a blank space.

They're heavy, these thoughts. They're heavy, when they come as just a picture. What words are gonna describe that picture? More than a thousand, I'll tell you that much. I don't even know if they exist in this language. Don't know why they

would. But they keep pouring out my mouth like waterfalls of feeling and mystification echoing off the rocks of my fixed place in society. But that is the beautiful version. Really, they are bitter insincerities thrown down through generations to ease the fall.

“And they marched on the streets, baby. They sang and they chanted and they held their heads up high. He told 'em to and they did. He believed in them. Child, he believed in something more than them. And they took it in. Gram mamma says the wounds felt healed when his words came out. She knows how you feel baby. When the hurt just stays and the words can't even come out.”

I can say how the words feel so beautifully in my head. My mouth won't let tones of that nature through its rigid walls. They don't belong out there. Out in that world where my beauty fades away. Away in the wind that set the sails of my descendants. Their faces felt that wind and I feel their faces when I touch my son's. I feel the cold stare they gave that wind, it hardens me. I feel the foreign nature of the boards that tore their bare feet, it isolates me. But most of all, I feel the hopeless beat of their hearts, and it moves me to tears. It's hard when you don't know your own tears, when you can't isolate their precipitating grasp on your self-worth. Wind touches my son's face. I lean over and try to explain his alien tears, by taking in the feeling and turning it into words.

"Our innocence was taken a long time ago. Someone stole it from the first man who stepped on that boat. You have to find a way to bring it back because it can't be seen anymore. These streets were paved a long time ago to hide it all. The rulers of this country paved right over that innocence. You have to look deep child. It lies under that concrete. And if you can see it you will be elevated. Dr. King showed us that. He saw the bumps in the road and envisioned mountains. He saw the mounds bulging out of the ground, the concrete cracking and he knew that underneath a rose was just waiting to grow. You have to have faith like that or else you will never have the power to crack the heavy burdens that weigh you down."

The weight of words is something I will never truly understand. The word: Nigger. One word, six letters. Letters that by themselves signify nothing. But you put them together, you organize them just right and you create a porthole to histories relentless grasp on human progression.

"Baby, I don't know why they say it. I don't know why anybody ever said it, but they are afraid hunny. They are afraid. Folks don't just say that word unless they see fear in themselves. That fear can't live in you too child. Then they got yah. It needs to stay in them. Let it run out of you like water. Blood, sweat and tears have been carrying that word for a long time. It's been runnin' right outta black folks for a long time. Let it run out of you. 'Cause there's gonna be battles baby. Blood gonna be spilt in this world. That doesn't mean it's okay. Let the blood carry the fear right out of you. Just let it go!"

Just let it go. Where in this lonely world is that fear going to go? Fear seems to have found its way into the nooks and crannies of this world. I don't know if there is room for any more. Certainly not for nine-year-old fear. That kind of emotion sees the entire world under a blanket of doubt. And that doubt spreads like a wildfire. It has the heat to burn down the bridges put up by the great men, by the prophets. They erected structures that transcend canyons. But they are so flammable. Susceptible to the smallest of sparks. So flammable. It's exhausting trying to keep away the flames. Humans simply cannot function under exhaustion's weight.

"There comes a time, child. There comes a time when words become more than letters and sounds. When that time comes baby, just go ahead and hear those letters. Go ahead and take in those sounds, but not the feeling, baby. The feeling – it don't belong to you. I don't know who it belongs to. I do know it's not a person that made it. It's something much more than just a person could do. People use those letters to be part of something that masks their fear. And they don't even know what that something is. Baby, be proud that you don't want to be part of something you don't understand. Be proud that you own your feelings. 'Cause letting something that is invisible control you is like being invisible yourself.

Invisibility seems like it would be such a great thing sometimes. I tell him it's not and I mean it. I only say otherwise out of tiredness. Just plain 'ol everyday tiredness. It makes the past crawl out of my skin when I am not seen by

other people. Knowing that I am there and knowing they look, not through me, but right around me. Around a human being. Like some sort of post. Like I'm some sort of immovable blemish. But sometimes, on days when love comes home like this, I wish we both could be invisible. At least then we wouldn't be looked around. And he wouldn't have to feel four hundred years of pain in a nine year old body.

"Child, prophets are the people who tell us to hold on. They tell us to keep moving. One time a tired man sat down and wrote. He kept his pen moving and when he was done that paper was changed. Baby, you paper and your mind is a pen, and you can write whatever you want. That man wrote, 'life for me ain't been no crystal stair...but alls the while I been a keeping on...so don't you stop child, don't you quit now.' Well baby, don't you go quitting now, tomorrow's on the second floor and we only at the first step. You gotta learn how to fight!"

I remember that poem by that wonderful man Langston Hughes. I remember believing in it. I saw hope in his words. Then I think about what I told my son that day. 'Bout those words being just sounds and letters. I don't know how to tell them apart anymore, the sounds, the letters, the feelings and the words. I guess that's what the years take away, the ability to discern feeling from freedom. I know I've had both, but they have never seemed to come together. Maybe they will. Maybe the white and red sails don't have to be up at all. Maybe a wind from a different shore will come and push us through the dark blue tide that lurks ahead. Maybe then I can make a flag with

my own colors and send the tattered rags of histories mistakes out to the unforgiving ocean we have been floating on for so long.

When Emerson Marin awoke from the state of hypnosis he saw a woman in her late fifties draped in what looked like a queen's diamond chain walking with a hand over her face to guard the light enduring the space between her eyes and his. She was doing the best she could to hold the morning sun away from her aging face.

He cowered from her. He pulled a pillow tightly to his eyelids. He closed them one by one. And with that, he was gone.

18

Mason Kelly came from the pangs of tough love. Arthur Kelly, Mason's father, had not done as well as planned in the TV and VCR repair business and communicated his personal disappointment on a regular basis. His pride pounded upon his son just as often as the world pounded down on Arthur Kelly.

The repair business was set in a small studio room on Aurora Avenue in downtown Seattle. Aurora is well known for having a large number of very cheap and accessible hotels, run down casinos and all night eateries. Sufficed to say, not many people on Arthur Kelly's avenue needed their TV's fixed. The fix they needed was a different kind altogether. He was offered TV's and VCR's daily for prices so low it would make your head spin. He bought them and said he would fix them up and sell them and be rich.

In reality: He bought them and put them in the corner of his shop and left them there to die. And in a small corner of that shop sat the hopes and dreams and wishes of his son, Mason.

And so many dreams of this sort sit in similar ways, stagnant and still in a world full of cheap commodity.

Now: Arthur Kelly's' life was one of negotiation and wonderment. He never overcame the wanderlust that he knew in his youth. In his mind, there was always something better,

always a better way to live. But he was alone, with a son, who hated him. And he was afraid.

Most of his worth was invested in mediocre money making schemes that he felt would one day bring him the big money; “enough to get the hell out of Aurora,” he would say. Well, as most schemes of this nature go, Arthur Kelly’s all failed miserably. And when his wife left him to join the ranks of a soldier stationed in Germany, so that “at least [she] could see the world,” Arthur all but realized his place in the totem pole of life.

Realizations like this can be very hard on the children of such people; on the children of parents that don’t really realize they are parents. Arthur knew that he had a son, but didn’t really know what else he needed to do besides that. And so it goes.

Mason grew up mostly at the houses of kind friends or smoking cigarettes in woodland parks. His father never physically abused him, nor did he love him. He offered a simple neglect, a smile that says, “*You* really are on your own, good luck shithead.” Mason didn’t really blame his dad for the way everything turned out. “It is what it is,” he would say to himself time and again.

The Aurora Bridge that resides about one hundred yards from the Kelly residence holds the record for most successful suicides in the United States. It looms over a large canal that opens into Lake Union and then into the much larger Lake Washington.

I can picture the faces of the people that walk down Aurora Avenue late at night. Past the cheap hotels, past the wide eyes of wandering women, past the TV and VCR repair shop that funded random acts of drug use, and onto the edge of the bridge. They look back, they peer longingly at the path that led them to the bridge. They might laugh, they might cry, and then they jump and it doesn't matter what emotion they jumped with. They fall hundreds of feet and die with a sudden jerk of the neck as they hit the icy water below.

Mason thought about those people all the time. For a while, after his mother left, he figured it was just a matter of time before he knew such a path. He fought hard against the thought for years before undergoing a realization. In thinking constantly about jumping off the bridge, Mason began reflecting on his life. He thought about the tough love his parents spilled upon him, the less than adequate surroundings they gave him to progress in, and the lack of support they offered him. He thought about why he didn't do better. He decided he would leave his father and mother behind and never speak to them again.

After stacking up as much money as his meager TV repair wages afforded him, Mason left Aurora and moved to the eastside of Lake Washington, to the suburb of Kirkland. He rented out an extremely small studio apartment and found a job repairing computers, which he lied to the owner of the store about being able to do. He found that a few books from the library taught him everything he needed to know. Business

was much better on the eastside as the notion of tough love rarely exists in such a place. The abuse and neglect are harder to spot when things are shimmering, and on that side of the lake, everything seemed to shimmer.

Parents were too busy attending soccer games and going to fancy parties, picking kids up and taking kids places, being everywhere and nowhere, all the time. As such, they had no time to fix their computers. Mason began to make enough money to move to a one bedroom apartment, bigger than the unit he grew up in. He was stable financially, but that was where the stability ended.

Mason drank more than the average man. After an entire night of drinking he could still appear sober. His willingness to continue the drinking process propelled him past every level of drunken thought. The more he hid the emotions away the more he didn't want to think about them. The less he thought about the bridge and the people and the path of their demise, the more he thought about his rising.

Mason lived for the weekends and took full advantage of the drinking potential they held. I remember calling him on a variety of evenings just to hear a hoot and a holler. Mason was finally alive. In drinking, he found something that worked. Mason had finally found a way to control the path of his demise.

"There he is."

He smiled broadly as the door flung open in front of me.

“There he is,” I replied.

“What is He doing?”

“What is He doing?” I sneered back.

“Pull up a chair! I have black cherry vodka and cigarettes, giddyup!”

The house smelled stale, swollen with smoke and depravity. It’s a smell that one cannot choose to simply relinquish. I had to pretend that we were talking to one another in a frail train station. Maybe the conductor had just passed through. Maybe the stale smell came from years of service. Maybe it had beauty to it.

“Mothers hide your daughters, daughters hide your mothers. Here we come!”

I’d heard this before and gave a deep laugh, like a man does when he wants to be thought of as a man. I took a sip of flavored soda mixed half-heartedly with a ship-boat-captain’s vat of vodka.

Alcohol, ladies and gentlemen, makes people manlier if they act like men when they drink it, so said the man who in high school had the lowest ERA in the North Seattle Valley.

“Throw me a lighter dipshit,” I called over to him through a smile.

“Lowest ERA in the Valley,” said Mason.

We laughed and we drank and we were happy. And so it goes and so it shall remain that when grown men drink and laugh like men they shall be happy. And so it is with Mason Kelly. Yes, dear friends and readers, it is that.

He approached the couch and sat his drink down on a six hundred dollar coffee table. It was by far the nicest thing Mason had ever owned. His sister gave it to him on account of she has fake tits and likes things that cost money.

“As long as it makes you feel like you can feel,” she might say.

“Here’s to happy,” Mason might reply.

“Here’s to Kirkland,” he said.

“Tiki Joes or go home!” said I.

His home had a wreath on the wall that he stole from the grocery store. He stole it because it was outside of the store and he wanted to steal something. He kept it up because it hadn’t fallen apart yet.

Because of Mason Kelly’s silly little lifestyle, I have peered at sinners, salivating, waiting to be momentarily saved. Because of Mason Kelly I have broken the laws of this beautiful, free

nation and imposed my will on the comforts of others. And although no plans were in the works for such actions this lonely night I speak of, fear stood faintly in the corner.

Mason Kelly, as many people called him, had been yelling about a cab for five minutes before I heard him. I suppose I shouldn't say many people called him by his entire name, but one time a fat girl from California called him that. It stuck. Sometimes when fat people say things they stick more. I walked outside and lit a cigarette. He pulled me into the cab and the ethnic man told me to put the cigarette out. Mason glared at him.

"Where you go?" said the man quickly.

"Tiki Joes bar," said Mason.

"How you get?"

"Straight down to the lake."

The driver pulled out of the parking space and up the steep hill to the street. From Bellevue to Kirkland the drive seems short. It doesn't seem like you are going through too many price changes, about all the houses look the same. All the people in the houses look the same too: saturated. They don't ooze or anything, but their movements have a necessity about them that can only be explained by Mason.

"They run around like their insides are falling out," he said.

"Mothers hide your daughters."

I have always thought that abstraction and illusion bring about truth. I have failed to see it anywhere else yet. I can't tell if Mason Kelly is an illusion. He moves like a ghost, like pale skinned puppetry.

The cab driver pulled slowly out of the apartment complex and moved Northbound to the land of milk and honey.

Milk and honey, glitter and glitz, uninhibited splendor, Mason could paint that kind of picture in your head. Every bar that ever was would pay millions to advertise the way he did. He could make you believe that girls would be dancing on the table in a three-hundred square foot dive. In his head they would be passing out lays, pouring free shots and giving prizes for blonde hair. I suppose this is a good time to discuss the casual vices of Mason Kelly.

They include, in no order whatsoever: Blondes, cigarettes, satirical television, smoking indoors, barbequing multiple times per day, nairing his asshole, finding money in other people's clothes, short humorous replies, John Denver, having blonde hair, cocaine, jerking off with a crooked dick to cheap porn, stealing items from garbage bins to display in his house, dolphin sheets, and the most notable: Casual binge drinking.

So, when Mason decided that Tiki Joe's would house him, he brought that kind of hand to the table. Usually, he had little to no effect on the establishment. Every once in a while he would run out on his tab, hit on someone else's girlfriend, or dance,

but most of the time he would pay them a fortune to let him act the way he did, and what a way to act.

I don't know if anyone listening has ever seen what a forty year old ex-heroine addict's eyes look like. I haven't really, but I think I have seen them foreshadowed in Mason's worn, sullen sockets. This is not to say that Mason has, or will ever inject drugs into his veins, it's too expensive and somber. Instead, he will drink copious amounts of poison until either one of two things occurs: A doctor tells him he will die soon or he dies soon. I hope the former is the way it all will go. I hope that because the world wouldn't be the same without Mason Kelly.

"A black opal," he said to the bar tender.

Mason leaned his arm on the bar and casually crossed his legs. He looked at me with a smile that curved to the left, he wanted me to laugh. I laughed and elbowed him playfully. He took the drink from the bartender and told her to hold his card. He would scheme various ways to not have to be charged for the drink he had just received.

"Now what?" I said, after thanking the beautiful girl behind the bar for my beer.

"Now we get laid," said Mason Kelly.

Let it be known that the simplicities of life are all too often overlooked. Many times the greatest of men and women, the men and women that adorn our hearts long after they are gone, are simple people. They love simple things because they know how to love them. And so it goes and so it will always be. When you know how to love something, you will be happy.

Mason loved very little in his life. I didn't know that then. I know that now. I saw him then as a slim figure of misguided fortune, someone whose fate landed casually upon others. It landed casually upon me in the following way.

I had just moved from downtown Seattle to Kirkland, a wealthy suburb full of twenty-somethings that were waiting to be discovered. The apartment complex I lived in was called and is called, the Villagio. Such a name should only be in Las Vegas, city of hyperbole, but instead it adorned a well made sign that sat near the entrance of the lake side complex. I came out of the front door of the Villagio that day with a single purpose. Little did I know, I would alter my existence forever.

My best friend at the time had mistakenly dropped a nugget, the colloquial term for a small bud of Marijuana. I knew that it lay somewhere between his car and the front door. I searched the sidewalk and the curb to make sure that it was not marinating in a dallop of oil. After distinguishing that it must be in the grass or bushes, I dropped to my hands and rooted through the dirt. As I searched the green grass for green grass,

three laughing hyenas stepped out of the Villagio's front door and lit cigarettes.

They stood about the same height and two of them had the same demeanor, capitulating smiles and charismatic stances. I thought nothing of it, as I had seen such people before and knew that conversations rarely came up. After minutes of searching, I knew that I was trying too hard and took a knee to think about what to do next.

"What the fuck are you doing man?" said one of the smokers.

Without thinking I replied, "Looking for some pot I dropped."

This statement was received with laughs and much nodding of heads.

"I've got some upstairs," said Mason Kelly. "Come on up."

And so it was that day that I needed a friend and there was Mason Kelly. So it was that momentary necessity completely mediated my interaction with him. And so it is now that the moment stands in the way of his progression, a beautiful surrender of pale blue forgiveness.

Emerson Marin's sparkling blue eyes winced in the bright lights. He pulled his head up with his neck and looked directly at Violet Rosenfeld and her curvy disposition.

"Feel human?" she asked patiently.

"Is this what human feels like?" asked Emerson Marin.

He was lying on the hardwood floor of Violet's office. Pushing his torso up with his elbows, he felt light.

"You'll feel a little lightheaded for a while," said Dr. Rosenfeld acutely.

"The more you release the more you become comfortable letting go."

Emerson felt his head and stood up to face the window. His reflection shone faint in the glass. He looked like a ghostly version of himself. He looked like a soul.

"I'm going to leave," said Emerson without callous intent.

"That sounds just fine," smiled Dr. Rosenfeld.

Emerson left the office and walked across the curb and into the street. He stopped in the middle of the street and looked at the oncoming cars. For just a moment, he had no name, no face and no ability to live or die. For one moment he was completely inhuman. And in that moment he pulled up

something that lingered underneath the insecurity of his typical emotional state. It bloomed within him.

Energy surged through his body as cars in the distance started to slow down.

He screamed.

A moment passed and Emerson was on the sidewalk, face down in the dust and the clutter. Moments before he felt a dragon flowering within him, he was soulless and conquering. The cars before him were nothing tangible. They were orbs of energy surging into him. The world was nothing more than energy swirling in heavy currents of emotion. He felt them as he felt air slip into his lungs. It came and went and came and went and came again without push or pull.

He sought nothing, he felt everything. And in that feeling was a truth he had not before known. He searched for it, and realized that trying to find a feeling makes it impossible to find. The search mediates the experience. To feel one must stop searching, stop seeking and breathe.

Emerson Marin had been searching his whole life, never stopping, never feeling. This he now knew. And with that thought propelling him, he ran as a wild wind, all the way to

the brick church he called home, in the small country town of Traveler's Rest, his flaccid arms flailing in the wind.

He widdled away his thoughts in an attempt to uncover the nature of his emotion. The knife bent gently against his protruding negativity as if it was a part of his being. As if the character that he turned himself into relied on it. Who knew Cyrus O'Reilly? The knife eased back and forth, slowly curving around the exterior of the thought and once again he was alone, a thought in a thoughtless world. A world created by the negation of the creator.

Alive were the nerves. Energy cannot be denied. It cannot cease to exist merely because the proprietor fails to reply. But like an insane man in a small white room, it bounces off the walls not knowing why it bounces. Only knowing that to not move would be to have no effect.

Hope would prevail again. It would find its way into the world. A stowaway on a boxcar headed to hell. Not knowing its destination only thinking about the motion of the vehicle.

Stagnant action knows hope only as an acquaintance, but motion runs with hope naked through fields. The two dance naively in the moonlight to the whispers of the wind, never thinking that a storm might be coming. Cyrus knew the

moonlight. He knew the glares of the stars and the grimace of the black that surrounds them. He had seen himself laugh at blackened waves as they disrupted sandy beaches late at night. Seen the sparkle of sun still left on the stars that glistened off the water as if to announce that the two entities of the world were involved in some late night love affair. It was beautiful.

“As beautiful as anything could be,” he said aloud, as he shuffled into the kitchen.

The motion of his coughing body couldn’t deny the stagnant thoughts still embedded in his mind, so he stared at the butter.

Refrigerator doors closed, head up, eyes engaged. Send the signal to the ears, hearing....something, yes...music. The sordid sounds of Scottish bagpipes curled themselves around his foggy circumference and lapped up the clutter of thoughts that were moments before entranced by butter. Cyrus enjoyed the bagpipes like a child dances with his grandparents, without knowledge of the way they are supposed to be, but with an intense pleasure for the way they always are.

Cyrus saw his father’s hair as redder every time he heard the pipes play. They played and he became strong like his father used to be. The bagpipes went away quickly as did the red hair. His thoughts drifted to a child smiling in a willow tree, on a little piece of California.

Was it a dream he once dreamed or was it where he grew up? Had there been peace in the past? He couldn’t remember.

What was the willow tree? Was it really a place to hide from fear as he made it up to be? Where did mind meet matter? Not knowing any of these answers he thought about the way the wind affected the tree.

The tree, you must know, was on the down slope of a jimmy rigged sheep pasture. It protected the northern side of the one acre environment from the sight of the road. The willow experienced the wind in a mystical fashion. It threw its branches into the air, flailing them around in confused directions as if dancing interpretively to the cacophonic breath of god. When the dance ended the branches ceased all movement and hung again, limp. How could this tree protect itself against the wind? Its flaccidity aroused notions of insecurity and fragility, but when called to battle it prevailed, every time. The wind never took the tree's ability to be a willow away, no matter how many times the pulsing gales tried to harden it.

The willow embodied the hope of the human condition. It embodied the staring eyes of computer programmers who dream to be firefighters and the tired bones of firefighters who wish they were computer programmers. For the grass is not always green, but there is always grass.

The thoughts of grass caused a mild calm to displace itself into the contorted demeanor that made up Cyrus' fluctuating state of being. Yes, there was always grass. It could be brown, but then again what if brown is green and green brown? What if it

is really breen? There was hope in him again. Hope that maybe he was wrong. That maybe his timed calculations were nothing more than loose interpretations of what may be an entirely different reality. Yes, maybe this reality was more prone to happiness than his, maybe it rained affection and contentment, or down poured love. Maybe... maybe. The confusion calmed him and the importance of the initial emotion faded, a little, and the knife was put on the table, for now.

The next day Emerson refrained from walking to the altar, as was his morning ritual. Instead he knelt before the small black cross that adorned the space above his mirror, in his tiny bedroom, at the tail end of the brick church. The world was dark. He stared at the cross.

Emerson requested the small black cross be the only one in his room on account of its simplicity. The larger crosses were too powerful for him to bear on a regular basis. They looked like actual crucifixes, actual pieces of wood that could torture and condemn men to a sure death. They were pathways to hell for most of them, sinners one and all. And all for one and one for all.

He pulled his head as far as he could to his neck and on bended knee said the following prayer:

“Mother, there is a beast within me. I feel it now as I have not felt it before. I feel...”

He squeezed the candle tightly, imprinting its sides with his finger’s impression. He felt the hot wax drip through the cracks. It burned his palms. Energy surged through their centers. The cross looked ominously down at him.

“Mother,” he said through clenched teeth, “Mother I gave new life to myself. I gave myself a life that knows not of the dances we danced.”

He closed his eyes tightly and thought of god. Emerson felt like he was flying, soaring above the world and all that lies within it. Lying, he thought.

“Lying,” he said out loud, “has brought me this far. All whom I have touched have lied. To be human is to lie. Never can we speak with absolute sincerity. Words do not allow it.”

“They told me things. They gave me words. There are no words. There is no name. There is only – now. And now there is feeling, always there is something flicker flockering within us. Energy, pacing, if nothing else, back and forth, telling us there is something to be done. And it will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

The candle flickered out as the slightest of breezes slithered through the altar. The darkness took him in. And away with it he went.

Sometimes when people walk they actually flicker flocer. Flicker flockering is a kind of swaying of the soul. An almost unconscious movement, one that seemingly must occur or else the world be redefined.

Flowers have been said to flicker flocer on occasion. Sometimes even not on occasion. One of the biggest culprits of such behavior is the tulip. Tulips swirl slowly around their space, leaning and turning, bulging and blooming, but always swaying.

Now housewives have a lot of things to worry about. One of these things is the tulip. Margaret Hathaway saw tulips like a local bartender sees an empty glass. Either someone cared too much to stay or cared too much to leave, either way he has to clean the fucking thing up. She always had to clean the fucking things up. Her husband picked up the flowers on a jaunt away from his normal route home. He presented them as if they were a free coupon for a beer and then retired to wherever the hell he retired to.

She poured water upon them and looked at the tips that were feigning life. They bent slightly, but not in the wind. They stayed upright, but not to assume any duty. They stood momentarily majestic, but she knew, oh she knew, they would most assuredly die soon. They went perfectly well with her

kitchen and she let them stay. She watched her smile widen slowly in the mirror as she bent down to take in the subtle fragrance of the flowers.

Little did Margaret know that not far away Cyrus O'Reilly was planning on changing her complexion in the most drastic of ways. Cyrus was not an evil man. He just flicker flockered sometimes and didn't ever really flacker back to his original starting position in the game. Not many people ever get back to their original starting position in the game, some don't even know where it is. Cyrus thought that it may have been in the middle of a calm field in California, but he didn't care enough to think about it a second time. He set fire to a lot of ants there and didn't see the point in going back.

Although he couldn't remember the exact location of his first residence, he knew that upon it stood a small ant hill. A nine year old Cyrus watched the ants scurrying in and out. His eyes were baffled by the way every ant's path, their patterns, were the same. Cyrus envied the ants. The thoughts spinning his mind in circles had never allowed him to known repetitious action. Further, he never understood it. The ants were, without a doubt, cleverer than he on this particular point.

"At least that is what they think," said Cyrus as he dropped tiny firecrackers into the top of the hill.

Firecracker explode, ants go nuts. Cyrus watched as they went nuts. Though they were seemingly dying and afraid of the unknown vestibule that just exploded in their home, they

presented order to the rest of the world. A hell of a show, thought Cyrus, a hell of a dance to dance. Those little fuckers can put their best faces forward even when they are getting blown up. Even ants could push through with some sort of dignity. Cyrus kept the feeling of defeat for a long time after the memory, storing it deep into the myriad of misunderstood questions that he'd formed about himself and the world.

Cyrus' television only worked because he told it to work. The television brought a funny little man in a funny little suit talking about America. The only thing about America that Cyrus found amusing was the catchy little snippet of music by Paul Simon called American tune. He liked it because it said, "I'm all right I'm all right I'm just worried to my bones."

Cyrus felt he was fine when he heard it. He felt interconnected to all that is connected to anything.

His brain always flicker flockered like that, but rather in a sway with the wind kind of pattern. Today the wind must have been fucking gusting because Cyrus wanted to cut off his pinky finger, so that he would know pain. Sometimes pain wants to know us. It gets all teary eyed and wants to perch down on our shoulders, so that it remembers what it's like to be human.

Sometimes I don't remember what it's like to be human. I had a talk with Cyrus about that one time. I said,

"Cyrus, remember when we were human and liked clouds?"

“No,” he said and that was the end of the conversation.

I would wager that he was trying to sort out where my eyeballs would go if he pushed them into the back of my head, so I decided not to make the wager on account of I might need the balls later.

Margaret Hathaway looked alone now more than ever. The tulips that she wanted so desperately to accompany her on this spinning little trip didn't seem to want to give her the time of day. She looked to me for company by way of a telephone call and I showed up late smelling like cigarettes. She asked me about fertilizer and the detrimental effects of poison on cat tongues. I obliged her informational requests by telling her whiskey was for sale if there were buyers. We drove west to the edge of the street. It took about ten minutes, but her smile made it seem longer. She should kill herself I thought, but that was not unusual. I sat her down and told her about whiskey and why she should buy us some.

So, she bought the drinks and I looked at her fat ass the whole way from the table to the bar. She reminded me of a hippo with a hat on. A good name for an album I thought.

Her breath smelled better after a few drinks and I leaned in to blow smoke in her face. She laughed and I thought I should

just do her in right then, in front of the bartender, so at least someone else knew how happy it made me. I didn't and she touched my leg instead. So I told her to play a song on the jukebox that reminded her of being a kid.

"One that makes you feel free," I said.

"I feel free right now," she replied, through gummy gums.

But finally she chose *oh sister* performed by Emmy Lou Harris. It sounded kind of like a slow dance with a scarecrow. But the scarecrow would have on a dress instead of the usual overall attire. I think she liked the line, "you must realize the danger." I think it made her free to realize she was in trouble and that someone else was aware.

I returned Margaret Hathaway to her tulips and her husband with the notion that she would live forever embedded on her whiskey lit tongue.

"I'm back," she cat called to her husband.

"You never left you idiot," he muttered under his breath.

Cyrus thought he was going to die every day. He figured he had a deadly disease and that there was most likely going to be a cure created and sold to the world for millions of dollars.

Dollars he didn't have. He would protest the corruption. Protest the way many people can't afford to save their own lives when the world finally sets in. And though his energy swirled and soared, raged and ravaged his soul, he wouldn't march on Washington, or do anything that stemmed from having an actual position on the matter. Instead, he will take a shotgun and run screaming up a beautifully sculpted hill in New York City, which I will explain later. Then he will blow the fuck out of everything, which I will explain later.

Cyrus took. Many do. He had no other way to interact with the world. There was nothing he could give. He was a blank space. And so he took to become something more. And can we blame him for wanting to transcend? Can we do that, dear friends?

He took out the pieces of a small wooden table and began putting them together in the middle of the barren floor. The man at the store promised a beautiful thing. People do that sometimes. It's easy to do and I can't say that I mind it. That is where Cyrus and I differ strongly in political opinion.

He wanted people to promise rusty nails, bad tax returns, and sexually transmitted diseases. He wanted an infomercial explaining the deterioration of a child's mind from the first abuse to the last. He wanted the table to be already fucking built when it came in the package.

The hours grew slowly from each other. Whiskey bottles began their call. They needed a platform for their campaign. The platform had just been built by Cyrus O'reilly. On it were

discarded peanut shells surrounding a dingy metal bowl, a damp pack of tobacco, a rusty hunting knife and a long barreled .12 gauge shotgun. The whiskey had not yet found the table. Instead, it was held upright, pointing toward god and the devil himself, flowing gently down their throat.

Though mildly concerned with the adolescent growth of her tulips, Mrs. Hathaway's mind began to flicker away. Hopefully, she thought, there will be no flockering until the sun goes down. She, unfortunately, would not be granted this wish. Seconds after the cat's meow her memories exploded.

I wouldn't believe it if I didn't not make it up myself. Stay calm my friend, there was no death involved in this particular occurrence. Rather, her hair maintained its wispy foolishness, the stretch marks on her sunken chest kept stretching, and water came out of her eyes. She was lost in thought; transfixed by her need to be fixed; absent of the notion that there were proper and improper ways to act unto other people. Other than that she was perfectly normal. Normal. And what you see is human. And what I said was human. And what she saw was Cyrus O'reilly gently knocking on her door with an empty whiskey bottle.

During the time that Margaret Hathaway's memories were being splattered all over her hallway, Cyrus O'reilly convinced

himself that he would no longer hold back his reasons for his actions. The shit had gone on long enough. He thought.

Mouths had moved so far away from their purpose, he figured they might not be able to find their way back. But Cyrus O'Reilly was a fighter. And he believed that mouths had memories. They could get back home.

He thought of songs and *Solsbury Hill*. He played over the imagery in his mind. And in his mind were fields of green, blue skies and smiling children. He turned to look at the environment that produced the imagery in his mind. The contrast. He took it in. He couldn't hold it, only the bottle. The bottle was using all his take-in ability. Outlets were needed for proper functioning. And when the whiskey bottle pounded its third pound, the door opened. His eyes let loose all that was inside them. Emotions were exploding within, pouring out of his eyes and onto Mrs. Hathaway's welcome rug. She wondered why she didn't back away at the sight of a soul.

Somewhere, in the middle of an emotional explosion lays the core of one's dilemmas, his soul.

She didn't know, of course, that emotions, though invisible to the eye, are very sticky. They were all over her shoes. If only her memories didn't explode all over the wall she would have realized the danger in the nature of the man before her. But she was a Mother, and nature needed to be nurtured no matter what the cost. And with the lightest heart and fading breath, she accepted as he covered her mouth with his pulsing hands,

stabbed her with a broken whiskey bottle and said, "I've come to take you home."

Taste the moonshine in the rain.
Don't let it hit the daffodils.
Open mouths to sun drenched stains.
We are merely built to spill.

Turning sideways, facing grace.
Courting with the counterpart.
Tongues out lashing saving face.
People crying, tainted hearts.

Assemble now my shape in vain.
Carry on and rush the start.
Cracking bottles before the blend.
Slashing necks to leave pure hearts.

Drenched he finds the bloodied eyes.
Salt the wound before the pyre.
Light trickles down his dusky skies.
Burning fears to stoke the fire.

Cyrus now and patient last.
Ask emotions to fall slow.
Down the spiraled stair he's cast.
With endless steps still left to go.
With endless steps still left to go.

Emerson sat patiently in the back of the brick foursquare church. The window that led to the sky cracked at the corner, letting the light of the moon shine soberly through. He let it catch his eye. Wearily wobbling now, the whiskey seeping deep within him, he lit a cigarette and thought of god. He tried to pull god from the light. He lit a fire deep within.

“The sound doesn’t ever come,” he said sourly. “It moves and it moves and it fucking moves. It wanders around this room and touches every cross on these walls. The crosses will crack if I crack them. They are wooden and rotting and can burn.”

Emerson stood up. He took a slow, steady pull from the bottle. His body leaned lightly against the hard stone wall.

“And fire will light up the world! It will light this mother fucker up! And when we die we light up the world, don’t we god? Don’t we light this mother fucker up?”

He stammered in circles and again to the window.

“We can kill people if we want to. And what could be more human? What could be more human than doing everything we could do?”

He dropped the cigarette, then fell with it to the cold, stone floor. It smoked before him, slipping away from itself,

spreading, merging with everything around it. Bleeding, like people do.

Cyrus froze, malignant to the sight reflected in the cruel, cruel glass. The bowie knife felt cold. Cyrus' hand steadied itself mildly, very mildly. Mrs. Hathaway's voice didn't skip a beat. Rhythmically, it echoed the tunes of reason we find in the warmest, fuzziest nooks. Nests that our Mother's create for our initial suffering are painted with such a sentiment. Mrs. Hathaway attempted to spray-paint something beautiful on a sewer wall in a shit storm.

She said, "Child, there are days when the world eats up all there is to love, when all you want to do is cash in what you earned and move on. I know these days," she whispered, "I know the feeling of being nothing more than someone else's cash, never knowing when you will be given away, or to whom."

She raised her soft hand to touch his shoulder. Lips began to quiver and Cyrus backed away. It was unclear to me at the time whether he needed air of his own or if he needed to be inundated with something cleaner. His voice clattered quietly and I turned my attention from my own thoughts and again toward his state of being. Callous yet comforted. Shaky and perturbed, mimicking the cries of a wolf pup looking for his

first kill; savagely ignorant, yet maliciously polite. I closed the thesaurus. There was no time to wear fancy pants. Cyrus had the knife to his own neck. He had drawn blood.

Mrs. Hathaway turned toward the window to ask god for guidance.

"Fly away," god said. "And find the comfort of distance to be fruitful and deserved."

And as if leaving a tea party, Mrs. Hathaway thanked Cyrus with a look of Sunday fellowship, and traipsed out the door, blood seeping out of a small slit in her blouse. He didn't notice her leave. His hands were red with indecision. He prodded the air and thought it funny that his insecurity dripped back down upon him. He realized that he could just as easily wash it away as soak it up. And so he did. And so it was done. And what you see is human, awkward, afraid and full of the want to forgive.

Crying comes easily to those disheveled with pity, and tears came calmly to the weary eyes of Cyrus O'Reilly. They would come again, and again. He knew he was destined to cry. Many are. Many flaunt it in front of cameras and parties longing for someone else to notice fate and not momentary sadness. Cyrus cried in the bathtub. He cried with bandages on his neck. He cried a child's tears through a war torn body. Many do. And

thank god Kurt Vonnegut pointed that out. Thank god for him, thought Cyrus.

Cyrus lathered up his face, washing the tears away with cheap soap. He still had the lingering effects of whiskey clinging to his bones. The numbness would not go away. He worried he would never again be able to see anybody. He worried he would slit his throat out of fear and there would only be expensive soap and he wouldn't be able to afford a clean get away. He dressed, turned on the TV and looked for a friend. Many do. And they find them and the friendships last forever. Cyrus went to sleep with that thought.

He woke to the empty sound of serenity. Blood stained his outer layers. He wanted it back inside. He needed all the help he could get. Vague memories of fear and whiskey echoed through a low stomach tremble. He was not alone. Interconnected through chords and wires, smoke and mirrors, were loosely put together reasons. He did not know they were there, he was unaware. And he would not find out until that fateful day. And oh what a day there was to be had.

Somehow he knew something of something. The clarity he knew gave no greater clue than that. He felt as if an amazing greatness had already occurred, as if the switch had been flipped. His actions came easier. They lifted him up, but with whose strings?

He looked at the poem sitting on the table under a blood stained bowie knife, Cyrus now and patient later, he thought.

He didn't feel too terribly impatient, but figured being Cyrus sounded doable for the time being. And as Cyrus he pulled out a cigarette, noticing a hollowed out area at the top of the filter. He noticed a chance for fulfillment in a doomed existence. He noticed one moment of meaning and lit a match to burn it all away.

Everyone needs something to believe in. A lot of times people think the word 'god' is synonymous with belief. Really they are just two words that got lost in the jumble a long time ago.

{Praise a long time ago}

Sam likes god because it is easy to like god. She likes to have somewhere to go where they say: This is what we believe. She likes to find herself in the 'we'. She can be a part of a collective inspiration to understand the world around her. I like that she believes in god. I told her once, "Sam maybe you just believe in people." And she said, "God is in people and I said ok and we smiled and had a drink."

Sam likes to watch god act outside of his heaven and let people know that it feels good to catch snowflakes on tongues.

"Good energy," she says, "That's god at work, doin' his thing."

Someone's always doin' their thing with Sam. She likes people to be set in their thing, to have their own special power, their own special trait that makes them different, yet unified with other talented individuals. Then people can get together and share their talents and have fun, I guess. I said Sam, "Maybe you just believe in fun."

And she smiled and drank and I smiled and drank and we had fun.

Sam has short brown hair that kind of stops right where it needs to so it doesn't get caught in her scarf when she tries to protect herself from the snow. She has a wispy way about her that makes her cute and fun to agree with. Lots of times Sam agrees with me too and we just have fun agreeing. I told her a while ago, back before I was old, that I thought her beautiful and maybe if we weren't married in twenty years or so we should get hitched, so as to not stand out at cocktail parties. She said we didn't really go to too many of those parties anyway. Then we laughed and she made me a drink and I smiled and wanted to marry her.

One day I saw Sam breathing in and out of a tube. A car wasn't watching where it was going. It broke her legs. When I went to see her at the hospital I saw a helpless, helpless girl just trying to get home. One day she would walk again, but it wasn't that day. I told her through tears the first night she lay in the hospital bed that I was angry at the driver. It fell on calm, sleeping ears. I told her that recklessness should not be

tolerated and I stood up and looked out the window. I stared at the streetlights and the cars and the people and I cried to them. I touched the cold glass with my fingers. I reached out to them. Then I looked up at the sky and I prayed to god to heal my friend, because I love her, I said, because she's my friend.

I thought about the way my love for her produced hate in me. I hated the person that hit her. I thought about how people kill each other every day because their love makes them angry at someone else, someone who tried to take that thing they loved away. I looked out the window and I forgave god. Then I laughed and hugged my friend.

She came out of the coma after one day and laughed at me for making friends with her god. I told her that I was thankful she had something to believe in. I told her because I loved her. She told me she knew I would be there. That she did not think about god in her sleep, that she did not think about me in her sleep, but she knew I would be there. I was glad to hear that. I was glad to know that she believed in me.

That night rain speckled itself across the bottom half of the glass, just glittering across the darkness. Sam always used to say I was cheesy. You know, like I like sappy love songs and stuff. I guess that's my thing. I get something out of writing sappy love songs and sappy poems and stuff.

"I guess that's why a glittering window makes me think of fallen angels."

{Praise fallen angels}

Not like those dark angles that fell from God's good graces or anything like that. Just angels that, like raindrops, scattered themselves around and randomly fell on my window. I told Sam once, "Maybe people just get blown around so much that when they see a good spot to sit and just evaporate away they do, but they never want to do it alone 'cause they'll fade away quicker."

She sort of grunted and laughed and made weird sounds with her nose. She got up and threw a pillow at me and smiled. Sam didn't really like to tell me what she thought about me she,

"...made me feel".

{Praise feel}

She didn't give me words. She just listened to my words and gave me love. The kind you dream about when you're six and you want right away.

"That hang-out-on-a-tree-by-the-lake-until-dark kind of love."

{Praise that kind of love}

I hope Sam never dies. I hope that if she does die she goes to heaven because that would make her happy.

Pretend this is real: A man and a woman walk along a road and they don't know where it goes, but they are happy. He turns to

her and says, "Can you love me, even if I don't believe in anything?"

She smiles at him as if he was a hundred feet away and sets her head calmly on his shoulder. She whispers, "Believe in me," so quietly, almost just to herself.

And I suppose it doesn't really matter what she said, what words she decided to pull from that giant, giant list. It just doesn't matter.

Sam said that when I told her this story of the man and the woman. She said, "It doesn't matter what the woman or the man said." I asked her why. She smiled a lowly smile before she said, "Because the story starts out with, and they were happy and what more do you need to say than that?" I hope she goes to heaven. I hope she goes there because I loved her. Because one day she made me happy.

Emerson awoke slowly, Dr. Rosenfeld's tightly put together face only inches from his own. He blinked as if rising from a coma.

"How long have I been here?" he asked humbly.

"About an hour, maybe a little longer. You're deep within. Stay," she said. "Stay where you are."

Jimmy Hendrix used to live in Seattle, Washington on the corner of 45th street and the interstate. I hear he used to sit in the attic of the house and smoke grass and play the guitar and go bat shit insane. He is buried in Renton, Washington and today people go to his grave and smoke grass and think about how cool it was that he went bat shit insane. It takes courage to do a thing like that. To go crazy and let the world know you're crazy and respect you for it.

Jimmy Hendrix used to put tabs of LSD on the inside of his headband before concerts and go nuts while he played music that trained musicians dropped their jaws to. Jimmy was a trained musician as well. I don't know who trained him or if he trained him or whatever, but I do know that when his hands touched a guitar the sounds all made sense to him. The sounds make sense to people who appreciate senselessness. To them he is a hero.

James keen has a poster of Jimmy on the wall of his room in a house that he shares with four other people. He likes to pretend that when he graduates from the University of Washington he will create something that will bring peace to the world. Not like a giant bomb built to explode and spread love to everyone, though that does sound refreshing, rather something that would give him a good reason to smile at

people. A smile, dear friends and readers, can never be underestimated.

Once while in South Florida James Keen smiled at a Haitian man on the corner of Federal Avenue. The man held little magazines titled *Awake*. They told about the rainforests in South America and how they were being destroyed. James asked the weary man if he was selling them and the man let out a hearty laugh, so James laughed, and for a moment everyone he was thinking about in the whole world was happy.

James keen wanted that kind of happiness. He wanted all the people around him to respect him because he made them happy. Because he had a cause and it was noble and he was noble and things were good.

His studies took him from one edge of philosophical moral problems to the next, from psychology to Ancient Indian Literature, Women's studies and the history of Tibet, and back again to contemporary ethical dilemmas. And he smoked pot and he listened to Jimmy Hendrix and Bob Marley and anything else that made his hand swim in the wind.

I call James and his friends that gave hugs when they greeted and talked about peace, neo-hippies. Neo-Hippies are people who have grown to dislike the fundamentals of the society they live in. They don't like the president, whoever he is; they don't like frat boys or pop music or anything that might be televised in prime time. Some of them are bastards and some of them are angles. So be it. And so it is with the world.

The beautiful thing about James Keen is that he hasn't forgotten how to have a hero. Many times when people feel they have come of age, a strange disdain of all people comes to the forefront of their minds. They feel as if they can overcome any obstacle, do anything, that they can be anything they want to be, just like their mommas told them. They believe they're special, just like grandma said and that is that. Sometimes they forget to believe in people and just believe in themselves til' that fails and they get depressed and don't believe in anybody, so they sit around and cynically smoke pot. So it goes. I envy James a few times over for this one aspect of his character: He made heroes of people, every day.

There stands a man on the corner of Brooklyn Avenue and 50th street in the university district, Seattle, Washington, who sells *Real Change*, the homeless newspaper. If you decide you want to shop at the Safeway on the corner where this man stands it is impossible not to see him. Go see him one day and you will hear this: "*Real Change*, sir? Have a nice day, sir."

Without fail his booming, soulful voice will fill your ears. When this happened to James Keen he felt it. Sometimes he gave the man a dollar, the price of the small paper filled with poems written by the homeless and other articles written about the homeless and neat things of that nature.

James would buy the paper and smile and feel appreciated and good. The man would say thank you and smile and feel appreciated and good. It was a hell of a deal. James wanted to

be a person like that, a person that made people feel good. But nowhere in his college could he find a course dedicated to being homeless and making people feel good. So this man was his hero, his teacher. And he only said a few words a few times a day to a neo-hippy, half cynical, half beautiful bastard. But he connected, and that is what beauty and god and knowledge are all about. And he did it all with a smile.

Emerson smiled at Shirley Ringwald, receptionist extraordinaire. She smiled right back. He left Dr. Rosenfeld's office and skipped swiftly off the curb and into the street. He walked to a bench in the middle of the park adjacent to the psychiatrist's office. There he sat and watched the leaves turn in circles as they fell slowly to the ground.

It was fall and the winds were willing to pick up, but the earth wasn't ready for them. It had a little more growing to do before trying to off itself for the winter. Emerson watched a leaf fall carefully through the wind. He wondered what kind of path was established, where it would end up and how it would handle the change. What contours of the leaf caught the wind? What edges helped it turn away?

He picked one up. The spotted orange and red coloring caught his eye. He stared at the traces of fluorescence that made up the natural organism. He wondered where the colors came from. Lightly, he threw the leaf into the breeze and watched it sashsay down to the crisping dirt below. He pulled his coat

tightly as the wind took him in. He stared straight at it, his face squinting against the cooling air. He lowered his head and pushed through, smiling to the ground.

There was a hum in the breeze as it lifted the willows. The branches rode the wind's undulations like a lazy sea pushing with inertia that seemed to come from nowhere. Emerson stepped into the nowhere and walked briskly back to the church.

Upon arriving he put down his things and knelt before the small ivory cross adorning his wall. Painted black later in life, but ivory nonetheless, it was a gift from his mother. He kept it across the room from his bed. It was the first thing he saw in the morning, the last thing he saw before he fell asleep. It shimmered in the candlelight, sleek and powerful and pure.

Emerson remembered the time it bled, or, the time blood spilt upon it. He remembered what he lost that day and put his hand to the floor. He cradled the thought in his mind's womb then drifted off to a cave where he searched for god.

I never thought Sam could die. I knew I had to be right and slowly I began to realize why. I realized why on a Wednesday morning. I came to her house to see if she had a newspaper that I could use for paper mache. I had to make a piñata.

I couldn't breathe in the air in her house. It didn't have oxygen. The only sound that came from a dark, back corner was the soft love of an old Barbara Lea record. I went in holding my breath. I let it out when I saw crimson murk seeping underneath the bathroom door. I opened it without thinking. It smelled fresh.

I wrapped her arms in bandages and cried to her unconscious face. She woke up when the tears landed. Her murmuring words were lost in my heavy sound. My clothes felt burdensome and I took off my shirt to feel lighter. I wrapped the cloth around her seeping wounds. I had to move fast; think fast; live fast. I did. I took her from god that day. He gave her away as if he had free will.

Sam came to without a sound. I gave her a cup of tea and swathed her weary shoulders in a fleece blanket while we waited for the ambulance to arrive. She looked like she had just come back from an ice cave. Her lips were cold and tired and her hands trembled when I touched them. I quit touching them. I took my mind and held it in my hands. I questioned; most things really. How can one be specific at times like these, when things are already as detailed as they need to be?

I don't believe in an interventionist god. I don't believe in things like that.

{Praise things like that}

I knew that Sam did believe. I knew that she was thinking about god. I held her head on my shoulder and took the tea cup from her hand. I touched it. I knew inside of her there was something divine. I knew, that day.

She came out of the situation with smiles. And through them I saw divinity. Through them I felt moved. I knew that I would never feel that way again. I needed to remember the situation. I kissed her and felt connected, felt the warmth that I had seen in her lips so many times rush over my eyes. The sight took place in the cores of my being and I saw truth for the first time in my life.

Clichés lash out sometimes. And through them we find the melancholy support that we need to get through the day.

{Praise getting through the day}

James felt a spell would ease his body back to goodness, but he had nothing to conjure up. Instead he closed his eyes. He floated away, slipping hazily back to the park he'd sat in earlier in the day. The hectic nature of his mind didn't allow for him to take it in at the time, but now, now when his mind felt numb, now he could feel it.

Now: Things were slow. Smoke filled the air around him, the wind sat stagnant in its swirl. He drifted slowly away from himself. Then he was dreaming:

James heard little of what the people around him said. The noises were whisked away by spring winds, they drifted into the breeze with the rest of the matter and the mirth. Kids curtsied to one another in dresses as they sashayed downstream with the lightly flowing water. It speckled their faces as they ran, hand in hand, through it, beneath it, and over the tops of its trickling wake, the sun, like their floating feet, dancing, everywhere. And Cal Anderson Park sparkled and James sparkled with it.

The earth is alive. Every inch is alive. Every inch of us is alive, always, ready to sparkle in the sun.

{Praise the sun}

And the people the sun fell on sparkled too, all of them. They walked with faces turned towards gravel pathways, as is the custom. The sun sprinkled light on the bridges of their down turned noses.

Little by little they let the noises of the park lift their faces, consume them in light. Their eyelids turned inward and their faces shrank until they controlled the glimmer their eyes took in. Then they surveyed the scene, let it fall before them, and returned again to the consistency of dirt.

James did this. And every five minutes or so he repeated the routine.

At the head of the park loomed a large pyramid shaped fountain. Water eased over the top and down the sides. Eased may be too casual a word, the water sleeked down the sides of

the pyramid like rapidly melting plastic. Its flow illuminated each edge of each brick, each one catching a bit of water, causing it to break and fall in cacophonic euphony, the slow, pulsing flow staying consistent with every push from the center.

A large woman, about three to four feet wide sat at the bottom of the stream that ran from the fountain. Her feet dipped into the glimmering liquid. James stared at the fat that rippled in every indentation of her tight green shirt. It was repulsive, yet called to his vision. He felt sorry for her body and sorry for himself, for his thoughts.

He turned and looked at the entrance to the pyramid. Water fell over it. It looked as though any moment, people, their hands raised to the sky, would be hurled from it and scream until the ride came to a watery splash below. It never happened. The pyramid was only twenty or so feet high and more of an aesthetic amusement than anything else.

An Asian woman walked with her daughter. The daughter wore a dress pulled up to her neck, the mother a shirt unbuttoned past her breasts. Classy, thought James Keen. Go parents go.

The sun grew hotter, which for Seattle is a relative term because every time you try to tell someone its hot in Seattle you get one-upped, every time. Regardless, James pulled his linen pants above his knees and let his hairy legs glimmer in the light. He took care to fix his facial stare every few minutes onto something else, so as not to seem overly interested in any aspect of the park. There were too many people observing too

many people. He didn't want to stand out. And although he felt he was the best looking person, not only in the park, but on the whole fucking hill, he kept a demure demeanor. Such things rarely go unnoticed, he assumed, but when he lifted his head he didn't see a soul who seemed to care. And so it goes, he thought, and so it always seems to go.

Sam moved to Rome, Italy for three months during the spring of her second year at the University of Washington. While there she encountered what would be the most beautiful sights her eyes would ever take in. They took them in, and with the beauty she felt a worth she hadn't before known.

The way she could sponge up life and squeegee herself onto people was an astonishing experience to partake. She mesmerized the gentlemen that surrounded her with such ease. One had to wonder if she knew she was doing it, if she cared at all. I suppose the relevance of the matter is of small pertinence to the genre of human that was Samantha, but such suppositions really don't matter anyway, do they?

Oh, silly, silly words – how they complicate those that use them.

{Praise those that use them}

The wind lifted her face to the sky as she strode across the Ponte Cisto bridge. She saw St. Peter's cathedral in the distance on the other side of the Tiber River, but feeling

anxious about being so close to such dogmatic law, she fed her attention to the gypsy woman selling names imprinted on rice grains. Never thinking to buy one, she smiled at the woman and thought about petting her depressed canine companion. She didn't. Instead she felt the wind lift her hands to her face. She felt young. She felt she could walk forever, until she saw and understood everything. She relished the motion of her body, which the energy inside her made constant.

The motion led her away from the Campo Di Fiori, away from the hustling Italian market vendors and sightseers, and into the Western side of town. She walked eagerly across the ancient cobblestone walkways. The walkways knew of possibility. Roman history is blanketed with the notion of possibility. That one could always be greater if the glory of his greatness was given away. As long as one sacrificed his individual significance he could rise to heights unseen. At least that's how the story was sold.

Samantha touched the cobblestones of possibility and they reciprocated such notions in their indirect way. She knew no boundaries and couldn't understand the thought of humbling her character to something other than itself. Her intelligence was adequate, not extraordinary, and her common sense was applicable, but not overwhelmingly acute. Her grace came from her beauty.

"If only she had wings", her Mother used to say when swooning over her delicate possession, "She could be an angel."

When Sam's Mother crooned her eyes opened up wondrously and the angelic ideal of Samantha danced in her head.

And although they were a major draw for most visitors to the city of Rome, Sam hated the sight of angels. She hated how they were sculpted, as if with divine intention. She hated their perfect manner and the purity in the mind of the artist who shaped them.

"There's no design, your flaws are fine," she said to herself through soft gusts of breath.

Sam moved through the streets with an overly reflective mind. Her physical faults were in holding patterns inside of her head. Finally, she stopped underneath the whispers of water that caught the wind next to the Trevi Fountain. She remembered the walk, but was unsure of how she ended up there. Must have been following the crowds, she thought.

Sam watched people throw in coins, expecting something in return. Always throwing, always expecting. She took out a golden, Italian coin. She brought the coin to her lips and hoped. Samantha hoped she would never again feel the push of necessity, the slow, rumbling growl that echoes within, that says, but it must be done, it simply must. Sam threw the coin into the fountain, hoping she would never know the feeling of wings on her back

Such lies grow in the hearts of men and women when they least expect it. When the head's collection of thoughts has no time to

stop and sort them out it chooses what it wants to use as cause or effect, as meaningful and meaningless.

{Praise meaningful and meaningless}

Samantha never had enough time. Her watch constantly angered her as it did now, causing her to leave the famous fountain. Her pace quickened and moved through the cobblestone streets with anxious ankles.

A weathered old man noticed her stropky steps. He looked contemptuously at the strands of short brown hair that flickered and flockered just above the back of her shoulders. The wisps in the front bounced off black glasses that boxed in her eyes from the rest of the world, from the rest of herself.

Her nose was petite as were her slightly colored lips that just barely protruded from her face. Her delicacy caused the old man to wonder if she was sculpted by an angelic Mother and not the god he knew so well. Her hips worked in lovely unison as she rounded the Gelati and headed down the adjoining street and out of the tired man's life forever.

She was a work in progress, a genuine artifact of evolution, structured daily by the inertia of the particles that surrounded her. Even the old man's presence, a distraction from the two women lavishly dressed in sultry bridesmaids gowns, added to the never ending sculpture of her character. For at least one moment she was content with her single lifestyle and didn't have to ponder the thought of an enclosed existence.

Reveling in his good fortune James Keen meandered around his apartment eager for the night to arrive. The call hadn't been completely unexpected. It had been preempted by the extra session of foreplay the night before that never turned into anything more than a cunning rouse for cuddling. He didn't mind the cuddling, or the foreplay for that matter and was happy that the call came. She wanted something more.

He knew of her desire. It came right through the phone and into his ear. But when would it materialize? Would it be tonight? Would games be played? James knew that precise, calculated actions were in order. The slip up could be huge. The boat could easily be rocked, for it was only a canoe at this point. James Keen had to make it a tanker. So, "Of course I understand," he said. "I completely know what you're talking about. I love hanging out with you. And we can take this wherever you want it to go."

Perfect! Compassion, understanding, maturity, and friendship: All things he felt she wanted. He felt it meant he could not have sex that night and the next time he talked to her she would want him twice as much, or so thought the eighteen year old staring in one direction and walking in the other. Thank you for making this night fit together so precisely, he thought. And as if the plan had been booked in his planner for months and the reservations made with casual intent, James Keen waited for a girl to arrive, knowing that he had already forgiven himself for not trying hard enough.

The hours between the call and the arrival are always the most annoying aspect of the game. He lounged across couches in the waiting room of his mind, flipping through the same pages of the same magazine over and over. Sex enveloped his thoughts.

He could see the women. Their thin bodies draped haphazardly with little to no clothing, whispering for attention with half opened mouths. He heard the subtle whisper that he always pictured their half opened mouths to make.

When would she arrive? 8:30 was it, or 9:00? He began to drink.

Her image etched into his mythologized version of women. His mind began to stroll along. In a smooth sort of way at first, then it began to race, but the image never moved. The image of the idyllic wonderment stayed the same. The woman was trapped as a finite version of herself. His mind processed female imagery in such a way that there was the mythologized image and nothing more. No room for fluctuation. No room for humanity, no, simply no room for such things.

The image: A curtailing smile slinking out of the corner of dew-dripped lips, the girl looking right at him, and maybe a little wind to provide the needed mental energy that her presence involved. She sat there, winking with her entire body, as if he was the only being in the world with eyes.

He looked in the mirror while relieving the first broken seal of the night. He felt that he might need to change his shirt and maybe turn his hat to the side, ever so slightly.

Drinking, casual conversation, a possible trip to a party somewhere on campus, a flirtatious game of pool, and a whirlwind of sex, the routine sat motionless in his head. Motionless as only desire can.

Echoing off the walls of the mind, desire pervades the senses and captures the feeling of security within the nerves. This feeling is captured the first time the routine ever takes place.

{Praise the routine}

Like a gambler, he played every day, the first win looming in his mind each time he laid his hand. And the idea that he could win, not that he would, or should, but that the possibility existed, drove his compulsion. He lit a cigarette and used the lighter to pop open a smaller canister of beer than the previous. The phone rang. She was at the door, but unable to get in. With a breath from his diaphragm his body left the couch and wandered over to the door as if it had nothing better in the world to do.

He traipsed down the apartment stairs and into the lobby. She stood on the other side of the glass. Who was locked in and who was locked out? Both were on display, making the fifteen feet from the elevator to the door very awkward. He thought about his hair which was a little shorter than before and

wondered if she would notice the change. Her body wavered back and forth, sort of slow dancing with the purse that looped over her shoulder and kept bumping against her side. Then, with a click and a slight push the doors of display opened. The image blew out of his mind as he searched for something to say- and only the words remained.

The rain poured down on his shirt with a penetrating vengeance. James ran across the darkened street, through puddles that quenched the sponges of his leather shoes. He bounded across the rain filled gutters and onto the sidewalk.

The encounter had not gone according to his meticulously audacious plan. When the girl arrived he was no more in control of the situation than the middle car of a freight train. He didn't even move when she left his apartment after about an hour of quick advances. He didn't even know why he made them, they just happened, responses to the words he spoke. Now he was headed to the Knarr Bar to drink his face off.

The Knaar Bar in Seattle's U-District neighborhood is disgusting. As such, disgusting people work at the front door and check IDs. James walked by one and handed the grimy fella his false identification. The card, made a month before by one Sean Feinstein of Mercer Island, Washington proved to be a success. The disgusting man looked halfheartedly at James

and said, "Have a good one, Huck," as he surveyed the scene and gave James back his card.

Fucking Feinstein, thought James Keen.

"Thanks, he said," while lifting his head.

The Bar door flung open and in walked a stray cat from the storm. There were about thirty people or so congregating throughout the area that night. They took up most of the room around the two pool tables in the back and crowded the shuffleboard players five feet away from the bar. His path etched itself around the shuffleboard spectators and into the seat next to a soul drenched in confusion.

James Keen knew about such states and bellied up. His cash poured onto the table in crumpled up outbursts from his jeans and the last fifty cents were conjured up from somewhere in his back pocket. He made the exchange and sat momentarily content in his seat next to the bar, a beer in his hand.

A basketball game shown on the television and James wondered who the wives of the players were. Did they go to every game and if so where did they sit?

A cigarette lingered on his lips. A lighter appeared in his hand from the man next to him and the confusion of the exchange startled the receiver. James lit the cigarette, which had apparently done more campaigning for a light than his mouth. In a show of confidence he spun his barstool around. With the

cigarette perched tightly against his upper lip he brought his eyes to a tempting enigma.

The enigma sauntered around the table carrying a pool stick with a firm grasp. The stick eased its way into her hand and then back out, striking the ball in front of her and causing the onlookers to take their right hands to their mouths in awe. She let out a half smile. One that you give to the man you just won the bet with as you walk away. James took in seductive sight, filing the image within his conception of beauty. The bearer of confidence took three strides to the left and exhaled the smoke from her mouth and into the cloudy mist that hung over the table.

James's desire bled from the wound laid earlier to his confidence. Another sip of beer, a glance at the score of the game and a head-twist in her direction with a look of disapproval – then eyes back to the ground. The cigarettes seemed easier to introduce to his lungs than normal and he lit another thinking only of the affect it might have on his appearance, the effect it might have on her.

His appearance was a counter response to her movements. She seemed to own every motion her body made and conducted his body without thinking. The arousing performance she displayed on the floor of the otherwise dilapidated bar room went inside of him, through him, and within him it stayed. He knew he was transfixed, a captured man. And as a prisoner of war he took three of her steps

toward the pool table and looked in her direction with her own eyes.

When one is seen with her own eyes her sense of placement lacks definition and she usually looks back as if to say, "where am I?" The eyes that greeted the staring James Keen followed him for a second and no more. They paid no heed to the fact that they were indeed in two places at once. It seemed to simply not be a matter of interest for them. Keen knew nothing of the uninterested look.

His looks were always full of anticipation and a reverent desire to be taken away. They beckoned passion, but were whippets of melancholy that mediated his moments.

The morning mirror gave him no comfort. It merely greeted him as a grocery store clerk greets a frowning customer, a false exchange of false coin.

A cheer cut the energy of his delusional embrace with the wanted and his eyes returned to him in time to see the home team come away with their tenth straight win in a row. She seemed to shrug it off as if such things happened every day. The winning never ceased to end or begin. It seemed as though the feeling of victory lived within her sense of self.

She categorized him within the realm of people who had entered and exited her life. That is, she had seen her own eyes and looked away so as to not embrace herself outside of the sphere which she controlled.

James watched her walk with the pool stick. He watched it catch on the fringe of her blouse, which lifted, slightly above her waist. She smiled, she pulled it back down. She made sure people saw her do it.

The articles that covered her body, the articles that cover anyone's body, are there because sometimes the weather gets cold and one needs a certain amount of fabric covering him or her to keep warm. James looked at the black V-neck blouse that seductively allowed her firm breasts to have a show of their own. He watched as it stretched and pulled with her body when she walked and how it held in her independence when she laughed, only allowing the air she didn't need to escape her lungs.

James felt the shrill pain of a hallowed evening in his now slumping posture. His head swiveled surreptitiously. On one pass he saw the face of another beautiful woman, this time only in the reflection of the mirror. Had she been there the whole time? He searched the right side of the bar for her, then the left, perusing the people with his eyes. He thought she may have fled to the bathroom.

James smoked marijuana, a little a day, every day. His boredom with the world gave away easily to guitars, pot and pornography. He rarely acted in an excited manner and when he did he could be seen as most assuredly drunk. On this worthless of Wednesdays he sat facing the television, his elbows resting on the bar, trying to fade away into the screen.

He thought again about the strange sight in the mirror. He wanted to smoke. He hadn't the energy to dissect the situation and returned his thoughts to how to ask for a pack of cigarettes without sounding completely idiotic.

"Could I steal some Camel Lights," seemed like the winner and it slid out of his mouth like an August breeze.

"For six and a half, I'll give ya the whole pack," replied the bartender.

"Sold," said James Keen.

He played with one of the cigarettes in his hand for a few minutes, thinking back to a movie he watched months before about a heroine who was better looking than he and smoother than a sea shore. With that thought he flipped a quarter through his fingers before saying, "I'm here huckleberry." The smoke lingered in his face, stagnating the air around him and causing a sudden saloonish feel to come over his eyes. He squinted in a 'make my day motion' and continued to smoke the cigarette in the guise of Clint Eastwood. He liked to pretend.

James's appreciated living in his imagination. He appreciated people who lived within their own imaginations as well. He seemed to always resort to some sort of script when playing out his life. The tapestries in his bedroom hung as if no energy at all was put into placing them, though it had taken him a full two and a half hours to pin them up. Sometimes bass pounded

through his car and he pushed the seat back, causing him to lean with one hand on the steering wheel, a grimace drawn across the canvas of his face. Why can't a face be like a canvas? He often thought when changing his clothes. He would stare in the mirror with shirts, posing his face with hellos, what ups, and how do you do's. Like clay he would contort and redirect the skin covering his bones to create the image he would assume that day. No, James didn't really believe in the inner self. He was in college and he had plenty of time to look for such things.

He decided that in this silly little game of hide and seek the hider was just too good. He accepted the notion that he would just be whatever he wanted to be whenever he wanted to be it. For this reason he had a random assortment of friends and a specific personality to go with all of them. He never actually changed completely. The facade only ran so deep. Underneath pulsed a cacophonous river of emotions and concerns that flowed the way it did depending on how many rocks seemed to fall in the water on that particular day.

On this particular rainy Wednesday in the university district, Seattle, Washington, 98105, USA, Earth, Milky Way Solar System, James Keen sat at the bar as Clint-fucking-Eastwood and drained the tobacco out of cigarettes through deep bellows of dark smoke.

In American culture, when males consume alcohol while sitting on barstools watching girls walk in and out, placing a number

on all of them, something happens. The calm collected emotion of Clint Eastwood somehow fades away with a cloud of smoke, the hands suddenly have no idea where to go, attention cannot be placed on anything for too long, and the urge to touch the opposite sex comes out of nowhere in a full born frenzy, capturing the mind.

James thought about the girl in the mirror. Why had she simply faded away? Did that feeling on his shoulder have some sort of meaning? Was he just too stupid and stoned to know he needed to follow her? Now a multitude of desires haunted his mind. The room seemed to be a lot louder, and the walls seemed to breathe anxious breaths. His foot slid off the barstool and hit the floor not knowing where it was headed. The rest of his body followed suit.

Minutes later he was in the bathroom, his face on display in the cracked mirror that covered the five foot wall.

“God Damnit!” he said aloud, hoping that emitting thoughts three dimensionally would create a world of fantasy before him where the girl reappeared and seconds later they would be pushed up against the already cracked mirror. He put his hands in his pockets, holsters of fear, and nudged the bathroom door open with his knobby knee.

The pool tables crowded the bathroom door. He walked sideways, a foot at a time, through the crowd and stood for a second by the front door before lazily drifting out like it had been the plan all along. He had been completely manipulated

by a single sight, a hope, a shameless desire. The black evening catered to his need for substance, his need for...what? He wondered.

He walked home, his face sullen, a brazen, exasperated stare leading the way.

It isn't as though he could be classified as sane or insane. Cyrus fit both descriptions to a T. The land he occupied with the one bedroom cabin and a meadow the size of three football fields was left to him, without intention, by his parents. His father had been in the shit and died upon hitting the Vietnamese soil. His mother tried suicide for a brief stint in the eighties, but it never fully panned out. In 1989 a man beat the shit out of her for sleeping with another man. She died upon hitting the ground.

Cyrus, then an eighteen year old, was sent to live with his aunt and uncle in Vermont. Although they didn't believe in having children, they accepted Cyrus out of respect for his father's time served. Cyrus knew exactly how long his dad had been in country: 1 hour and 14 minutes.

"You are nothing compared to that kind of courage," his uncle would scream at him with shimmering lips. "You aren't worth the one hour and fourteen minutes of hell he endured."

“One hour and fourteen,” Cyrus would say.

After enduring their tutelage for three more years, Cyrus decided he needed to leave. He didn’t tell them where he was going, nor did he tell himself.

He had begun to act upon his thoughts without needing to be fully conscience of them. A metaphysical wonderment: Cyrus O’Reilly. He communicated to himself from himself and used his body as the mediator. The conversations might only last a second or could go on for hours. Either way, Cyrus was right in the middle of the shit.

He hitchhiked, right through the shit and everything, all the way down the east coast and into Florida. He stayed there for three months as the care taker of Cynthia Carter’s swamp and alligator show. In the vast majority of those three months he never took his eyes off the swamp. It did not reflect at all. He looked in expecting to see a reflection, but he saw only the mirk and mistakes inherent to things left on their own.

Cyrus became lost in the mundane beauty of the swamp. How it swayed amidst itself, allowing the filth to enter with a kind of stoic confidence. Such confidence he had never known.

Cynthia Carter was an eclectic dame who kept shawls and skirts from historical periods. She wore them around the house, fulfilling the shows mystique for the curious patrons.

When they left she drank and danced with old men. The mirrors acted as an audience. And although Cyrus lived in a small shack in the back of the property, he crept close to the house at night to peer in at the audience.

Each night he peered in at the mirrors and as long as he was out of view he found them beautiful. He loved how the images were not real, yet real, all at the same time. The paradox became his obsession. He looked into the mirror at a distance, noticing the way light reflected. Comparing, contrasting, wanting to know for sure which was the real artifact. That was his compulsion.

His heat oppressed mind couldn't take the confusions any more. He decided to take matters into his own hands and wandered up to the house, just as the last customers were leaving. He watched her lock the door. He watched her undress. She slipped into a black, velvet nightgown and swayed her hips to the music. He began to feel tingly and touched his chest. His heart pounded. How did she make that happen, he wondered? She controlled his eyes and the more he stared, the more his heart pounded. The pounding scared him, yet when she left his sight he felt cold and alone. He crept near the bedroom window of the house. She had not yet gone in and was still preparing her final drink in the kitchen.

Cyrus opened the window and slid through. He moved from the bedroom into a room filled with stuffed alligators. He perched among them and watched the darkened hallway as

Cynthia Carter sauntered through with a hesitant hold on her drink.

When she turned on the lights she said, "What's that noise - who in the world?"

Cynthia's voice trailed off. She stared wide eyed at Cyrus O'Reilly.

"Now son I told you to stay in the god damn tool shed, so help me god I'll skin you alive. Do you hear what I'm saying to you?"

Cyrus stood and stared at the oncoming feeling. He felt fear and frustration. He felt gratification's desire, he felt the pounding. The tenderness of the emotion had gone. What was left was lethal.

There are always two sides to every feeling one ever comes into contact with. If one side is not played out, then the other one takes over. No one ever knows if the right side was played out. It's a simple twist of fate that determines it all.

{Praise the simple twist that determines it all}

Cyrus was through twisting. He was not going to be the laughing stock of his own mind any longer. The feelings that had been stored away and had oozed out of his timidity over the years now amassed into a very real weapon.

Powerful is that which has been waiting.

"I came here to stop you from tingling," said Cyrus O'Reilly

"What in the hell are you talking about? When I tell Frank tomorrow that you came into the house he is going to kick your ass back to Canada. Now get the hell out of here," she said, while pulling back her night gown.

"I'm going to bring the hell in here," said Cyrus O'Reilly

His eyes stared right into the mirror, but he could not see himself, only Cynthia. He walked over to the glass. He punched it with his bare hand, shattering it into a million tiny pieces. Blood fell with the glass to the floor. Then he bent down next to it and stared at Cynthia Carter.

"Alright, now you done pissed me off boy, that mirror was from India and that is all the way across the god damned world!" She screamed.

She walked over to him with the hounds of hell at her sides. And just as quickly, Cyrus sprang up with long shards of glass coming out of both hands. He threw his arms around her, stabbing her twice in the back. When she backed away, he slit her right down the middle of her belly. She fell to the floor without a sound and seemed to die as her head hit the hardwood. Cyrus turned her over and sliced her from arm pit to arm pit. He sliced a cross into her stomach, leaving a trace of the divine with her.

"I will find god," said Cyrus O'Reilly.

He walked away from the body and feebly opened the door. Cyrus walked the entire way to the bus stop and caught the first bus that came to the station. He sat in the back and hid the bloodstains on his shirt from the sleeping passengers. Just as the tires started to spin, he noticed a ticket lying on top of the snoring, overweight woman next to him. He took it without thinking about a thing.

A one way train to New York City, thought Cyrus. What will they think of next?

James felt awkward when being introduced to people. He immediately sensed that he had nothing in common with anyone; that conversation would ultimately bring this to the forefront and awkward smiles would be shared. Now it has been mentioned earlier that James Keen adored the simplicities of a smile. And let it be known now that the smiles that arise out of awkward meetings with people are in no way simple. Regardless, James felt that meeting people for the sake of meeting people had about as much merit as eating shit to see what shit tastes like.

When James met Dylan Smalls he felt that taste crawl to the forefront of his throat. His eyes winced as he slumped in his chair and said, “Hey Dylan, what’s happening?”

Dylan continued to stare at the computer monitor in front of him. The monitor was positioned in the corner of a 5 by 5 room. The room could have been a broom closet if the Seattle School District in Seattle, Washington had bigger classrooms to spare, but they, like most public schools systems in this country, do not.

The building itself sat upon a small hill. Its exterior had been built entirely out of glass panels. From a distance it looked like a reflection of the trees that surrounded it, it looked as though it were trying to hide.

Dylan embodied the building’s sentiment as he slowly moved the mouse around the worn pad.

“If you type in artillery instead of guns, you can still get to the websites that Bess doesn’t want you to go to”, he said.

“What’s Bess?” said James Keen.

“It’s what the schools use to keep kids away from sites on the web that are inappropriate,” said Dylan. “It’s fucking stupid because all you have to do is call the guns a different name. You just have to use different words.”

Dylan liked that he knew how to play with the system. He liked that his black pants were skin tight and that his shirt looked

like discarded fishnet stockings, poorly woven together. His Mohawk turned different colors every day and the steel tips of his boots looked worn and confused.

The more I look at his eyes the more I see a hawk that swallowed a child in the night. It must have been hungry to swallow an entire child, I said to myself, the first time I saw him.

James Keen didn't see any of these things. He said, "What do you like about guns?"

"I just like to kill stuff," said Dylan.

James laughed a little bit and shuffled around in his chair. He attempted to sound like he didn't care about anything at all, especially a 16 year old, suicidal kid, talking about guns.

"My dad used to take me to the gun range," said James. "One time I was trying to fire a 12 gauge shotgun at the skeet. Those are the things that fire up into the air when you pull a cord."

"I know what skeet is," muttered Dylan.

"Anyway, 12 gauges are huge and I had it about four inches from my shoulder. When the skeet shot in the air I fired. The gun's kick hit me so hard that I fell on the ground and I had a bruise the size of a softball on my shoulder," said James.

Dylan's eyes turned from the computer screen to the ground. He smiled with a slight head tilt and made a sound like "hmfh."

He was not about to let this college kid come into his space and have the only story about guns.

"I have lots of guns," he said. "I'm a really good shot. I could probably hit a person from a tall building and no one would know."

"Why wouldn't they know?" asked James.

"Because I wouldn't want them to," said Dylan.

"If I wanted them to know that I killed someone then I would just spray the whole crowd. I could probably take out a hundred people before they brought me down," said Dylan.

"What kind of gun would you use?" asked James with a smile on his face.

Dylan looked at James as if he was the first person to be seen by his eyes in quite some time. He smiled a little too and said, "There are lots of guns that would work, I'll show you some."

Dylan and James navigated the interweb for about an hour, the time of the session. The goal of the session was for James to meet Dylan and attempt to get to know him. Many people do this with a question and answer period that revolves around family, friends and hobbies. James Keen asked Dylan how to spray a crowd of people with bullets and get away, Scott free. He asked a 16 year old kid how to be a mass murderer. He paid close attention to the answers. He listened to the child with suicidal tendencies. And through the conversation, he

found out what this world really has in store for those too busy to see the celebrity of youth.

Emerson awoke as the wind tiptoed across his forehead and slipped down the silver cross resting upon the nape of his neck. He put his hand to the cross and felt the coolness of his core. He thought often about the commitment he'd made. He thought about everything that went into it. The years, the hours...the hours, the moments that made him decide, the indecision that made him wonder. And with the finality of the communion, he gave his life to god and words.

He studied the bible to such a degree that the words melted before him and the scenes played out in his head like short films, but the director was always abstract. The colors and emotions swirling through the stories mixed within him. The words moved him without him thinking about how they felt. They moved him through the stories and through the images swirling about, but did not help in his attempt to understand it all.

Desire never left him. Many religions say it can't.

That it is the human condition. That and breath and shit and death.

Emerson knew this to be true, to be true. He lifted his swirling mind from the pillow and placed it above his body. He walked

to the cross adorning the altar. It loomed above him and he knelt before it. He spoke slowly to god:

“I am Emerson Marin and I have woken again to find myself beneath you, again. There are things floating within me that your words do not condone. I have read all the words in all the books that bear your name. I have taken them in and they have all mixed together. I have tried to feel their feeling. I have tried to do that. I introduce myself again to you, anew and again. I ask for your forgiveness for the things, for all the things that the words do not pardon.”

And so it goes he thought, and so it always seems to go.

James thought he was patient, but his senses knew otherwise. After working with abused and neglected kids, as he did every day after school, he walked to a small coffee shop to pretend to study.

He leafed through the patrons and one after the other they turned their attention elsewhere upon the arrival of his eyes. He felt the heat of the cup underneath his palms as the barista handed him the steaming swill. He held the cup with one hand, then another. Foam puffed out from the tip as it moved from hand to hand. He licked it clean and took a seat next to the window. The people outside moved in hasty streams of sound.

Lighting cigarettes and staring at the ground, they trespassed on city streets meant for those going somewhere. James picked up the cup and held it just below his nose, its steam moistening his lips. He took a slow sip.

Outside the cigarettes burned slowly in the street. The wind picked up the smoke and it swirled with exhaust and dust and death and wafted through the sky and up to heaven. James watched it ascend. The steam simmered and he took a long, slow pull from the cup. It swathed his mouth in serenity for a moment. He swallowed, thinking fondly of the liquid as it slid down his throat.

He was waiting for something. He knew the more he left his house the closer he came to it. Sometimes he sensed it in rooms filled with other people. It seemed not to run from him, but to scamper about, this way and that, until it danced away, out of sight. But still, he waited.

James Keen was beaten on a morning that started with a leaf trying to hold onto a tree with all its might. The wind whipped the leaf until it tore. Wind beckoned that single leaf with the graces of god, but the leaf, sturdy and strong, held on for dear life. Finally, as things eventually do, the leaf let go. The force of the wind was too consistent, too overbearing.

The leaf's fight with the wind is like its fight with its own biology. The futile nature of the endeavor leads only to a monotonous melancholy.

James was hit in the abdomen first. Following that was a stab wound to the side and when his head hit the ground, his soul just about up and left. He staggered above himself for a while. Soft music played in the background in a language he didn't understand. Motionless, the rest of him lay on a damp Seattle sidewalk. The lights of the bars were so close; their glimmer trickled off the sewer water running through his eyes.

The boys who beat James Keen had never killed anyone before. They were later described as "drunk, bored, and confused." Such a description fits those that deserve it. James Keen did not deserve it, but it could have been attached to him as well. That is the reason he walked by the Man Ray that night, one of Seattle's many gay bars. The bar doesn't even exist anymore, but on that night, in the glow of a full moon, it was quite certainly in front of James Keen.

He felt like he needed to completely let go of the mirror, the mirror that shone in his head every time he thought about sex, the one that pointed him toward disaster after disaster. The one that left him to search for himself in other people and the one that told him in which people to search.

James Keen's internal mirror was a constant reflection of that which he was not. One that said, find these things in another person and you will be fulfilled. James realized hours before

his death that fulfillment was usually mythologized. He realized earlier that month his true fascination of aesthetics had been leading him in the wrong path for years. His constant search and bewilderment with the opposite sex was exactly what it promised him every night: A disappointing exposure of his own insecurities.

By exploring his ability to feel open he explored his ability to search through the mirror. Like a child staring at a reflection wondering where it came from, James Keen stared into a cheap bottle of wine, wondering where all his ideals had led him.

It was a cold Friday night and his friends had gone out in search of the unknown woman that would be wonderful and sensual and practical, while at the same time consuming mystical amounts of alcohol and laughter. They would point to her, but it would be a mirage. It would happen again and again, and then they would retreat through pompous banter, discussing a fantasy world that never seemed to actualize.

James sat at home with a bottle of wine and the internet. Two very explosive things if juxtaposed just right. He drank until the bottle seemed to have a green tinge. He stared at the greenness of the bottle, wondering how he never noticed what the bottle actually looked like until it was empty.

Metaphors like this happen to us all the time. We see them and feel them and sense them and laugh at them. The poets grab them and extend them and make them beautiful. The cynics shoot them down and stomp on their significance.

{Praise their significance}

James Keen searched for porn on the internet.

He knew that he had been hollowed out years before. He was a commercial for an amazingly effective person. He just didn't know how to sell it any more. Unknowingly to James, instead of alcohol really filling you up, as one may think it does, it actually empties out everything inside of you.

You feel that freedom as you throw caution to rainy winds; you sense that epiphany as you move lightly through heavy waters.

{Praise the heavy waters}

James knew that he could only suppress the righteous emotions that were swelling inside for so long.

Sometimes, the hardest thing to do is sell yourself on the idea that you don't exist the way you have built yourself to exist.

{Praise how we're built to exist}

James could think about this philosophical notion for hours, but wine does not allow such things when action on the thought is close at hand. James clicked away at his computer trying to find the right image that would make sense with his version of arousal. He clicked and clicked until he saw a man standing next to a woman with her head bent low. The man stood, nude and muscular, the woman slender and voluptuous, as many porn type women are. The man held the head of the

woman in his hands as if in total control of her. The woman's eyes stared blankly at the ground and her body fell limp in his arms.

James had seen hundreds of images like this in his life.

Masturbating to internet porn was not a new activity, staring at the man in the picture was. James took in the whole image of the man. He saw the curved features that were said to only belong to a woman. He saw vulnerability and power and grace. His mind, confused and excited, sifted the thoughts through his social acceptance meter until the meter exploded. He felt a surge of violent energy well up in his body. The energy came from a place that James had not felt before, it came with a conviction that he had not yet known. Such a feeling does not come to those that do not seek it out and this night was a tender search of the soul for one James Keen.

It was after the hours of staring at images of men and feeling a headstrong energy persist in him that James knew he needed to act on the emotions swirling, swelling and crashing through his soul, if only for a moment. To allow an energy that strong to course through him and then to shut it off would be emotional suicide. James hid behind his social mores and intellect all his life, now he would come to the world as an emotional bat out of hell.

He knew that acting on the emotion and fantasizing were two entirely different games all together. The former scared him to

death. He wondered if it would be as cowardly a death as the emotional suicide that accompanies repression.

He was mediated by the thought of failure in the world he had built for himself; the only one he ever knew; the only one that knew him. To let it down would be to kneel at the feet of all who would ever come into his path again. In repression he would not exist.

Such thoughts come to all our minds, I think. What we do with them makes us who we are. The thoughts can be put in so many categories. The human brain has such a complicated filing system that many times we lose the file on purpose and never search for it again. It's simpler that way, simpler to believe that it never existed at all than to substantiate its existence with thought or, god forbid, action.

{Praise action}

I envy James for the actions he took leading up to that terrible incident and the innocent death that followed hours after in the hospital bed. I envy the purity of heart that led him onto the hill that fateful night and I glamorize the experience, because sometimes things need to glitter for people to notice them.

Emerson became a pastor shortly after his twenty second birthday. Never before that time did he consider killing off parts of his world, but he knew it had to happen. The adventurous nature that propelled him through his youth could not live within him any longer. It would kill him. That he knew. That raucous disposition trickled within him and leaked into his demeanor from time to time and the time had come to put his finger in the dyke.

He knew that giving his desires to god would not satisfy his curiosities, but what's a human to do?

God exists for people so that they can do just that, kill a part of their humanity and replace it with an ideal. And humans do this every day. They give up the aspects of themselves they can't control. They just give them right up. And they look up at god and ask if he knows what they sacrificed. And they pray and pray and pray that it was a good idea. Then they keep praying and giving and killing off small pieces of themselves. And so it goes.

Emerson knew the way it had gone and the way it would go and all the in-between, just like god. He knew that he would give up the glitter and the gold and live within the confines of brick and bond. And although he knew desire would weigh down his soul, he didn't know how. That was the mystery, it always is.

So he knelt before god and the cross and the candles and tried to take them all in, to fill the ever growing void. And every day

he knelt and every day the crevice of his desires crept further within him.

The emptiness, like a cavern, took shape inside his soul. Sound echoed all around him, darkness lapped at the stagnant water on the rocks. His despondency shone as shadows pressed against the cavern walls. He stared at the shadows as they told the story of his life, a fire burning closely behind them.

He became lost in that image. And as the days passed he decided to forego his intended purity and took to drinking copious amounts of whiskey. And he would scream at the shadows on the wall, he would scream at them dear friends, as if they existed. He plunged himself into the bottle and knelt and plunged and knelt, like washing garments by the river he scrubbed his soul clean only to notice the water was filled with dirt. Rage overtook him.

His sermons became rants at the world. His congregation, made up of the most elderly people he had ever seen, paid little attention to what he said. As long as there was a time to praise they felt content.

And there is so much to praise. Around every corner sits another chance to praise the world we live in and the people and the love and everything else.

Emerson found that people listened to his intonation more than his words. Words were merely placeholders for emotion, something for feeling to ride on as they passed through the

inner workings of the soul and out into the wildness of the world. Words carry the feelings out, but there their function ceases. After that, words just dangle, waiting for someone to pick them up and put feeling back into them. And so it goes.

And so it went that the congregation of Ebenezer Baptist church, Travelers Rest, South Carolina was too tired to pick the words back up. They just let them drift back to the dirt and left them there to die.

And on and on it went, and years passed in that way. And one day Emerson awoke to find he was thirty six years old. He stared at his decaying body in the mirror and wondered where in it he could find god. After all the years he still had no idea where to look. He didn't feel the presence anywhere. So he knelt and prayed and drank and slayed the impurities within him, drowning them in the shrill spills of whiskey.

He stared at the cross and the nails in the hands of the christ. Always his gaze drifted to the nails. He took them in. He bowed to them, to them he gave respect. The rest of it didn't have a place within him, but the nails, the nails were a part of him. He felt them all the time.

And within him people were crucified, the people he wanted to be, the people he knew he could be, the people that he was.

Yes, people. Yes, plural. Yes, inside us, all the time.

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Fiddlesticks, fiddlesticks, pick em up, pick em up. See me my friend I am there, I am there. See me my friend, I am here, here I am. Away from Mothers. Away from god. Here we are, here we go.

You sleep in the valley of the shadow of rebirth. As innocent as the child stealing apples from the tree, you pursue your passions. Pick em up, put em down. Touch the good, hear the bad, feel the in-between. There will be no more, no more in-between! The grievance has cost too much. Let loose. Let it grow. You are woman, you are man, You are human!

Oh, the man that claims himself as man! The dirt he walks on! The foul stench of his lies, the stale smell of repulsions panting! Laugh last! Laugh fucking last, that's what it screams as it pushes its small head back into the womb - your dark, cavernous prison! Bowed head...bowed before it all. All the while screaming! Screaming at the god above to be let out!

{Praise the god above}

Cyrus screamed as the voice echoed wildly through his head. He didn't understand most of the words, but words can only mean so much anyway. Cyrus felt the effect of the words. He knew they lived within him as something very different than letters, symbols and signs. That he knew and that was all.

Cyrus never understood why he was a man. It made no sense to him that he was not a woman also. If one could be a man at one point in time, then why could one not be a woman at another point in time? If Woolf could create *Orlando* and Orlando could exist in his head, then why could he not undergo a similar transcendence?

Cyrus paid no heed to the genitalia argument. He understood that having certain biological parts classified him as one thing and having other parts would make him something altogether different. These were details that he didn't have any time for. The voices, the screaming, the questions, these were the things that he had to deal with.

His inconsistent mindset never allowed him to label himself as anything other than human. That, he felt, was as specific as the shit was going to get. And because of that, he wandered through fields of confusion and questioned at every turn what he should be doing and why. How he should be thinking, walking, talking, remembering...it didn't matter, all things would be done the way they needed to be done, until that fateful day.

On that day necessity will take over to such an extent that Cyrus will not know what should be done, only that it is being done. On that day he will be pulled so maliciously from his mind that questions of gender and sex will be laughing matters. That day will face him, as it will face us all; unexpectedly and without mercy.

Motherhood took Samantha away to a place she never thought existed; a place she never felt she would exist within. She was right. Existence in that place can be with stagnant emotion. An uncontrollable siege of constant need and forced love.

Yes, she loved her children and would never think of giving that love away, no matter what the cost. But that didn't change the fact that she loved them from this realm. She loved them from a place that she did not control, from a place that no person controlled at all. She loved them as kitsch loves pink flamingoes. They played in her yard, came in and had soup with their friends at her table on cold December days. They sat in her car with shin guards and cleats poking and prodding each other amidst her far away cries. She never had to think about loving them. She never had to think about anything.

Her necessity as a Mother controlled her. And as it controlled her mind, necessity controlled her body in almost every moment. Every time she took a bubble bath she felt as if she was in a pornographic film. Touching her thighs, curving hand next to body a finger at a time until it came to her groins. The water would wash over her. She would release, walk out of the bathroom and cook her children breakfast.

She often thought of the day she became pregnant and the thoughts that encircled her head in that moment. That moment seemed as if it happened to someone else, the hope, the mystery, the love. It was like a long forgotten dream, remembered only in other dreams, fleeting. It was a dream

that came and went without warning, without the substance to know whether it was good or bad.

It came from all angles: Friends, television, magazines, books, from her husband's expectations. She supposed she always longed for the moment when she could watch him lift his first born into the air. When the moment came she just wanted him to put her down. She lived in an uncontrollable realm of expectation. The plans had been made, the course set, and the captain, whoever he may be, had taken a firm grasp on the wheel.

Samantha had grown accustomed to the falling eyes of male onlookers. Her breasts did not boast themselves from her chest, but they filled whatever shirt she put them in with upright dignity. Her legs were not succulently long, though her buttocks seemed to cling to skirts that found a way to flow breathlessly from the other parts of her body. She was unflawed physically, yet her short brown hair snagged at the tips and her nose came to a bit of a point. Photographs suggested she took after her mother. Samantha suggested that her mother was a slave and shunned the compliments of beauty with an American smile.

Sam's mother, Gladys Merriman, still kept a well-balanced house, tidy and confidently put together. She never laid a

finger in a place that didn't require it. It gave her grace, she used to say. It gave her boredom, Sam used to think.

I believe Gladys to be a very handsome woman, contrary to the professional opinion of one Arthur Frankel. Frankel took amateur photographs of Gladys to demonstrate the logo of his dentist practice: Teeth. Gladys' teeth were amazing. Whenever individuals pay attention to the details they make sure not to leave out teeth. They're the things that protect us from our words, the last line of defense before they leave our bodies and enter the cruel outside world. Teeth are important for this reason. Gladys liked them because they were telling of one's character.

"The sooner the better," she would tell Samantha. "You might as well learn about people sooner rather than later, so as to not have to go through the courtship of friendship."

That courtship had left scars on her life.

Gladys overcame obstacles that Sam never had to think of, millions of dollars to spend and no one to spend it with. Such plagues invent themselves from plagued minds. Gladys Merriman's was one such mind. Her continual search for a suitor nearly landed her in the hands of many unworthy men. She disgraced these men the moment she found them to be unworthy, shunning her love for them and moving onward toward assumed happiness.

Her twenties would pass by without her putting more thought into a relationship than to an evening on the town. For a brief time Gladys pursued a lawyer, Dr. Stephen Howl. When her father found out that Gladys pushed him aside for bigger and better things, he reminded her of his contempt, a contempt she had put off since her earliest years. Her father spoke in slow, vulnerable words that sashayed their way across a dimly lit table.

“What kind of woman do you presume yourself to be? Your mother left because she thought herself a failure as a wife and mother. I have pursued wealth and prestige to get you to where you are and you leave opportunity to a fool’s fate. How can you manage to look at yourself in the mirror? Don’t you understand that you are only a reflection of what you could be?”

“What do you think I could be, dad?” Sam said.

“Well I will tell you what you dumb fucking princess, you wouldn’t be a god damn thing unless I put that life into your bony little fingers. I moved the fucking world to get where I am and you can’t even move your fat ass from that chair to find a man to marry you. You are a sorry sight!

“A foolish thought to say a sorry sight,” whispered Gladys under her breath as she turned away from her father for the last time.

Her father took a long sip from a barely full glass of scotch. His words danced around Gladys' head. She was all of a sudden forgetful and hardly remembered why she felt so numb. Her father put down the glass of scotch and tightened his scarf around the cold white hairs of his neck.

"I'm going to Florida for the winter. When I come home I expect that you have found someone to support you. I am tired of you Gladys. I'm tired of loving you. Goodbye," said her father.

Gladys turned towards her father as he walked out the door: Her face stoic, hands clammy, and her mind as stagnant as a Florida swamp. She watched him walk away from the table that night without a thought in her mind. Three days later she received a phone call from Trinity National Hospital informing her of a plane crash. Her father had taken the red eye and it had taken him down. Gladys felt alone in her large house for the first time in her life.

She stayed at the residence on Hollows Drive for three more years. During those three years she slept with one man. He was in town on business and stopped by to see her father. Gladys told him of her father's passing and the man felt cowardly for not having found out earlier. He offered to give Gladys money to help her along. He felt obligated.

Gladys accepted the money and wearily put it in an urn that was never put to use. She placed the urn underneath the office table and met her father's friend in the foyer. She offered him

lodging for the night and a glass of scotch. The man took the drink and the offer. They moved into her father's study and the man moved next to Gladys. He took her clothes off and had his way with her right there in her father's office. She let him do it. She felt obligated.

The money stayed in the urn for a while. After some time, Gladys took the ashes of her father and instead of placing them in the urn and paying to have it sealed she poured them slowly into the drainage ditch, in the street, in front of her house. A penny saved is a penny earned, she thought.

Emerson stepped slowly from Dr. Rosenfeld's office. He pushed through the lightly falling rain and onto the sidewalk. Casually and without a moment of thought, Emerson lifted a cigarette to his lips. Smoothly dragging on the soft tip of the filter with his teeth, Emerson slipped his thumb across the lighter's trigger, scorching the tobacco. He pulled tightly, with pursed lips. Then he looked at the road, at the people, at the night sky and the stars above. He winked at god. He felt like a child remembering, as if he'd just uncovered something he had never known. He felt a swirl within him. Memories, images, pictures of a forgotten time flashed haphazardly inside of his mind.

Striding across town he thought of the sermon he would deliver to his congregation the next day. It would be about rebirth, about the exchange of love that creates life. He would write it and the room and all the people would be filled with beauty. Perfectly created, perfectly placed and delivered without a care in the world.

The banal and the beautiful touch paths only every so often that one must take leave of the moment to identify the happening.

{Praise happening}

I see a swan floating in the murky, gray depths of New York's East river. Amidst the refuse and disposed consumerism it treads a path of lightness, drawing a clear white line through the devil's own swamp. A swamp looked over every day as something beautiful within the city. It has become cliché, a dumping ground for the obscene. The swan's elegance creates anew the feelings of hope that the river once bore the metropolis.

It treads a weary path through the refuse and the river. The swan, the water, the garbage all float freely together through the staggering city. Only if the eyes are blurred from a distance, if the thoughts are put together just right, only then does the swan become something more. The sight allows the mind to abstract the entities, it allows for feeling to overcome substance. And

somehow, beauty embraces us and we are free again to believe in the absurd nature of our earthly disposition. Then we can hope. And that is all that will ever be ours. Hope.

{Praise hope}

Elliot Kingston looked over a lightly rusted rail at the scene and wondered if the swan could fly. It was like wondering if an angel trapped in hell could maintain its status as an angel. Would it force the onlookers to view it as god's own misplaced creation?

Elliot, the only atheist born into a houseful of Christians, knew the swan had the capability to leave, yet chose to remain in the dark waters, stubbornly. Maybe swans suffer from an incurable esteem, one that forces them to be among refuse to feel beautiful. Elliot's passion for broken women and the many affairs he kept despite his marriage constantly reaffirmed this belief. Purity was now nothing more than a child's abstraction.

As a mother's touch is pure to her child Elliot's caress unto his mistresses came with ease. It came with forgiveness. As if to say, "I know, I know, but don't worry now 'cause I'm here."

They came willingly to room 922 at the Ambassador hotel, which his wife knew as his 'office'. And when they came to him, he would sit down with them and look at them as if they were the first people he had ever seen. As if they were the only objects on earth worthy of being looked at. And like reading from a book they took his hand and undressed of their own will

beneath his gentle grasp, allowing their emotions to fall from their bodies as easily as their clothes. He would play with their belly buttons, circling them with his pointer finger, then with his pinky, as his thumb gently massaged their points of expression.

Each one had a different tilt to her head as she pondered whether to laugh or moan. The tickle of the belly button and the tenderness of the clitoris caused a childlike absorption of his touch, a naive embrace of feeling that enamored their sense of sensuality enough to make them feel abused and loved all at once. He was the rapist and the therapist, they the victims and the nymphs. He held their heads like crying infants, tenderly taking their pain away, to make his crying cease.

As the wounded adult only cries when his children have gone to bed, Elliot only felt passion when their eyes shut and he was somewhere inside. When they opened them again, after dreams of glitter and gold, he would be there to show them the way home. And then he would stand motionless, looking over the railing, eyeing a pure white line through hell's murky waters, alone. God's own misplaced creation.

Samantha eased her way out of the cab and over-tipped the cabbie for the short ride from uptown. She felt if she did this he would not let be known she had ridden in his chariot to the

pyre gates. Gus Van Cremmins, the elder doorman, gave a stately nod of the head as she walked by. A salute welcoming her into the safety of the building, letting her know that when inside she would be protected.

Elliot greeted her at the apartment door with a soft kiss and let her walk past him, then calmly shut the door behind her with a cool blink and the beginning of a smile which he parlayed into the first question: "I trust your feeling well this afternoon?"

Samantha gave a short sigh accompanied by a tilt of the left side of her mouth that let him know she needed comforting.

This was the foreplay: The subtle, repetitious cries of confusion in the hint of a smile. Then came the soft touch of an accepting hand on her shoulder. She stood up and walked to the window, put both hands upon the lightly rusted rail and looked out over the river.

Her head turned to the sky by means of confidence's collision with anxiety. She looked up at the gray clouds shifting effortlessly in front of her. Disgusted by the melancholy of the day, she looked toward the rooftop of an adjoining building.

Perched on the lip of the roof was a white bird with a curved beak. It had the slightest tinge of grey on the underside of its wings. It squawked a high pitched, scratchy squawk and jumped off the building. She envied its ability to fall to the ground and lift itself back up whenever it felt the time was right. It was a subtle attempt at suicide, a direct look towards

purity, towards death, knowing in the back of its mind that the whole charade would soon end. It caught breeze and flew over the river. She loved the white of his feathers against the gray skies above him. He flew faster, a white light streaking through the otherwise uneventful sadness of the day.

She felt hands on her hips, easing their way up her body, trying to subtly bring her back from her thoughts and into the moment. The hands tried to help her understand her time, that her o'clock had landed on the balcony of a hotel room, that it was exactly where she was supposed to be.

Samantha's body felt dominating over the hands, yet she did not let them know she could control them. Instead she let them wander, allowing them to find their way onto the lower curves of her breasts. She turned around. She felt the time had come to allow the hands absolute freedom. She looked at his body with a downward tilt of her head and slowly turned up her eyes to meet his own. Her eyes saw clay, brown and wet with the anticipation of a mold. Her hands felt the spin of the machine as they guided his hips toward her groin. He caressed her buttocks with a gentle glide. Her hands, stricken with clay, tore off his trousers, losing the buttons in the process. And she began to make love to him, because she wanted to, because she decided that it was time.

A child who bears her Mother's aggression does not lose love for her Mother. Instead the aggression makes her all the more interested in the possibility of love. The child creates in her head

the idea that one day there will be a bond, something more than just physical touch. And with every physical interaction comes the hope that one day there will be something more, that the physical action could hold a haloed meaning. The child longs for the Mother, the God of her early life, to bless her. She longs for the sins of her birth to be forgiven and knows that there are tests she must pass to allow such purification to take place.

{Praise purification}

Elliot constructed the gauntlet for Samantha to pass through and every time she hoped it would lead to something more than another exam.

She passed down signs of security and unleashed wild thrusts of her pelvis onto his, each one taking back the comfort of unlived moments. The faster she went the purer his body tried to be. And when he tried to give her the ultimate gift, the youthful vigor of possibility, of untainted purity, of life, she denied it for she had previously taken precaution to bottle it and planned to throw it in the trash.

She rolled along the bed, at her own pace and not noticing his body at all, took the bag of life from him and walked stark naked into the kitchen. She casually opened the bottom cupboard drawer and discarded the it on top of the other unwanted waste. She watched as it made a white line across the refuse. Trickling down, god's own misplaced creation.

Sam and Elliot took a taxi to a beautiful restaurant. They sat quietly for a short time before Sam excused herself to the restroom. As was her custom, Sam walked into the restroom and put her hands on the sides of the sink. She looked into one of the most ornate mirrors she had ever seen. She peered deeply into it, as if a world existed behind it, an entire solar system of existence. She became lost in herself and all in one moment she thought this:

In my life I have feigned love for objects.

{Praise objects}

I have passed no judgment on these objects. I have engaged them indirectly and without concern.

{Praise concern}

Now I sit, one of them. I have feared speech. I move - quick and forgetful. I have fear of the future. I sit meticulously counting my thoughts, worried that there are no new ideas to behold. I have thought about all of the things in this room. In all the rooms that flank the corridor of my life. I have painted all the pictures on the walls in those rooms. And sometimes I know that the brushstrokes are not my own, they are part of a painting that I don't recall. And in those moments I search, I search for the lost innocence that so callously stains my heart.

{Praise what stains our hearts}

I don't remember running through the rye. I don't remember the other children playing, or the lightness, or the fall. I had my eyes closed. I plummeted down, the easy way out. Life can be so tiring. So tiring...but there are myriad beautiful notions still to behold!

{Praise the beautiful notions}

And we must search for those notions. We must orchestrate their happening. We must be the energy that we wish to see conducted in this world. To be a conductor of energy, to stand alone waiting for lightning to strike, it is lonely and burdensome to the soul.

{Praise the burdens of the soul}

I forget the feelings of love. I forget how it captures. I have never felt the security of the emotion, only its momentary comfort, only its glare. It has touched me and I have turned in circles to find it. A hungry ghost of emotion, it lets me down and gives me the comfort of cold, small circles.

{Praise the circles}

I have just one trick. And because I have just the one trick, everything that comes in front of me gets the trick. The trick has one effect. And if the effect is powerful enough for the situation, then so be it, and if not, then so be it, but that's all I have to offer. Words are my trick. I throw them out into the world. Forget

*they came from my mouth and worship them as I worship myself.
And in this self-worship I attempt to find meaning.*

{Praise the attempt to find meaning}

We find that our search has many filters. It constantly plunges inward...inward. It pushes the corners of stable walls and creates its own path. The only problem is when the search needs to come back it can't find its way, the information never makes it to the brain. So we are mediated by the constant inner search.

{Praise the search}

And the search bounces off the walls and sends up glimmers of a response to our brain. Like the light shining within a diamond, the search purifies our vision for one moment. And in that moment we see absolute light. We see purity.

{Praise purity}

We are constantly tricked into believing that if we complete the journey externally, we will have done it internally. This leads us to create mediations, aspects of our consciousness that filter our search, that give us our direction, that cause us to forget about purity.

{Praise purity}

Instead of a long path, instead of seeing a beautiful sunset and walking into it arm in arm, instead of that, I see only to where it bends in the undergrowth. I only see that which blocks the road

I've taken. And somehow, even though I'm conscious of its detriment, I know that which blocks, somehow...somehow it connects all that is within.

{Praise all that is within}

Samantha Kelly turned from the mirror and walked out of the posh bathroom that sits atop the Barnebie tower in downtown Manhattan. The tower is very tall, the view regal. Samantha Kelly was neither tall, nor regal, yet there she was. She moved quickly through the thin aisles. Elliot sat with his back turned to her and she fixed the bottom of her skirt before sliding into the seat with a smile.

"The bathrooms are absolutely beautiful here. I love the details in the mirrors," she said.

"Elegance lives in the details my dear," said Elliot as he folded his napkin into his lap. "Details move people without them noticing. That is their beauty. They are invisible to the untrained eye, but if you are looking for them, if you want to see them, you will. It's almost a subliminal feeling otherwise, if you don't take the time to look. The details create your experience without hindering your control."

"That's nice of them," Sam said, with a slanted smile.

Samantha moved her purse away from Elliot's leg and closer to her chair. She had not been raised to simply let important things sit by other people. No, Sam had been taught that

important things needed to be as far away from people as possible. They needed to be held close, secured, so as not to feel the vulnerability inherent to missing them. Her mother told her, “You won’t ever get those things again, one shot that’s all you get kid.”

One shot, thought Sam.

“Elliot, you’ve got money,” she said with a rascally tilt of her brow.

Sam’s face slid down closer to her drink. Her legs moved slowly underneath the table “What are you gonna do with all that money?” She laughed as she said it, sipping her drink through the slanted side of her mouth. She laughed as if she had seen the laugh somewhere else and knew that it would draw a laugh from him. The scene had been played before and it will be played again.

“What makes you think I’ll tell you?” Elliot countered with a confident gaze. “I guess it all depends on my desires, when the opportunity comes along,” he said.

“No choices, just opportunities?” said Sam with wide eyed disappointment.

“Just opportunities,” he said sternly.

After dinner they took a taxi to room 922 at the Ambassador Hotel. She made love to a beautiful image. She turned in ways she’d seen women turn. The sounds that came from her mouth

had been made before. In coitus, she was a representation of a beautiful dream. She woke up and left without a sound.

Sam tip toed through the dimly lit, ice burdened walkway. With her head to the ground she walked past the throngs of smokers and huddlers, freezing from the drastic temperatures that slowly broke down the city, piece by piece, human by human.

She looked to the sidewalk and began her brisk walk home. The morning air had not blown in yet, the stillness of the night still lingered.

The buildings stood tall, vacant of emotion. They penetrated the skyline. Sam moved through them all, leaving a tarnished road behind her. The clock at the corner stood out amongst the trees. Its light left a dark shadow on the mannequins in the windows. Sam looked at the mannequins and moved faster toward home. The mannequins stayed exactly where they were, almost perfect, drastically under rated.

The wind picked up as Sam pulled the fur hood of her designer coat over her dark brown mane. She looked like an Eskimo with Gucci shoes on. She walked over the bridge, stopping briefly in the middle to look at the moonlight glitter in the river's wake. She peered over the rails, taking in deep breaths

from even deeper crevasses. She felt warm all of a sudden and stared blankly ahead. The wind touched the fur of her hood and tickled her nose. She laughed and felt a tickle in her tummy. Maybe this is all a joke, she thought.

Sometimes jokes turn us upside down.

The skies circled underneath her feet. The clouds billowed slowly around her ankles, wisps of white moving up underneath her. The river below trickled down her face and the dirt of the ground stained her hair. The water slipped slowly down her body, past her soft breasts, over belly button, where it subsided, easing into her pores.

She winced and took another deep breath of the valley's air. She felt righted. Again, she looked up at the tall buildings, again she saw herself as her mother's daughter. She looked back in disgust, she felt ashamed for a moment. Then she moved quickly through the spine splitting air. She would not feel shame. She would not feel remorse for a life lived. Her mother had been the one to not live her life. She had forfeited it for a painting.

And in the painting was a life that seemed beautiful: A daughter in the corner, a husband in the mist and a gorgeous woman in an evening gown waltzing through it all. A beautiful image, paradoxical as it was inflicting. That was the portrait Sam kept, that was the picture of perfection she moved within, out of, and into again.

Again, she compared herself to the image. She wondered where she now fit within the realm of her Mother's world. And where would her husband be? Would he be anything more than a misplaced creation, splashing about in the background?

Mason and Samantha Kelly lived just outside the heart of the city, but close enough for Sam to walk home. She needed to be close, so she always had the outlet, far away, to not feel the temptation. Sooner or later, she knew one temptation would engulf her senses, it would take her completely and she would leave everything she had come to know, her husband, her comfort in carelessness and her children. Sam once heard an important woman ask the question, how could a mother leave her children? By getting up one day and walking out the door, thought Sam.

Now: Passing by lonely cafes and even lonelier café patrons, Samantha pulled the Fendi coat close to her brittle neck and watched the first glimmers of light pass, as a rainbow, through the mist of the morning sky.

Scarves always hung in the entry way closet next to the top hats that were not to be worn and the hand carved canes that were not to be walked with. The scarves hung gently from an antique coat rack procured from mediocrity and built up day and night by one Gladys Merriman.

Gladys never thought twice about adorning the house with untouchables.

“They make things look orderly. They give us a nice appearance,” she would say.

Frowning now, through a whimsical wind, Samantha thought about the warmth the scarves could have offered. She thought how easy it would have been to play in the snow with one of them wrapped around her neck. She thought of memories that had long past, that would come again, with a seemingly never ending vigor.

A nice appearance was something that Samantha could understand. Through her earliest years to the ones she suffered through now, she understood the value of appearance. Some days it was the only purpose she could wrap her head around. Sadly, and with a continuous contempt for her own lips and mouth, she found herself smiling in an attempt to feel surreal.

Surreal, thought Sam. And it was surreal, surreal that she walked in the night to her home where her children slept, surreal that she was smiling, feeling inhuman and completely human all at once. Surreal was the calm of motion.

To move is to take away the stagnant doldrums of our most contemptuous thoughts. The movement elasticizes our perceptions and forces them to blend into the surroundings we place ourselves in. The movement stations us, grounds us, and

pushes us away to a place we can understand. And really, dear friends, if we can all get to a place we can understand, is that not enough?

{Praise a place we can understand}

Those words hit the top of Sam's head with the force of a puppy's love. Her face scanned the side walk, her eyes lifted to the low hanging birch trees covering her path. Is that not enough? She wondered. If I can understand my life, even if I don't fully accept it, is that not enough? Sam thought about the words she had just given herself. She thought about necessity and the anger built around her indecision.

Never in her life had she done anything she fully understood: Going to college to move away from home, marrying Mason because he too knew struggle, having children, cooking breakfast, carousing with Elliot, everything, all the decisions that made up her life, she never fully understood any of them. All of them were on about the same par and none of them drove her to any sort of happiness that could make her world spin slower. Instead, they compounded together and brought to her a world of inequity, of beauty, and of disgrace. More than anything, Sam felt the disgrace of it all. And through low hanging birch trees and the want of a puppy's love, she made her way below the harsh night air and into the heaviest of houses, to lift the weight of her disgrace onto the breakfast table and serve it with a smile.

Emerson felt as if the wind had been lifting him from one moment to the next. He swirled with it at times, but for the most part just let it carry him along.

His visits to Dr. Rosenfeld were more frequent now. He remembered her often and turned his attention to himself only when he needed to remove her from his mind. Really, he paid little heed elsewhere. The visits allowed him to lay back, close his eyes and become lost in all that was within him. He found himself a different person every time he awoke. Sometimes heavy, sometimes light, but always new. Always becoming...

One day Emerson found himself alone in a dark, damp church, a candle twittering light in front of his eyes. In that moment he thought of fire and souls and patience. It echoed within him. He thought about all the times he had known the love of god. He kneeled again, searching for that which was lost.

Before him stood a grand cross, malignantly placed against a wall. As he was often the only person in the church after hours, he came to know the spots of the cross the candlelight remembered to catch. He stared at one such flitter of light in the apex of the darkened wood. It flicker flockered right above the head of Jesus. Right above that kind, kind man's head there was light. If but for a moment, there was light.

Emerson felt immense love and lost himself in the emotion. For a moment light was within him too, and then, like the swirling sermons that echo within us all, he remembered the nails in the cross fastened to the darkness. He closed his eyes

and placed both knees firmly on the ground. He could not feel the light. He could only feel the nails. They mediated his moment.

And slowly, on his burdened knees, in the fading light, Emerson felt the pain of the hours.

Samantha Kelly walked into the house without making a sound. Her husband slept soundly on their bed. She slipped into the bathroom and turned on the shower. She locked the door and put on a silk robe, a Valentine's Day gift from years ago. Her faced looked foreign in the mirror. Her checks were rosy, her hair ratted at the ends. The soft, brown strands of hair clung to each other slightly, showing that hours earlier the hairs had been sculpted perfectly.

Her mascara ran from the tears that flowed as she stood on the bridge. She looked disgraceful and she knew it. The steam billowed up around her and she stepped into the shower to wash it all away.

The water hit her body with a slow and steady rhythm. Her hands clasped together behind her back and she rocked casually from side to side. Samantha's thoughts went back to the night before. Elliot's hands around her waist. His grip and the comfort she felt within it.

She knew it would be a release, what surprised her was the load she was carrying. The weight of her decisions seemed to increase with time, yet as her actions became consistent it seemed easier to carry them. She washed off indecision. She massaged her hair with shampoo, she smoothed out regret. The water dripped slowly down her body and recessed in her belly button. She was at play. It was all a joke and she needed to just laugh and play. And as she let out a delirious laugh she heard, "What's so funny about sleeping on the couch?"

It was Mason, and Mason was stumbling around with his eyes half closed. She could have had Elliot right there in the shower and Mason would not have been the wiser. He moved in to grab his toothbrush and didn't see the scorn on her face.

"I guess it was comforting," she said.

Water streamed down the sides of her body, the steam curling in around the shower door.

"Well maybe you should plant some roots there," he said.

"I think I may have," she replied.

Her eyes were darts, jutting out from her wrinkleless face, sharp and cunning. Mason looked right at her. He made a grunting sound with his nose and the back of his throat. Then he opened the shower door, put his lips to her ear and whispered:

“You spoiled bitch.”

Sam was on the bridge again. The shower’s water flowed from her ankles. It dripped down her body and into her eyes. Her feet were held by strings. She reeled, upside down, her mother laughing gruesomely in her ear. Water splashing her face, her thoughts, her words. And words came from deep within, they came without hindrance.

“I used to sleep hidden in hay, in the middle of a farm, next to fucking horses. And when my mother would finally come looking for me, I hid in the hay. I had to squeeze between the hay bales, but I could do it if I had the time. I didn’t have the time. I moved quickly so that I could go where I needed to go, but I didn’t have the time. And when I was found...You are a fucking pussy. Do you know that? A fucking pussy! You come here and you look at me and you say things...and I want to hurt you. I want to hurt you. Do you know that? Did you know...I think about those things? “

She pushed the water from her face. Through the water her voice moved, violently and without fear.

“I don’t give a fuck what happened to you when you were 9 years old!” said Mason coldly.

The letters lashed out from Mason’s unshaven face.

"You are a grown woman. Did you know that? A grown fucking woman. And you have children. Do you remember having that first child? I do, and what a fucking night that was."

"Oh, fuck you. You are a bastard. You're the last one that should be saying anything about that, you with your two drinks before bed. How 'bout the 6 before that?! You worthless father, fucking prick!"

"You were so god damn drunk you didn't know what hit you."

"And you were the one taking care of me. Right? You were the one looking out for me? Every girl's dream Mason is to be taken when she's next to unconscious."

"You wanted everything that you got that night, sister. You begged for what you have. You know it because that look on your face tells me you know it. It tells me that you're just now realizing how fucking sad you really are."

The words lunged out at Sam and she stepped back so as to not take the full brunt of their force. Moving quickly in mind and body, she reached back for something to hold onto.

She thought of being covered in vines. In a spider web of vines, she would be the bait and the spider, and she would devour herself, given the time. She knew that her plastic smile would fade as the days passed on, more and more it would become her fault. She sensed anger on the horizon. It was coming in waves and she decided to ride one of them out.

“Mason, go out and make a day for yourself. You should think about yourself today because I’m not going to think about you. Did you hear what I said? I’m not going to think about you today. I’m going to go to my “fucking interview” and seduce that man into believing in me.”

She made the quotation marks with her fingers, naked, in the shower, with water pouring over her filthy surface. Her voice trailed off through the water. She didn’t care if he heard her or not. She needed to say the words. They needed to be out in the world. And that was all.

“Did you hear what I fucking said, I’m not going to think about you, all fucking day. When I’m at that interview I’m going to be the sharpest fucking tack on that wall and I’m going to do it without you, without you in my world, without the thought of you in my being.”

“You are worthless,” said Mason while exhaling and shaking his head.

“Things are what they are because that is all they know how to be,” said Sam.

She grabbed a towel and stepped out of the shower. Then she walked into the closet and decided on an outfit that would make people believe in god.

Outfits can do this depending on the person looking at the outfit. You see, god shows itself in objects as Mothers sometimes show themselves as objects. Clothes, dear friends and readers are simply objects. And if the outfit, the object, creates the emotion in the viewer that the wearer intended, then things are perfect. And if things are perfect, then god certainly has a part in it. Samantha would make sure that god had a part in her day. But never could she have thought about how great a part it would play.

She stopped at the top of the stairs and took in a deep breath from the air below. It whisked up the staircase, over Italian upholstered couches and into her million dollar lungs. She took a step down and noticed how fabulous her shoes were. She didn't need the tall buildings of the city staring down at her for her to feel confidence. She didn't need another's firm grasp around her waist. All she needed were those shoes and that look. The one that would make people believe in god. She hoped she had stolen it from the mirror and that it was planted on her face. She took another step and enjoyed the fact that her shoes gave her an equally stunning emotion. Such emotions can only be found in and extracted from objects.

Sam knew this was her calling. She began extracting emotion from objects at a very young age, now she would do it for a living. If she could just convince them she was capable. All of the wondrous objects at Sotheby's auction house would be hers to control, if just for a moment. She would take them in, bathe in their splendor, and then sell them to the highest

bidder. She would give them away as her Mother gave her away, as a beautiful object, whose worth was trapped in a self-woven spider web, waiting to be consumed.

Sam walked down the rest of the staircase. Her children waited in the living room, their eyes glued to the cartoons on the gigantic television.

Mason bought the television eight months earlier for ten thousand dollars. Sam and Mason were in a fight and he went out to get scotch and came home with a TV. She yelled at him for wasting away their money. He yelled at her for pretending the money was hers.

Not anymore, thought Sam. I will make my money, I'll do what I want and if I want to leave I will leave, if I want to.

"C'mon guys it's time to go. Get your packs and grab your lunch money," she hollered.

The kids moved slowly, staring at the images on the television, but making progress to meet her request.

"Get in the car. I'll be there in a minute," she commanded.

Sam thought about how long a minute could last. She thought about Elliot pushing his body against hers and how it was over now, how she had progressed from that point. She wondered what kind of progression had occurred and if she could ever find that point again.

"I won't be picking you up from school today guys. Daddy is going to walk you to the carnival. He will be there right after, so meet him by the statue of the bulldog."

The kids silently stood in the entry way, the front door flung wide open.

"What? Asked the Mother.

"Someone stole our car," one of them said.

Sam walked quickly to the front door.

"That mother fucker," she said under her breath.

"Daddy decided to take the car today kids, even though he isn't doing anything. Sometimes people are like that boys, sometimes people don't ever stop to think about others. Now get your god damn gloves! We're walking."

And with that, Samantha Kelly and sons waddled out the door. Objects of fate, who would never fully understand the events they would all witness when the darkness fell.

Cyrus marginalized the other thoughts in his head. Although the time moved slowly around the clock, the hands had a rhythm to them. Cyrus felt the rhythm. He sat inside of it and let it flow around him. His body housed all that it needed and rhythm didn't seem to fit the form. It left him and continued to move around the world.

During Cyrus' youth a cross adorned the wall of his Mother's bedroom. It was made from an ivory tusk. Cyrus' Mother told him never to touch it. She told him of its purity and its beauty, he was not to dirty it. Cyrus took this personally. And as any nine-year-old would, Cyrus sliced careful slits into the pad and underwear his Mother laid out for the morning. He moved the knife with surgeon like precision. He knew of her monthly ailments, she made sure he knew when he was to stay in his room and not make any sound. He knew of these things.

That night she drove her stainless car straight to church for her presentation of the good lord's words. She was to read a bible verse to the congregation. Corinthians 9:22, which reads, "To the weak, I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so by all means I might save some." Jesus, that kind, kind man was to have said these words and today she would say them.

And as she spoke with all of her heart about a humbling compassion that could save the world, blood trickled down her leg. The waning moon shone in from the skylights, as Claire O'Reilly put her hands upon her thighs. She watched the crowd

move their eyes to her hands. She felt the stiffening of their glare. Her legs came together and the blood smeared across her pressed, cotton skirt. She walked in a hurried way across the stage, saying she would return. That's what they all say, thought Cyrus O'Reilly. His eyes had moved in the same way as the others.

He had seen what they had seen.

{Praise what we have seen}

And in the back of that lonely church, his ponderous eyes moved to the crowd's eyes. Their movement echoed a river's stroll, indignant and without wonderment. They questioned the stage, questioned themselves, and felt the guilt of poor people.

Cyrus turned away and scampered through the night, moving through the darkness with precision like speed.

He was innocent, boisterous and sinister.

{Praise the sinister}

When Cyrus' mother returned home that night she saw his knife in her bedroom. As Cyrus had cut the small slits, he made even smaller slashes in his tongue. He cut the end of it six

times. Moving slowly, so just a sparkle of blood showed upon the blade. When his mother returned, the blood was still on the knife. Claire O'Reilly called her son into her bedroom. She moved slowly across the room, across Cyrus' eyes, to the knife. Cyrus stepped back. She moved closer to him

"Did you want them all to look at me like that?" She said. "Do you know what they saw?"

Cyrus nodded. "I wanted them to see you as I see you," he said, lying to the world. Moment by moment. Lying. And slowly dying.

Claire took a step towards the bed behind her. She sat down briskly and moved her thoughts to her faith. She moved quickly. She felt the smooth feel of ivory against her hand. She brought it down hard on the face of her son. Cyrus did not make a sound. After the third altercation with his skull, the tusk lay gently at the foot of his mother. She screamed and fell back onto the bed. The sweat slipped down her back, her breath heavy. The last memory of that night laid in Cyrus' mind, for she passed out soon after and drifted off into a penetrating sleep.

Rufus Womack moved from the moment he woke up to the moment he laid his head back down to sleep. The inertia of the big body never seemed to come to a complete halt. His slow,

monotonous movements kept his days going at a practical pace and he never worried about mistaking moments for magic.

He noticed windows that reflected light onto refuse and lady bugs that crawled on rusty sinks. There was something to be found in everything and Rufus had always been the one to find it.

Rufus had not yet come across any crystal stairs in New York City and he was not going to falter because of the cracks he saw in his worn down path.

Sad were the sights that surrounded Rufus' humble living space. He worked as a bellboy at the Ambassador hotel ever since they needed a bellboy to work at the Ambassador hotel six years ago. His uniform rarely needed pressing and his subtle motions kept his shoes from requiring a shine. He looked as though he took meticulous care of his clothes, but really he just never moved fast enough to spill anything on them.

When Rufus moved to work it was with a constant pace. And although he was about the biggest, blackest baby Alabama had ever seen, New York City's contempt for its inhabitants kept people from noticing his presence. On this, the coldest of recent days, Rufus sauntered down the sidewalk carrying peanut butter and banana sandwiches.

His mother told him his father used to eat them. So, when Rufus made sure that the bell boy job was his, he went to the

store and stocked up on peanut butter and bananas, because that is what men eat when they live far away from their families.

Rufus kept a first floor studio apartment next to an independent record shop, just across from a run-down elementary school. The record shop kept the neighborhood floating with enough people so that Rufus could see what life would have been like had he been in it. He never imagined himself as a participant in the whole mess of things that surrounded him. He was a bystander, a drift of smoke in a fireless night.

And although the sky was still stained with the darkness that drifted up from the city streets, the watch around his wrist dictated that he should be walking to work and that the sun would soon show its face. So, he moved on...

Just past the elementary school, inlaid between two small dogwood trees, was a bench with a bronzed inscription in the middle of the backrest. The inscription read, "For Melinda Storm Jackson, who believed in children and angels and a good place to sit." The words made Rufus think of his mother, he felt safe when he sat on the bench.

Funny how letters make words, funny how words make people feel.

{Praise what people feel}

Sometimes from the bench Rufus watched the children at the elementary school, he loved to see kids running as fast as they could. He could never run as fast as he could because of the gigantic tub of lard that he carried inside of himself. When he saw children running he saw himself in a different life, in different shoes and different smiles. He saw himself in skin that didn't make the teachers walk over and ask if they could help him with anything. He saw beauty in a less than lucid world someone once said existed over a rainbow.

The curb of the street across from Melinda Storm Jackson's bench seemed to be covered in blood. Rufus thought of a movie he had seen where a tough man asked another man to "put his mouth on the fucking curb". The man did it and the tough man smashed his foot down onto the poor sap's head. The affect: Broken everything, lots of blood, prison, enlightenment, the works.

Rufus remembered movies like this as if they were real life. He never experienced an interaction with anyone that was as graphic or real as the events he saw take place on his television

screen. Never before had he participated in 'real' life, or what he deemed to be 'real' life.

He walked over to the blood and thought about Alabama and the red clay of his youth. He wondered whether the man who died there deserved the death. There were songs and movies about men deserving death. Rufus had listened and watched and understood. He knew when people deserved things and when they just got things and what the difference was. He figured the man deserved it. That seemed to be the simplest conclusion and it made him feel like his Mother's son.

He pushed on past the blood and the memories and lifted his eyes to the edge of the forgetful street. At the light ahead of him stood two nuns and a girl with long, drawn on eye brows. As he came closer to the trio, one of the nuns smiled at him and he smiled back. She took the other nun by the hand and they walked across the street. Rufus looked to make sure the light had turned and then placed his gaze on the girl and her eyebrows. He wondered why someone would take off eye brows just to put them back on again. The girl saw him staring and opened her mouth. What came out made Rufus Womack believe in rainbows.

"What the fuck made you so fucking fat?" She said.

"What?" Rufus responded.

"What made you so fucking fat?"

“Peanut butter and bananas.”

“How the fuck could you get your hands on that much peanut butter?”

The girl laughed and Rufus wondered where peanut butter came from. He figured it must be from a plant somewhere and there were probably very tired people who took it off the plant. He thanked those people with a smile.

“Where are you going?” Asked the girl, her eyes darted back and forth within her sockets, she stared blankly and without concern.

“To the Ambassador Hotel. I work there.”

“Do you like it?”

“I love it?”

“Love it, you love working at the Ambassador Hotel? How the fuck could anyone love working at a hotel?”

“It suits me.”

“Must be a huge fucking suit.”

Rufus laughed with her. He loved that she could entertain herself by just spouting out words.

"I think the people there want to be helped," he said humbly.

"Who doesn't?" she said, turning her face to the oncoming cars.

The girl laughed again and took out a cigarette. She lit it and said, "That's what you get when you mess with love."

"What I get?" Asked Rufus

"What you get when you mess with love."

"Love?" Questioned the biggest, blackest baby Alabama had ever seen

Rufus had no idea what this girl with drawn on eyebrows was talking about. He decided he should look at her more, so that her words made more sense.

She wore a tight black collar around her neck with little metallic spikes coming out of it. Below that was a hooded sweatshirt and jean jacket with a patch on it that read 'Anti-Flag'.

In her bottom lip a loop of metal bobbed up and down every time she spoke. Her eyes were saucers, especially the black parts in the middle of the brown circles. Her hand shook as she

lit the cigarette. Rufus looked at her with a distinct thought, but had no idea how to talk about it.

“Love, you dumb fuck.” She said. “Love that makes us conquer ourselves and move from one moment to the other with absolute compassion for all that stands in our way. The thing that you feel when you feel you need to go somewhere. Today you felt you needed to go to work, but the only thing you need is love. So, you got confused somewhere along the way, but at least somewhere there was love.

“What stands in our way?” asked Rufus Womack.

“Everything that stands against love,” said the girl.

He listened to the words that had just come out of her mouth. He knew that they were the most beautiful words that had ever done so. He knew that, and that was all. He smiled and felt as though he were inside one of his movies, as if at any moment music could fill up the street and he could be whisked away, taken to ‘real’ life to say beautiful things forever.

“You don’t know shit,” said the girl.

She held a record in her hand she had undoubtedly just purchased from the record shop.

“Do you like music?” asked Rufus

"Do you hear anything anyone says to you," said the girl, as she finished her cigarette with a defining puff and stamped it out in front of Rufus' feet.

"I hear words all the time," said Rufus Womack.

"Do you ever think of what they mean," asked the girl.

"I don't need to," said Rufus,

The girl seemed to like the abstract qualities inherent to Rufus' down home ignorance and she cut him some slack.

"Whatever? Where is it you said you worked?" she said.

"The Ambassador hotel, you should stay there sometime. They have really nice pillows."

"Thanks," said the girl. "I'll look into it next time I want to kill myself."

"Sounds good," said Rufus Womack.

The girl walked away laughing and took out another cigarette as she juttet across the icy street. Rufus stopped to think about the conversation. He stared soberly at the sidewalk: The cracks, the people who walked upon them, the posts they weaved through, the lights caressing the seeping mist.

He saw the skies part and the mist turned the light into an arching beam of color. Rufus noticed it and categorized the entity as a rainbow.

“Soft,” he said aloud. “Soft are the rainbows and painted are the eye brows that lead us to them.”

He wished he could have remembered what he just said. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard. And silently, at peace, Rufus strolled up the street, unknowingly walking into a very twisted beam of light and rain.

There are ten different ways to lose gut fat. The magazine on the sidewalk assured all viewers that such was the case. One of the writers asked enough people, put together a figure, and put the words onto beautifully shiny paper next to a beautifully shiny girl. The girl is not there as a representation of a body that has lost gut fat, but rather what a body that lost gut fat might acquire. The woman: An object, perfectly placed so that the viewer will have to look at her.

Such is life. There are perfectly placed objects that detract us from the true meanings of our sights.

{Praise our sights}

Rufus Womack knew about the true meaning of his sights because he didn't discuss them with anyone else. His discussions with the rest of the world were trivial at best and

he couldn't hold a conversation with anyone who wasn't a little 'half bubble off plumb', as my father used to say.

When Rufus spoke it was as if the thoughts came from a distant mind and had traveled so far that they came out tiredly, without finality. Most people find cadences such as these to be arrogant or childlike. Really, Rufus just thought slowly. The simplicities of the images in front of him cradled him like a new born and he couldn't get away from their comfort. Little did he know that the images he took in had worlds of complexity behind them, entire solar systems.

He did not stop to think about the complexities that made him up, so he didn't know how to think about other's complexities either.

Things are what they are and why would they be anything else?

{Praise anything else}

Emerson Marin's body rested lightly against the branches of a small willow tree in the small pasture that sat behind the brick church. He'd slept there the night before, a broken bottle and rocks breaching his black robe throughout his slumber.

Without warning, a wind he hadn't known to exist in the south whipped up from the ground and threw the branches hard

across his face. The branches cut small slits through his skin and his back felt heavy and hot. The pain didn't come immediately, what did surprised him. And it didn't just come quietly, it surged - a screaming sermon of sound. It brewed within him. It babbled. And although the wind continued to thrash the branches, whipping them across his back, his body wouldn't move. Paralyzed by the surge within him, he lay, and the wind controlled the branches and the branches whipped him with the mercilessness of Roman leathers and he lay and was whipped again. And rage grew within him.

It was rage he hadn't before known. Rage at the wind, rage at the tree and the branches, the wood and the leaves and the bark. Rage at the rocks, the bottles and the nails. The nails! Always the nails!

Emerson screamed from a place he had known only as a child. It came back in a force that echoed across the small, grass filled valley. Not a soul heard it, not even Emerson's. His body felt empty, bristling, but empty. He took a wearied step and steadied himself next to the tree. He grabbed a handful of branches and let them slip slowly through his tight grip. The scraping of his hand across the coarse bark lit something within him.

Emerson walked intently into the church's back entry, through his withering quarters, and knelt in front of the candlelit cross. He stared eagerly at the nails piercing the christ. He had to die, Emerson thought. He had to die, without a shadow of a doubt,

he had to die. The nails were his path to god. And couldn't they be for us all, thought the small, Southern preacher. Couldn't the nails be a path to god for us all?

Cyrus curled into a ball in the corner of his ramshackle residence. He sat motionless, staring out the window at the gray world, waiting, always waiting, for Him to emerge.

His skin was a grotesque conglomeration of scales and scrapes. He was a restless dragon growing tired of a lonely cave. And as a dragon he crawled around the cave with slow, monotonous movements. The dark space contained the cryptic smells one can only associate with a dragon's cave. The depravity of power gone wrong, a life, consumed. He was defined not by what he was, but by what he was not.

Something in a dragon tells it to kill, to consume life with a vengeance unknown to most other creatures. He killed and murdered and did it all in the same swoop, without a thought of consuming the victims. After carrying the carcasses back to his cave he would look at them as food, but not before. Before they had their own purpose, now they simply served his. And if his desires were met, if those simple desires that drove him were being met, then he considered himself free. He killed to set himself free. He thought about the death without contemplating the life, without displacing its intention.

It moved, he moved, it screamed, he screamed, it struck, he struck back. The battle was without thought. It was action, pure, unfiltered action. And in the battle he moved the worlds in front of him and fed off their vulnerability. Without the desire for consumption he stayed a whimsically scared beast burdened to the cave. Lurking in the depths, he knew not of whatnot, he stared at dirt.

He burned the rocks surrounding tarnished bones with stale, heat oppressed breath. He was a killer, built to take apart the earth. And that is how the story would be told. Defined by the one action he had no control over.

The dragon had a heart, if not he could not survive. He was not mythical and could be killed. Alone and in fear, he sat as a metaphor for a world that wasted slowly away, a world obsessed with power and prestige, but scared to death of both. A fact provable to none but those left to rot in the wake of other people's dreams.

The only presentation the dragon owned was his intimidating growl. There were no other facial features he had the ability to make. Regardless of the emotion that might be swirling around in his dragon head, out came the hostility of the myth. And that myth moved through the lives that saw it, though they only saw it for a second. After that they were mutilated. His fangs ripped through flesh without notice of tendons and joints. They ripped it apart amidst screams. He growled and

huffed so as not to hear the wailing of these morbid scenes of fury.

And so the story goes, and always, always are we defined by that which we can't control.

{Praise that which we can't control}

Mason thought a lot. He thought when he drove and he thought when he watched and he thought when he talked. He thought now as he walked to pick up the boys from school. There had never been much thought into why he thought, he just did, and we all need to do what we need to do.

Mason needed to greet the boys and take them to a place that would keep them busy. He decided the carnival would do and led them there in a sordid silence

Mason sat outside of the house of mirrors as his children scampered inside. They did so without a moment's hesitation.

Flashing lights and spinning smiles swirled in front of his eyes. He scoffed and shook his head, smiling to the dirt beneath him. His thoughts spun within him.

He felt the mundane melancholy of squabbling spouses. His head hurt. He raised his hands to his head and massaged his

temples with his thumbs. He noticed the novelty of the carnival.

Behind him sat an ice cream parlor. It might have been an antique. He saw a man smoking a cigarette with his feet in front of the tilt-a-whirl. Don't smoke around kids, thought Mason.

His eyes wandered to the house of mirrors that lay before him. He noticed the first mirror gave a glimpse of what was inside. If he looked hard enough he might have been able to see a microcosm of the vortex within. A glimmer of light shone off the mirror as he struggled for a peek. That gleam of light just went in my eye, thought Mason.

He bore his eyeballs into the light. If I get used to it, I won't have to think about it, he thought. The light crawled into his head. It crawled into the swirling mass of motion echoing off the insides of a confused man. As light does, it came whirling out moments later. That's right dear friends, the dust of space and time glittered across his mortal refuse. And if the brains of the bunch were to decode its message, if one were to decode the inner workings of the moment, the thought, brought by the light, protruding into his senses would sound like this:

Humans cannot understand how they feel without a mask. We wear a mask that is a mirror, not of our inner self, but of the outer world. That mirror pleases the people who look at it. When we wear a mirror mask we please those that see us. For people enjoy seeing themselves.

{Praise people seeing themselves}

People enjoy seeing their perceptions on the faces of others. This is how we choose friends. We see ourselves in them and want to be friends with ourselves. Such a narcissistic activity cannot be stopped. We are all that we really know about the world that confronts us. We feel secure in ourselves, even if that security is based in fear. Through the mirror mask we sense our own sensibilities. And through them we find happiness. In finding others we find ourselves.

{Praise ourselves}

The mirror mask mediates the situation. The mirror mask makes the situation bearable. We don't have to look directly at ourselves. We don't have to feel what we feel. We see the beauty we seek in ourselves in the eyes of someone else. We fall in love with ourselves by falling in love with the image that we give off. And the mask wearer feels the security of the mask, a weight that holds her down and traps her emotions.

Eventually she will feel the weight. She will sense the presence of the mask. She will want to take it off and will feel as though it is stuck. My image is stuck on her face. She is not the mirror anymore. She is merely a placeholder for a displaced version of me. And she holds the place until she cannot stand it. Then she leaves with the mask and I lose the part of myself that I loved. I feel vulnerable without the comfort of my own image. And I drift, not looking for love, but looking for the comfort of my own

face. And every once in a while, I see it in the momentary glance of a stranger.

{Praise the momentary glance of a stranger}

And what a feeling that is, feeling like myself, but only through a stranger's glance. Once the glance is gone I feel burdened by the absence of my reflection. And in those moments I wonder if love is just the want to impact another with my impression. To know that the impression I give off could stay with someone forever...

I want to free myself of the mask. Only through the mask can I feel secure with her. Only through the mask is she willing to feel secure with me. And that is the world we create. By world, I mean the look I receive, the look I give off, the look she receives, the look she gives off. But what of that which can't be given off, what of that which cannot be received?

What does love look like?

We see what we want to see. She and I never see each other. We are lost in the images and perceptions of ourselves. They move ambivalently between us. And love is that. It is a sordid attempt to find the prima materia that bounces between reflections.

{Praise that which bounces between reflections}

And the mask is worn by all of those we see. We as the mirror take in all images. We absorb. We act out that which has been taken in with each of our movements. Others do as well. And we all react to each other before we can stop to think. And then we

speak. We speak our reaction and then the words are all that remain of the moment. They are the imprint in the amber. Words fossilize moments between people. And in that way language can control.

And Berger said, "The child sees before he can think". But we don't give him a chance to see. We have words and we give them to the child at the earliest of ages. Then the visions that come before him are nothing more than the words we have given him. That is the absolute power that we as a society give to language. We deify it. And first there was the word. Logos happened. Words happened. Wise men speak of the words and the absence of the words. That is all I desire: the absence of words.

{Praise the absence of words}

Through the words I have only found confinement. Through the words I have only desired the validation of my speech, the validation of the thoughts that created the speech.

{Praise the thoughts that created speech}

I have seen words at play. I have seen them move people and tear them apart. I have seen words mold people like clay. And sometimes people see the words in front of them. They see the vision of how they will be shaped by the words and they scream out trying to catch them, to catch the wind so that maybe the words will cease. Maybe the wind will go on without them. Maybe then what lasts forever will be pure.

{Praise what is pure}

Anxiety plagues those unfortunate enough to see the words as anything other than placeholders of emotion. Some feel the darkness of confinement that words can create. They see the light that lifts the horizon on the faces of others, but they know they will never embrace it. They know even if it came close to them it would bounce away and they would have to find someone else and stare into their mirrored mask to know how it looks.

Any light we give off in a house of mirrors is sent into infinite receivers. The sight can be intoxicating and it can be terrifying. And so it is with the world. To see all the mirrors, all the reflections, everything, all at once, infinitely conveyed in each, it can make the viewer question that which makes him human.

{Praise what makes us human}

Mason shook his head and looked away from the mirrors. He had not been conscious of the words that just rattled around his perplexed brain. He had been staring at himself, staring at himself hundreds of times over and the shock paralyzed his ability to think. Or so he thought.

Throughout the carnival ran smiling children. Mason searched their faces, but did not see his own reflected. Instead he saw a house of mirrors and a diminutive clown.

Mason moved slowly toward the little clown. It passed him by with a smile and he felt like an overgrown child. He felt small and wanted.

His kids came screaming out of the house of mirrors. They latched onto his legs, smiling with tears welling up in their eyes. He bent down to pick one up.

"I couldn't get out!"

"You couldn't find the ending?"

"I couldn't find the beginning."

"Did the doors look the same?"

"There were so many doors."

"There always are, son."

Mason's son cried softly. Mason looked at his other child. He saw him staring at the clown, staring down the novelty.

"What do you think, Ben?"

"I don't know. Why he is so small?"

The clown came toward Ben with his hands laid flat out, his white gloves sparkling in the hollowed out twilight.

"I am full grown," he said.

"How tall am I going to be? Asked Ben.

“You will be the height of your father,” said the prophetic clown with a twisting smile.

Ben looked at the dying light above his father’s head. It glinted off the skin atop his father’s worn scalp. It slanted directly into Ben’s eyes. He squinted and the world became blurry. And through a mind of mirrors and blurs he thought about how tall he would be when he was all grown up and ready for the world, just like his Dad.

A damp room, hollowed out by the night, bare. But all the while Cyrus searched. He searched for something worth being searched for. He held the worn shotgun in his lap, his fingers running slowly across the indentations of the trigger. It was his compulsion to search for the indentations that made a thing unique.

And in the detail lives the wonder, he thought serenely to himself. Cyrus wondered how it would feel to pull the weight of his body against the trigger and lose the feeling of the indentations, to feel them become nothing but pressure.

People do that sometimes. They wonder about the internal thought process of pulling the trigger. They beg to know how other’s mental dilemmas are transfigured and eventually worked out. It helps people to know that their own insecurities have a

comrade in arms. It helps people to know other shortcomings of the species.

{Praise the shortcomings of the species}

Cyrus O'Reilly knew about the shortcomings of the species. He knew that sometimes inanimate objects had emotions more tangible than his own.

Short, panicky breaths clutched the density in the air. The breaths were just enough to keep his heart in motion.

Cyrus never wanted anything killed. He wanted it to have never been born.

Where does the mind take those kinds of longings? Cyrus took them to the bottom of bottles of whiskey. He drank while watching children play in the park in his mind. He watched smiles fade from faces as the turn of the merry-go-round ceased. Where did that smile go he wondered now as he sifted through the last of a dying tobacco pouch? He knew it could not just up and leave this world, the world that created it. Millions of years it took to create that smile. It could not just go away.

His compulsion for understanding breathed short, panicky breaths. A heart attack of the intelligence comforted his fall and he didn't notice when the chair casually stuck him with a nail. He laughed a child's laugh. He breathed a child's air.

Short, panicky breaths of innocence flooded his conscience as he took a pull of the dew drenched tobacco. It moistened his lips and he felt the comfort of a mediated moment, the kind that bridges the gap between reality and consumerism, between commercial life and actual encounter. He didn't know where he fit.

He was a commercial for a shithead. He didn't know what a shithead was. He missed the episode on TV where they defined shitheads and was uncertain now if he could come to that definition on his own. Most men bleeding thinned whiskey blood from the neck, smoking damp cigarettes on a damp floor can't define such things. But he didn't know that either. He knew the time was coming to have faith. A faith that would cease the repulsion for life he held so close. Maybe it wasn't even repulsion for life. It was a loathing of creation. A hate of the way beings are created and held in momentary purgatory before slowly fading away. What cruelty he thought. To give beings the consciousness to ponder their death, to allow them the opportunity to look it square in the face and engage in conversation. What are we possibly to say? And slowly, from a half crouched position, Cyrus said,

Courage is nothing more than knowing you are going to die and not doing a god damn thing about it.

{Praise courage}

Brilliant as no one
Smarter than all
Important as tree to the leaf that may fall.

Dirt to the walkers
Breeze for the sounds
Important as wind 'fore the leaf hits the ground.

Silent as saviors
Screaming with grace
We shall crumble and crack before leaving this place.

Cornered by meaning
Echoing still
Grasping the wind holding onto free will.

Searching for thoughts here
Pain in the grasp
Reaching to hold broken hand without cast.

There's dirt in the dungeon
Bars reflect fate
Eyes search for light letting go of the weight.

Cyrus come lonely
Fear goes untended
Blow the top off the bottle else the contents will end it.

Cyrus left the window open so that when the birds came to see what the smell was they would easily fly into the shotgun bullets. Yes, they would fly down to see why bugs and death

were trapped inside the house and they would see shotgun bullets and fall down dead.

Sometimes things fall down dead when shotguns throw bullets at them. Shotguns were created to throw tons of tiny little metal pieces at people and rip their stomachs and faces off. Once a person's stomach and face are ripped off it is easy for them to die. Yes, these guns work perfectly for what they need to work for.

Cyrus O'Reilly knew this to be true, to be true. He knew this not from having a father that stored guns on a rack behind a sheet of glass, nor from attending camps as a child and learning about gun safety. Nor did he know it from learning the history of the United States, a country that develops such bits of science for the slaughter of millions of people.

No, Cyrus O'Reilly certainly did not have those experiences under his worn leather belt. He knew that when shotguns threw bullets at birds their faces did not survive the confrontation.

And so there lay on his dusty, wooden floor the carcasses of his realization. There lay the blood that sustained his knowledge of war. It slowly drifted across his mind and out of the drain that lay in the middle of the house. The concave of the floor decided where the entrails would end up. Cyrus did not. Nor did he decide that the trigger should be pulled, or that the birds should be punished for their instinctual curiosity. Yet his soul punished him for his. Tears of remembrance streamed down

his grave cheeks. He laid there, a pitiful sight to a wandering soul.

And we wander sometimes, dear friends, we wander down into the depths of ourselves and find caves too dark to explore. They echo so many sounds from so many memories from so many moments. And we are lost in the darkness. We reach out for the walls. We try to find a path. We wonder if anyone else exists in places like this. We search for others.

{Praise others}

Cyrus lay on the barren floor, his hand on a worn out shotgun, decisions tapping like fingertips.

Wretched thoughts meander through the minds of men who crawl out of crevasses and into blinding lights. The scream that echoed off the walls of that little cabin ruffled the feathers of the silky, black creations that god simply forgot to call home.

Cyrus O'Reilly felt the whip of the wind and knew that soon the blood would come. He always knew what bird would die. He watched them fly from the tall willows in the distance. He watched them fly right toward him, as if he was there to save them. He took the place of Jesus christ our lord and savior. Shadows curled around his eyes. On his tongue, the crisp of decisions whip. And before him, cradled in his arms, was a crow, stiff and cold. Its blood slowly crawled through the concave floor, passively making its way to eternity, arm in arm with the tears of a man that didn't exist, but in his own shadow.

Cyrus cut his tongue from the front to the back. The knife he used was thin and the blood couldn't stick to it. He looked in the mirror and held his tongue out, using his thumb and forefinger.

"Bleed it all out," he screamed.

He let the droplets move slowly from his tongue to the sink. His eyes didn't leave the mirror as he bent down to grab a towel. It went around his head. He couldn't see and had nothing to stop the bleeding.

"I'm a politician," he shouted as he wandered blankly around the one bedroom cabin.

The blood moved slowly, the cut was not very deep. Cyrus walked to the front of the house, bumping into an old chair and stepping on shotgun shells along the way.

"I cannot see to speak and cannot speak to see. I cannot be the sentiment that god thinks I should be. I move around with merriment, while others still believe. I cannot speak to be the one that you foresee in me."

He danced around in a circle, kicking his feet into the air. His bald head reflected a dull light that shone in from the only window. It faced a meadow that strayed out for miles. In the far distance was a city and to the east of that city, a disgusting river. And he sat in the remnants of a house, on the last of an old man's farmland, left to a young man, to find god upon. And Cyrus had searched. In every nook and cranny of human emotion he searched for the purity of it all.

It is a path of trepidation; it is a struggle to walk.

{Praise the walk}

Cyrus knew of the struggle emotion goes through to feel the outside world, how it is squeezed through a filter of letters and sounds. The filters shredded the dignity of his soul lifetimes ago, but he persevered. And that is one thing I can say for ol' Cyrus O'Reilly, dear friends and readers, is that he persevered.

Like wax, Cyrus felt he'd been melting for years. He pulsed and pushed as the heat grew. And when the cold fell down upon him, he froze. He paused. Always knowing that he need only raise the climate surrounding him and once again he could be alive. Heat came to him with the carelessness of a 1920's joyride, masquerading as truth and beauty, parading around his mind with a contemptuous grin.

And with each moment of heat he had privileged glimpses into the hearts of those within him.

{Praise the privileged glimpses, praise every glimpse within}

Cyrus felt he needed another joy ride, another glimpse within that which is human. He pulled the train ticket he swiped from a fat woman years before out of the kitchen drawer. It was eighteen years old. Logically, the time had come time to use it, to finish what started within him, so many years before. He looked around the small house he kept. Items were everywhere, but nothing caught his eye.

He stared lazily at frozen black birds, wasting away on the floor. He watched the stains of their blood slip through the cracks in the wood. His eyes darted behind the birds.

The sawed off shotgun rested against the last kill. Cyrus lunged for the gun and sprinted out of the house. As he ran he lusted after the holes he would create in other people's lives.

And away he went, human as all fucking hell.

Emerson decided to kill Dr. Rosenfeld on a Monday morning not long after the wind whipped him with willow branches. He didn't know how to stop the ever escalating lack of control. His thoughts swirled in so many ways, his motion stymied.

Stagnant as pools of dark tar, his insides lurched through life, treading on paths worn thin by the heaviest of humans.

The doctor played with him. She pulled him along the paths, loaded up his mind with weight and sent him out into the world, staggering and alone. As the months moved past he felt more and more the pangs of complacency. He felt like a bull chasing the reddest of sashes, fuming up more and more with every pass. But when tired, the desire turned to exasperation. The tear of his will pulled him beneath himself. His head lowering, his body hoofing the ground underneath, he shifted his gaze to the toreador.

He walked around his church looking for weapons. The crudest of metals turned before his eyes into sling blades ready to slash and rip, to bleed a person dry. He thought of tiny pieces of metal tearing through flesh. He thought of sawed off guns.

He watched a former pastor cut the gun and asked why in the most innocent of ways.

“Because the metal sprays quicker that way,” said the man casually.

Without the long, cool steel to protect it, the metal screeched through the atmosphere at light speed, shredding everything.

The gun still sat in the barn in the back of the church, in the corner, with other unused tools. Emerson ran to it.

The sweat and the dust seeped darkly underneath his eyelids as he peered into the shining steel barrel. The coolness of it tickled his fingertips, rippled through his back and down his curving spine.

Longingly, he looked down the barrel. The darkness inside of the gun shimmered in the moonlight seeping through untended window panes.

Emerson thought of the christ on the wall in the church above a candlelit grove. The light flickered in front of him. When did the christ realize he had to die? Was it before he was nailed to the wooden frame or afterwards? Plagued by the conundrum, he paced back and forth, ambivalent to any logic that would answer his questions.

Emerson believed in martyrdom. He believed the science that torched his heat oppressed mind could kill him. He knew Dr. Rosenfeld lit the flame.

He had to become something else to kill. He needed to transcend the lines of his confinement. His heart, like Pandora's, needed to open, to displace all that lay within it to create a sense of momentary control. At this thought he began to lust, to want, to need like he had never needed before. It

was a feeling he had known all his life, but never had he felt it surging as it was.

He needed to ascend, to let the ripple within him become something more than a tormented current traversing endless caves looking for life.

The phone rang in the receiver.

"Shirley Ringwald?"

"Yes."

"Shirley Ringwald this is Emerson Marin. Is the queen in?"

"The queen is home packing, she's leaving for New York in an hour, Emerson."

"New York City, USA?"

"Yes, Emerson can I take a message for her?"

"A message?"

"A message."

"Right now?"

“Yes, right now.”

“Why is she going, why is she going to New York? Why doesn’t she want to see me?”

“She does want to see you Emerson. She wants to see you right away, as a matter of fact. Did you know that the mayor’s ball is going on there tonight, tonight at the Ambassador hotel? Did you know that Ms. Rosenfeld’s husband is going to give a speech? Don’t tell her I told you, but I just thought that was the biggest coincidence I had ever heard of.”

“Tell her...”

Emerson paused. He surged. He stared at the blackbirds perched atop the chimney of the church. They circled above it, a swarm, spinning ever so softly...waiting. They stared and they swooped. Emerson looked one directly in the eye.

“Tell her something needs to feel something. Something needs to feel the swarm, the swarm, to feel the swarm as I feel the swarm. To feel the swarm and the nails and the weight of it all.”

“Uh, huh...I will tell her to watch out for you.”

Dorothy Ringwald lifted her eyebrows sarcastically in light of the words she'd just heard. She pushed the phone to its resting place.

Emerson Marin left the church. Later that night he boarded a train bound for New York City with a sawed off shotgun strapped to his soul, his black minister's gown flowing behind him, human as all fucking hell.

Cyrus persisted in believing that the world manufactured his demeanor on a day to day basis. His past moved within him, but it never rested directly behind his eyes. What did, no one would ever fully understand.

"I find you moving. You move within me. I walk and the blood that flows to my feet is your blood. I have seen it pour to the floor," he whispered.

Cyrus spoke to the mirror. He stared from every angle, at a younger version of himself.

"You cut me. My skin was taught. It was pulled hard. It stretched between nails, the wood splintering into my neck. You were there, watching, the entire time."

Cyrus' mind reeled. Colors shot through his vision; pinks and whites slipping through the blackest of backgrounds. He

remembered the pull of the nails, how they shimmered in the light of the moon.

“The rain fell upon me and you watched. I asked for mercy and you watched. Then I was pulled apart. And here I stand, pieces of myself, bouncing off the walls within me. Fires lit, shadows dancing, and the shrieks of children echoing in my head. And still you watch, silent as time.”

He pushed the bathroom door closed. Then he walked back to his seat on the train and slept against the coolness of the window, the sun still high in the sky.

Sam met Elliot at the Ambassador hotel at three o'clock pm. Bob had the kids and she had two hours with Elliot before he would give the keynote speech at the mayor's ball. The ball would be held in the Ambassador's Grand Ballroom.

The Grand Ballroom's enormous glass windows look out over a small coy pond. The windows stretch from the ceiling to the floor.

“So people can take in the beauty of the world as they listen to speeches,” said Francoise Lauren who designed the room.

The pond sat atop a small slope. At the foot of the slope lurched the East river, filled with everything god forgot about.

As Sam slipped behind Elliot's door and into the cradle of his grasp she thought about what Elliot would say in the speech. As he moved his hands around the contours of her frame she grabbed him in a way that let him know he was in charge. She would sit back, take him in and be the wiser afterward. The experience would be transcendent. And she would ascend, rank and riverbank, to float above all of the forgotten, misplaced creations.

Rufus knocked on the door of room 922 of the Ambassador hotel at exactly four sixteen.

"Room service," he boomed.

Years before a man in a coat came to a door and gave Rufus Womack, the biggest blackest baby Alabama's ever seen, three hundred dollars just for knocking on his door. Rufus, shocked and dumbfounded, said to the man, "And by the grace of god go I."

Then he turned and left the room without thinking about it ever again.

He knocked a second time.

"Just a moment," said Elliot Kingston, from inside of the room.

Sam was smoking a joint on the bed. She rolled away from the door in laughter as Elliot fanned the smoke towards the window. Smiling, he walked casually to the door, straightened his back and pulled it open.

Cyrus O'Reilly's train arrived in New York at four eighteen pm. He was never asked for his ticket. He stepped off the train and moved through the sea of people, the sawed off shotgun nestled against his leg. He limped so as to conceal the weapon.

Cyrus hobbled from the station and into the streets of New York City. His mind reeled. People moved about in swarms, dipping and swooning in droves, darkening the sidewalks on every side of him. He spun slowly in the smallest of circles. He saw people walking around him, bending, but not changing course.

He felt like a planet, and people, like space, bent around him. There was no gravity. The planets just curved around his matter, they moved with him symbiotically. He calmed. He would walk and walk and walk until something pulled him into its atmosphere.

And all of a sudden - he felt a beam of light within him. It coursed through his body. It burst into his heart and he saw the only thing he ever needed to see. The light - encircling

everything in his vision, shone from everywhere, no speck too small to sparkle.

His breath quickened, his eyes were wide. They took in everything: Sights, sounds, smells, the colors of lipstick, the patter of feet on the pavement, the greatness of the sorrowful sigh he heard coming from it all. Everything. And then - gone. Nothing. A dimming of light. People, moving, quickly, without talking, gray, misplaced figures in a darkening world.

Cyrus paused. He surged. He ran toward the river on his right. It was the only pure thing he saw.

Elliot opened the door for Rufus to enter and Rufus obliged. Sam lay on the floor next to the bed. She held the joint underneath it with one hand while covering her lighthearted laughter with the other.

“Room service,” said Rufus.

“Yes, thank you, we appreciate it,” said Elliot. Just set it right here, here you go.

Elliot held out a five dollar bill and Rufus stood before it. Without moving, Rufus peered around Elliot to wonder about the foot sticking out from underneath the bed.

"There's a foot," he said.

Elliot turned his head and smiled.

"Yes, yes there is. And the whole nine yards after that."

He chuckled and raised his eyebrows.

Rufus took the money from Elliot without thinking about it.

"That's a woman's foot. Is the rest of her here?" He asked flatly.

"Of course, of course," Elliot said with the leer of a politician.

Elliot was playing a game. Rufus was using words to talk about his vision.

"The rest of her is here. Sam, Sam wont you come up to say hello to...what's your name?"

Elliot squinted towards Rufus' nametag.

"To Rufus, get up here and say hello to this fine young boy."

Samantha Kelly slinked slowly up from the ground and turned her head to face Rufus.

"Hello," she sang with a Sesame Street smile.

"Hello," Rufus sang back.

He loved her immediately. She vibrated the insides of him and he felt the satiation that only such moments bring.

"I hope you never die," said the biggest, blackest baby Alabama had ever seen.

"Well, I hope the same for you," snickered Samantha Kelly, the smallest, most pathetic baby Gladys Merriman ever laid eyes on.

They smiled at each other like children. Elliot looked from one to the other, he smiled too. And everyone in the entire room was happy, still and bursting with light.

Emerson arrived in New York City at four eighteen pm. The passengers on the train were quite kind to him, as is expected. When people see the black robes of a minister they take a moment to remember god. And in that remembrance they find kindness or fear or something that makes them smile and bow and nod politely.

Emerson took little notice of the weary eyed travelers. He spent much of the time staring into the mirror in the small washroom at the end of his car. There he saw a youthful clarity he hadn't known in his adult life. It was a feeling, living in the mirror, in the mask he wore on his face, in the skin that covered his soul.

He felt light. He knew he needed to eat and found a hot dog vendor on the street near the station. Emerson asked the man selling the dogs, "Where is the Ambassador Hotel?"

"The Ambassador? Fuck, you got yourself a walk there, father. Just go along the river and you'll get there eventually."

"How far?"

"Probably take you a while tugging those robes behind you. Maybe you should just ask god to carry you there," the vendor said with a smirk.

"He carried me here," said Emerson Marin.

And with that, Emerson began his walk along the river to the Ambassador Hotel, to meet Violet Rosenfeld and kill her. So that someone else would feel the weight of it all, so that she too could be carried away by god.

Rufus walked away from Sam and Elliot with a smile on his face. He loved how happy they were. How playfully casual they were towards one another and towards him. There was a unifying quality to them that he couldn't put words to.

It was perfect that they were there, that he was there and that they were all smiling like children. All of those things needed to happen. They absolutely needed to happen.

Rufus thought about his slow walk to work, how he had to pause and speak to people and think of words to say on the fly. He thought of all of the thoughts that led him to room 922, or rather, what thoughts and words, what feelings and beliefs caused those people, to take that room, and call him to wait on them, out of all the people in all the worlds who could do so.

He thought of the 'ol verse his mother read to him before goin' to sleep each night. Corinthians 9:22: "I have become all things, to all men, so by all means, I might save some."

"I hope this me was good enough," he said to himself as he walked down the hall.

Emerson felt confident for the first time in his life. He absolutely knew what needed to happen. He didn't take any responsibility for what needed to happen, or how it would happen, or anything that would happen after that. Those

things would be dealt with by other people in other worlds that had nothing to do with his own.

Feeling light on his feet, Emerson jogged the last block and side stepped his way down the concrete banks of the river. He felt as if he was looking down a long telescope. And through it he saw one image, one vision. It gave him peace. Not the image, but its singularity.

He thought of all the words that told him to only have one vision, one love, one god: singularity. But he had never felt it before he reached the river.

Then, in the far distant water splashed, something else, additional to him.

When Cyrus O'Reilly ran down the banks of the East River he felt the surge like never before. It echoed through the darkening caves within him. The bird's beaks were pecking at his bones.

The rain started slowly, but as Cyrus ran further down the bank, shards from the sky came crashing into the concrete. The water pelted the city, splashing all of the people moving in myriad patterns. Quickly the rain soaked through his weary clothing. And still he ran.

He thought of the words that told him to only have one life, one hate, one self: singularity. But he had never known it before he reached the river.

Then, like a great buck, it powerfully appeared.

In the shower Samantha thought of the strangely powerful interaction with the bell hop. She smiled to herself, thinking him sweet for being so peculiar and kind. His wispy remark and the marijuana floating around her brain cooled the sense of self-deprecation that usually accompanied the showers in room 922. Usually, she felt as if she was screaming from a cliff, searching for her love, only hearing her own echo. What she wanted was counter love, original response. She turned off the water and watched the steam evaporate from the large bathroom mirror. It went away slowly, a molecule at a time.

Samantha put on a white bathrobe, the Ambassador emblem covering her heart. She curled it around her body and snuggled her chin to her chest.

“Why don’t we just do this all the time Elliot? Why don’t we live in room 922 at the Ambassador Hotel?” She crooned.

She said it as she fell on the bed. Sam looked upside down at Elliot as he fastened his bow tie to his neck. His focus was on the mirror and his neck and the tightening.

“To live in this place, next to that contaminated river? C’mon, were better than that, aren’t we?” He said blandly.

“We’re not better than that right now, are we? She whimpered.

“I hope so,” he said with a lion’s laugh.

Sam thought about his hope. She thought about everything that led her to room 922. She thought of all the words that were said in the house she kept with her husband, all of the words that lived there.

“There is something beautiful here,” she said. “There is something that I don’t have anywhere else. It is easier to breath here.”

“Says the woman who just smoked a joint,” Elliot retorted.

He was playing a game. She was telling him about a moment, a simple moment, and he was using words to make that moment disappear.

“Well, whatever. I just don’t want to lose that feeling and I always do. I do. I always do...”

Sam’s voice trailed off as she said those last few I do’s. Elliot didn’t notice.

He was focused on one thing and one thing only: The speech. The speech, from the poet, that would make the mayor believe again in the artistry of New York City.

The air surrounding the river swirled in cacophonic gusts. It pulled water out, threw water back in and spun it around the banks and the people and the words they used.

“Just stay close to me,” said Mason Kelly. “The water isn’t going to come that far up the bank. Believe me guys the wind and the water are nothing to be afraid of.”

He said it with a fatherly confidence, a feigned feeling of security. He felt secure not because he knew what he was doing, but because he had to do it, that kind of security, the kind that children take with them when they leave their families to travel worlds and fight wars.

The three boys walked along the river because Mason felt more secure there. The path turned away from the dark, cavernous streets that housed shadows no human need see. The mirrors were enough for one day’s wonderment. If the boys saw the mirrors and the shadows and the walls of the caves they danced across...well that would be one hell of a conversation. Imagine, dear friends, the amount of words that would take to explain.

There are certain mistakes that we make on our way through life that dictate the moments of everyone around us. Waves are sent out from our moment and the moment echoes in the lives of others. It pervades their senses. It takes down their defenses. And then they are left to move on their own. We, who changed their moment, all the moments to come into their lives, we leave, and they are left to move on.

Rationalism? The progression of a person's existence based upon a set of preconfigured truths. Really? Really dear friends? Is that the best we can do? Rationalism, when each moment, each molecule of each moment is so inseparably fused together - together.

Rationalism! A way it is supposed to work! A way it is all supposed to go! And then what? When the equation breaks down on its last step, when all the writing is on the wall and the equation breaks down. What then of the writing? What then of every step that led to the break down? What then?

...Then Cyrus crouched in the wet bushes that separated the river's bank and the large glass window of the Ambassador's Grand Ballroom. Water dripped from everything he wore. His face, moving side to side, shook off the ever pressing droplets

as his hands cocked the sawed off shotgun. He took deep breaths. His knees were covered in the mud sliding slowly down the hill. The rain poured hard pellets from the darkening sky; they shot directly through the wind.

His mind reeled.

...When all of the moments have collapsed upon one another, when they have become one moment, mediating all the rest that are to fall in front of my eyes. And I know that I can't stand any more weight on my shoulders. The surge of energy that it takes to keep the moments from crushing me! That surge knows no bounds. It will pop the top off. It will end it all. And what then? What then, when I have no boundaries to bring me back in? When all I know is the desire for suffering's release? He thought.

Emerson thought of going right through the front door of the Ambassador, finding Violet Rosenfeld, telling her about the inadequacy of rationalism and gauging her ability to live on her reaction. He thought of heroic actions. Actions that take place when the martyr does what needs to be done, so that others may live in peace and know god.

He thought...

It grew dark.

He thought he needed more time to think and waited patiently among the many cavernous bushes separating the massive glass window of the Grand Ballroom and the banks of the repulsive river below. Covered in ever penetrating droplets of rain, Emerson crouched into the smallest of balls. His black robes took him in. They cradled his bones.

He wished for a candle, a small, small light. That's all he needed. A small, small light to make him remember how it flickered on the wooden cross in that brick church, in that small, stagnant southern town.

Then he would remember the nails and then god would be within him again, prodding him along, splinters easing their way into the back of his neck with every simple twist of fate.

Remembering the worth of the pain, he peered emotionless into his reflection. He wasn't near enough to make out the face, but he saw the glimmer of his shape in its suggestion. The picture moved back and forth with the inconsistent light of the moon. His eyes were wide. His face seemed hollowed out, the black hood of his robe covering his head. His eyes stood out amidst the ever increasing pitch of the black. They picked up the simplest gleams of the moon's rising light. And with the light he rose and began the slow march forward.

People dressed in the most elegant of robes began to present themselves to one another outside of the Grand Ballroom. Samantha watched nervously from the foyer of the hotel. She was a ghost. And the ghost received nods from tight bloused women, one after the other, then slight tips of the hat from slightly tipsy gentlemen swaying back from the bar.

She felt like a nine year old holding her Mother's hand in church, waiting for something to sneak up behind her and bring her shame. Although no one knew of her and Elliot's perusing of one another, she felt the world too wise to not put the pieces together eventually. There's always a reason things like this don't work out, Sam reminded herself. There are reasons for people to be just like me, "There are reasons," she said out loud.

And though the people had reasons for attending the mayor's ball, none of them were quite like Sam's, but none of them were any better. Sam knew that. She knew no one would ever suggest anything, at least not publicly. It would always be kept clean in this circle, the circle of important people and those rich enough to fake it, the circle that allowed in artists like Elliot because he was rich and connected and had an elegant way of presenting himself in a contrary manner.

Sam looked at the myriad circles of guests now forming in the foyer. She witnessed the passing by of many a girl draped in designer attire. She saw them smile and shimmy as required.

She saw her face in theirs. And suddenly, she began to feel each passing glance they gave as they moved by old men in tuxedos, receiving kisses on cheeks and lazy handed hugs. She watched them present. She felt the place their minds went to. She felt it right then as if it were her face making the movements, her body holding up the weight of their moments.

She walked briskly to the washroom and its elegant mirror. She was alone and felt lucky to be so. And with two hands she grabbed at either side of the sink and peered deeply into all that made her human.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the stage, distinguished guests who’ve come from near and far, friends of New York City...thank you for attending this fine evening in the praise of a most worthy gallant. We are honored by the presence of each and every one of you. Tonight we come together to admire a man who has brought great consciousness to this sometimes challenging city.”

“Through New York scamper millions of hard working souls moving from one place to the other at all times of the day. All times, ladies and gentlemen, at all hours, every moment someone is moving through the streets of this city. And one man is in charge of making sure those people find what they are looking for. It is the job of one man to send those souls

through this life in the best possible condition. His job is to make sure the people of this city continue to believe in..."

He paused, Elliot looked directly at the mirror when delivering the speech, but now his eyes flicker flockered away to the window as... he wondered, would the crowd honor his attempt at sincerity, or would they see right past it and right into what made him human?

He saw the droplets of rain passing down the panes in long gliding streaks of water. They moved within one another, then out, then in again and then they fell to the ground below.

Elliot watched their paths. He nibbled on the remnants of the meal delivered to his room by Rufus Womack who now busied himself with the guests in the Grand Ballroom. He tightened his tie. Over and over again he tightened it until it pulled diligently from either end. He was ready to release the speech with every molecule he could muster. He would gather them all together at once, because he was a poet, because he needed people to believe in the artistry of ascension.

"...transcending," he said triumphantly to the mirror.

He turned in a half circle; he whisked his body away from the carefully constructed image. As elegant as his Mother made him, he walked to the door and began his descent of the staircase.

Cyrus' steps grew quicker. His feet sprayed from side to side on the slippery slope as the rain greased his path. He peeled the layers of clothing back from the contours of his face. And just before he stepped into the light of the window he paused...he bent his knee to the ground and felt the swell of the earth underneath him.

He trembled in the mud and the wake of the swill. The darkness oozed around him and light speckled the puddles in front of his wide eyes. The people, now all collected together in the ballroom, held their posture steady. They smiled courteous smiles toward the stage, into the shimmer of the window. They raised the most pleasant of brows. They peered deeply into the shimmering glass. Cyrus watched them peer.

And then the light in the room dimmed and a man came to the stage, his back only feet from the window. His hands weren't still, they flicker flockered just enough for Cyrus to notice. He watched them wander about the air underneath them, ever so gently brushing time with the smallest of strokes.

Sam watched Elliot as he began to deliver his speech to the mayor and the aristocrats and her. She watched from a seat

near the front, tucked away neatly in the corner adjacent to the darkness of the window.

She scrutinized the lines of his face, which moved with every word he spoke. How slowly they merged with one another. She thought of all the emotions that created the expressions that fixed the lines in place. How many she must have been a part of. How many she must have never known. There were so many lines, moving in so many ways.

She sifted nervously, quietly through her purse, her eyes still fixed on Elliot's presentation. Her fingers rifled through random objects thrown hastily into the bag. She lifted the flap of a side pocket. Her fingers knew right where to go. There, in the pocket, sat a small razor blade. Sam took out the razor blade and, like so many nervous moments before when she felt as though the world had isolated her from herself, she began to widdle away at her nails. No, Samantha Kelly never forgot about the nails.

The blade took off such little portions of her at a time. She wondered how long it would take to widdle it all away. The hours, she thought, how many hours do I have left to do this before I am gone?

The act wasn't overly sinister or destructive. It was a way for her to wield the sharpest of objects in the most delicate manner and have control. The motion calmed her. The

delicacy of the blade and of what it was capable made for a rousing simple juxtaposition. And in that simplicity she sat. Waiting...

Now...

...he wobbled in the wetness of the bushes, the moon beaming on his back. The black, sawed off shotgun glimmering amidst the dreary night. Small steps, then quicker, then a sprint.

One member of the audience in the shiniest of silver gowns pointed, then stood, then screamed to god above. Her echo alarmed the congregation and they lifted their faces in disbelief. All of those lines, on all of those faces, went bat shit insane.

Tiny shards thrown from the barrel of the sawed off shotgun eradicated the glass window. Into Elliot Kingston flew tens of thousands of tiny hell pellets. They tore him to pieces.

Samantha's breath lurched from her chest. She heaved and the words swirled within her. The blood ran thick through her face and her eyes wobbled in their sockets. Tears poured down her painted face as she ran as only a Mother would, directly at the absolute uncertainties lurking in the darkness.

Cyrus threw the gun at the corpse, now draped in the elegance of a woman's love. It slid down the stairs on a river of blood now leaking from Elliot's gaping head wound. Then without a thought in the world, Cyrus O'Reilly collared Sam's neck with one hand and held a bowie knife to it with the other.

And the people screamed,

“Oh my god!!!! Oh, my fucking god,” they screamed without thinking.

“Get out! Get the fuck out of my way!”

They ran over each other, ants swarming into the top of the anthill, scared as the muddled humanity that just blasted its way into their lives. They scurried. They howled. They tore each other’s clothing and ripped at the waists of those in front of them.

Cyrus stared at the orgy of weight and wonderment released with the surge of the shotgun. And not a single person stared back. There were glances, wide eyed, open mouthed glances, but not a single person cared to observe it all.

Cyrus walked through the wreckage and stopped in front of the first lonely soul he came across. She huddled like a child at his feet. She screamed for her Mother as he pulled her short brown hair. She rose to her feet to meet his gaping stare. She took in his eyes as her head tilted slowly backwards. Then a Bowie knife eased its way into her shaking skin, just below her heart. Just below. And in the most innocent of whispers he said, “Mother, grab your things I’ve come to take you home.”

Mason Kelly heard the blast from the banks of the East River in New York City. He couldn't see where it came from, but knew his children needn't see such things.

"Let's move to the sidewalk, up on the street guys, we want to be on the sidewalk. Let's go, now...let's go!"

The boys and their father moved diligently to the sidewalk. Mason said nothing more of the blast and the boys didn't have the curiosity to ask. They moved without thinking, but Mason's mind wandered around the darkness. His eyes were fresh and new.

It must have been a mugging, he thought. Probably a warning shot. The guy is probably running and hiding. He ain't gonna stick around up there, he's gotta be done with whatever person he was with and is running back to some cave somewhere. Fucking worthless piece of shit, thought Mason.

In a block Mason would climb into a cab, the boys would follow. They would go home and listen to the answering machine with dropped jaws. They would feel the weight of it all, the hours packed together into one moment. The nails would plunge into their palms, into the palms of one and all - and all for one and one for all.

They sauntered up the street, hand in hand, but in the distance people were running for their lives.

In the distance they screamed and gouged and made their diamond studded way to cars and limousines. They fled, blackbirds swarming on the city without warning.

Cyrus and Sam winced through the Grand Ballroom and made their way to the nearest elevator. Policemen stood, guns drawn, only a few yards past the elevator, but they didn't fire. Samantha's body wriggled in front of Cyrus' cheshire grin, Elliot's blood dripping from her evening gown, tears staining her mascara soaked face. Against such a sight the policemen were powerless.

No human could have been more vulnerable. Her body pressed against Cyrus', masking the madness that lay within him. And as the doors slowly closed the nervous police officers watched Cyrus O'Reilly's knife sink into Samantha Kelly's neck, the tip of the blade just drawing blood. His eyes flared. The doors closed. Then, after three seconds of waiting, they rose.

"You will know god tonight little bird. You will allow yourself to believe in that which you fly into. Did you know there are birds that fly right into sure and certain death? They fly right into bullets, with all their might they descend upon them. Tonight you flew right into the shards of the lord and savior good god jesus christ almighty! Tonight you will rise with him," Cyrus said.

Sam trembled, she shook. Speechless, completely and utterly speechless, she rose upwards, rising further and further each moment. Cyrus felt the surge in his hands. The center of either palm burned. His head shook and he thrust Samantha's body into the wall of the elevator. Cyrus grabbed her wrist with one hand, pinning it with his forceful grip. With the other he collared her neck and held her body tightly against the metal.

The bowie knife pierced Sam's right hand first, directly in the center. It severed what it touched.

She howled and the wail echoed back through her, time and again. Then the other hand was pierced in the same way, her neck collared; her body held tightly against the rising machine. Cyrus O'Reilly screamed with all that was left within his soul. The blood dripped down the knife, leaving traces on the façade of his snarling face.

"The nails were hammered in for a reason. You cannot just run from them. You cannot fucking run from the nails! They hold you where you need to be, so that all the other people in this world can see who you are. Do you feel their weight? Do you feel how heavy blood and flesh can become when it burns?" He screamed.

Sam awoke. Never had she felt more condemned in her life. Never had it all rested upon her in one moment.

Slowly, the moments add up, they wash over us, but rarely, rarely is it dear friends and readers that we drown in them.

Sam took the deepest of breaths and opened her eyes, the lines of her face staying where her clamped skin kept them.

The elevator stopped. They moved ahead. The blood trickled down her body as it mixed with the crushing wind and rain. They were on the roof. Cyrus returned the bowie knife back to her ribs. It touched her deeply, the bare bones and the blade sliding together every time she jolted her body away from his grasp.

Sam shivered through quickening breath, the rain and the chilling wind spurting from her lips with each exhale. Cyrus dragged her blood stained bones to the edge of the roof. There he stopped. He turned the knife slowly, through her skin and into her ribs. He brought her face to meet his own, his hand gripping and lifting her neck with slow, meticulous motions.

“Do you see what will fall before you - what falls before you now? How will you recognize your belief in all of the moments that are to fall before your eyes? He whispered, his slithering tongue inches from her eyeballs.

The rain came in the darkest of droves from the heavens above, it saturated all it touched. She screamed and the people in the

streets below looked up. Through blotched lenses they saw what looked to be a silhouette holding a woman about to meet god.

“You must experience the world, not the fictions you create. Do you feel it now? Do you feel what - right now - feels like? Do you feel the surge of the moment? Feel it in every part of you. Feel it fall within you and rise again.

Feel it in your face and when you feel it in your face feel the blood behind it. The blood, all that blood that boils in the moment will clot and condemn if it doesn't have a chance to come out. That blood makes you who you are. It decides your fate more than any sort of mask that could cover it.

Lines and carefully crafted tilts of the head - the masked movements we make! The masked movements we make! We make them because we have seen them, not because we know them. You need to feel the blood, to know the blood! You need to feel the blood surge behind your eyes, so that you know everything in you is directly behind your vision. Then you can release! Then you can be human! But not before, not before the solar systems within you align!”

Sam cried tears that had been with her for years. They sleeked their way down her face. Her hands clasped together below her heart, pressing firmly against the freshness of her wound, the blood soaking deeply into her white dress.

Cyrus turned abruptly to see policemen, guns drawn, their voices shouting above the hellfire and wind. They beckoned, throwing their arms to the sky. They pointed guns, one time, two times; they waved them in the air. Cyrus watched their mouths move. He watched the rain bounce from their lips and tumble across the darkness. He saw a world trying to do everything in its power to restore order. He witnessed a machine cry.

He looked at Sam through the pounding rain, his eyes wide, nostrils flaring, his robe rising behind him with the wind. He stood tall, ominous in her eyes. She stood weightless, harnessed and withered to the core.

“Do you have a knife,” Cyrus screamed at her.

Sam cowered.

“You have,” she sputtered. “You have a knife. You are turning my insides with it. You have a knife,” she sobbed.

“And with it you must be prompted,” he scowled back at her. You cannot act on your own. You know that, don’t you? You know you need to feel the pulse of metal against your bones to act? You need to feel as if the action will make the pain go away, or else it has no meaning. And so I ask you, you pathetic, pathetic soul. Do *you* have a fucking blade to cut off my fucking face!?”

Sam looked at Cyrus with the heaviest eyes he'd ever seen. He looked down at her and saw a shimmer of metal in the moonlight. The razor blade's edge had slit, ran, and held onto the lower fold of her dress. Cyrus bent slowly, Sam still perfectly placed between him, the guns, and the wide eyed Irishmen.

"You have to do it!" He screeched.

"What, what the fuck do you want me to do you psychopath!?" Sam cried into the storm.

"Release the blood behind my eyes," said Cyrus O'Reilly. "You need to cut my face from fold to fold, you have to forget the lines and just cut around it all. Take it off. Without my face the world cannot see the lines that tell the story of what I have become, they can only see that which keeps the story going, that which can become."

Sam took the razor from him and peered soundlessly down at the shimmering knife he held inside her skin. Cyrus pulled out the blade, ever so slightly, then, with venomous intent, he plunged it back into her bones.

The pain pulsed from her rib, through her hand and into his face. She pushed the razor in deep just above his eye. Then she tore it down, her weight coming down with her. She pulled against the cross-stitching of the skin. She pushed in again and

the blood spilt out into the wildness of the world. Cyrus shook, he reeled, his body seizing slightly with each tear of the skin. Samantha Kelly plunged the blade into his lower cheek and lifted upward with her arm and her body and her soul. The blood surged from behind the pale plumage. It gushed into the streams weaving together with the wind and the rain, cascading down his soaked torso. Again she threw all of her weight into his face and pushed upwards. She transcended the surface of his skin. And with that, it was done.

And there stood Cyrus O'Reilly, staring at his remains, at Sam, human as all fucking hell.

And just as unexpectedly, Cyrus turned his body to face the people below him. He dripped upon them from the heavens above and then fell from the roof of the Ambassador Hotel, without mercy, to the ground below.

Sam's body gave out. She wilted – a willow's tired branches fading into a dying breeze. Shattered within, her soul began to stir. Her head tilted back. She saw a dark room. A bed as inviting as any bed she'd ever known sat in the middle of the room. Inside of it now, she peered effortlessly at the pictures on the walls. She looked patiently down a long corridor. The shades were carelessly drawn. Light slipped in, indifferent to the darkness. There were rooms to the sides of the corridor. A different person lay in each bed, in the middle of every room.

All of them, lying still as stoics, experiencing everything that she was. The light coming from the corridor was gray. It held her eyes. Her teeth close together, her brow furrowed. Her hands held the bedding tightly. She did not want to go. The room began to blur. The colors moved together, they came right at her. She closed her eyes, but they wouldn't quit taking in the room. The colors funneled down the corridor, spiraling in myriad patterns. They rushed into the room. Her eyes flushed wide open. She saw purity in the darkness. The simplest of moments passed before her, right in front of her. The colors took her in, and then...

...without even the faintest of warnings, the biggest, blackest baby Alabama's ever seen was staring directly into her.

"I brought you the speech. I brought you the speech that your friend was going to give to the people, before..."

Rufus' voice trailed off with the wind and the souls and the rain. Sam looked at him without thinking. She didn't see a human at all, she saw something so much more interesting and amazing. She saw all humans, all of them, all within one being. Somehow, somehow dear friends, she saw all of that in Rufus Womack's pooh bear frame.

The rain trickled off the top of the ambulance doors. People moved frantically in the background, taking questions, looking

stern, holding hands on hips. Doing what people do when people need to look like they are doing things.

“Close the doors,” said Sam. “Will you? I would just like to know what it says, what Elliot would have said...what the speech says.”

Her hands and ribcage were bandaged tightly in soft white tethering. The pain medication seeped into her muscles, it soothed all of the hindrances she didn't know existed. Rufus wallowed up the slippery iron steps and into the ambulance, he leaned against the metal.

Rufus read the first few lines of the speech without batting an eyelash. Sam listened without any words forming in her brain. She absorbed everything he said because she was listening to him say it. The words didn't exist. The letters weren't real. Like her, they were a representation of lost sounds. And Rufus' voice echoed within the container,

“... All times, ladies and gentlemen, at all hours, every moment, someone is moving through the streets of this city. And one man is in charge of making sure those people find what they are looking for. It is the job of one man to send those souls through this life in the best possible condition. His job is to make sure the people of this city continue to believe in transcending.

Without the city believing it can become something other than itself, without killing its own ego and believing that what it is in its current state is incomparable to what it could be, until that day, we cannot speak of progression. Until that day, we are eating peanuts, shells and all, around marble bowls in designer living rooms where children aren't allowed. We are counting our steps and hoping with all that makes us human that the wind doesn't come along and take a piece of the shell to the floor. That we don't spill in a world like that, a world simply not built for such a thing.

And we wonder? Are there worlds that accept the spills of our humanity? Do we have to walk outside, to get back to the true innocence of our nature: The dirt, the water, the air and the fire? Do we have to step back into the cave and see again the shadows we once believed to be real? Do we have to keep moving, keep reflecting every day? Is it then that we throw the shells to the wind and let them turn back into dirt? Is it on that day we realize what kind of world we could live in? Such worlds exist, dear friends, such worlds exist all around us. In fact, those worlds exist within us. And they move us through this life in the most unexpected ways.

I think the mayor is an honorable man because he believes in the amazing power of vulnerability. He believes that when we allow ourselves to become vulnerable we have one of two options. We fall and shatter and our self-confidence crumbles down with us. Or, we rise, we rise up, we encounter new ways

of seeing. And there we could exist, all of us, together. And what a world that would be. Pretend, ladies and gentlemen. Pretend with all your heart.

Philo, a Greek philosopher from ancient times once said, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” Ladies and gentlemen each mirror we look into gives us another chance to say this. And I mean it when I say it dear friends. Say those very words to yourself until they are a feeling, until they don’t exist.

It is not until someone engages in leadership with this kind of mindset that we will transcend this silly state of affairs within us all. It is when someone, with all their heart and soul, who speaks from a lifetime of doing so, screams out: You gotta learn how to fight!

Rufus pronounced the last line with his fist in the air. He looked directly at Sam. And while watching tears slowly well up and fall from her eyes, he felt the innocent love of his mother resound in his bones. And in that love he knew God, and that was that.

...and then

Emerson awoke with a startling feeling in either hand. His palms, burning and heavy were pressed against the floor. His rib ached. He awoke and turned over because of that pain. He looked directly at Dr. Rosenfield and smiled in wide eyed wonderment.

She smiled at him with her hand on his shoulder, almost blocking out the light of the lamp behind her. It glazed her exterior in a shimmering gold. Emerson reached out to touch her face. She reached out her hand as well. Although she wanted to keep him at a distance her fingertips grazed his and he felt relief, enough to return his hands back to his chest. He felt fresh. Once washed over, tired and surreal, but he sensed a rising spring within him.

“Emerson don’t be afraid of the light, open your eyes,” Said the doctor.

He squinted, his pupils broadened.

“Human, Emerson, we are just human. That is all, that is all there is to be. Don’t be afraid of what you witnessed. You saw your myriad humanity. The multilayered perspectives we create to defend us in this world. You saw something that you

have only felt, but you fought Emerson, you fought, you fought through it and you saw what needed to be seen. You worked through the confusions and you did what you needed to do to disarm the anger.

I'm proud of you Emerson. You allowed yourself the honesty, the vulnerability required to sort it all out. The menagerie of images that we give to our interpretations of this world, oh, my boy you somehow put them into alignment. You saw the connections between them all, where they all began and how they blended into one and other. You saw the eclipse of all the energy that is you, and it came into your eyes. And now that you know that moment exists, you have created something to seek, something that will save you, from...from all of this.

Sometimes you have to be a woman to understand all of that, but sometimes you have to be a man, or see that woman as a man or the man as a woman because that is all your brain can handle. You are only what you've encountered. The archetypes within us, the characters that guide our thinking, they have so many forms. Oh, this must be so confusing right now. Emerson, I know that you must be feeling a bit overwhelmed, I'm just very proud of your progress."

Dr. Rosenfeld, a tear in her eye, turned away just before she felt Emerson would be awake enough to see her vulnerable state. He moved slowly to his feet and looked around the unknown

room. The floor was wet. He noticed his shirt was soaked, he was soaked. He sweated through it.

The room was different than the usual space he traveled in, but what alarmed him above that little fact were the sky scrapers outside of the window. Emerson dashed to the panes of glass. What he saw frightened him for a moment. Then he remembered the train. He remembered Dr. Rosenfeld sitting with him and waiting with him outside of the bathroom. He remembered their walk by the river and how he fought against going into the hotel and then...that's where he was! The hotel! The Ambassador Hotel! The room, Dr. Rosenfeld said, the location of the incident, that's where the session needed to be: The room that held the anger. That is what she said, that's why she was crying, something had happened.

He could hear his thoughts, he could feel. He stared at the water that ran through the city beneath him. The sludge and the grudge, misplaced by some, placed by others, floating, slowly away – it all moved so intentionally. How can something so misplaced move with such intention? He thought. What if the intention takes over? Can the water be changed by intention? Can the intention create a current? Can it maneuver the waste away? Can it rebuild itself? Can it...transcend?

“Oh, Emerson,” sighed Dr. Rosenfeld. “Are you alright? You will feel unnerved and of course we will have to keep working,

but there was a tremendous movement in your control today. I feel like your mind may be reeling a bit.”

Emerson still hadn't said a word. The doctor didn't want to sound worried or alarm him in any way. Her persistent questions were a diagnostic tool she hoped would reveal his state of being. So far, nothing.

He smiled like a Koala bear and stepped towards the doctor. He hugged her, innocent as all fucking hell.

He winced. Pictures of his past flew through his mind. He saw a body morphing into one person then another, then millions of fragments coming together, falling apart and uniting again as one. Again the pieces flew to the atmosphere and again they united as a single entity. He closed his eyes tighter. He saw millions of body's morphing together, breaking apart, mixing up their pieces, coming together again. And each moment, again, it happened.

He thought of his mother. Always, he thought of his mother. She knew he was alive her entire life, but rarely did she think of him. She didn't think of him right up to the time he threw thousands of lethal, metal shards into her welcoming heart. He felt he had done such a thing and then left her to bleed to death in a hotel room. That thought was his ever pressing burden, the heat of the mythologized moment always mediating his existence.

The attendants of the Ambassador Hotel knew it was a suicide, as did the policemen, as did Gladys Marin, but Emerson wouldn't believe it. He was convinced, dear friends, please understand, at nine years old he was convinced, convinced that his hatred for his mother and her affairs - that his hatred pushed her away, that it killed her. He thought he moved the trigger with his own finger. And sometimes he actually remembered it happening.

As the police report told it, when her married lover didn't want to take her away from it all, when he left her for fame and fortune and family, she turned her fear and sadness on herself.

And with that action, the anger began to swell in the skinniest, whitest boy the Carolinas have ever known. It blossomed and it bulged and it bloomed into something that didn't sit well with the soil. It was a misplaced creation spiraling down, spiraling round...spiraling out of control. But always the spiraling, all the time. And there he sat, on the hardwood floor of the hotel room where Gladys Marin blew away his childhood. She took it down with her and sent him forth in a million tiny pieces. And here he was, twenty seven years later, picking them back up.

Now: He saw the myriad aspects of his humanity, how they fell to pieces and reunited again, not with those they sought, just with those close enough to collaborate on the next moment.

None of it happened intentionally, or with predetermined purpose. Causes and effects flicker flocked in the breeze just as much as everything else. It all just – flowed together in the slowest, steadiest of currents. What will be will be...no, what will be already is, thought Emerson Marin. And with that thought, he knew he could forgive the anger and its source, he could continue his becoming.

He took a step back and spoke, wide eyed with wanderlust, “I think we all can be forgiven,” Emerson said meekly. “If we remember what we are made of. If we remember that we are an ever expanding atmosphere. That everything is bouncing from one stimulus to the next, yet always with the ability to transcend, to be recreated with absolute intention. It looks random, it looks detached. It’s not. Its symbiosis perfected.

We believe the aspects of our lives we can’t comprehend to be fixed in a state we can comprehend. We believe we can see the worlds within us progress knowing full well all we see is the wind blowing restlessly against the willows. We think we can see growth, maturity, progression. But we can’t. And though we can’t see the worlds rising and falling within, those worlds soar, they move faster than anybody’s business, they progress of their own volition.

Humans are like that sometimes. I think sometimes we don't realize we are moving a million miles an hour because we forget about the way things are all put together....

...We see the details in front of us, but not how they all connect together. And if we don't see how they connect together, well, then we will never understand how we are all inextricably bound to one another, we will never understand how God works.

{Praise how God works}

The pastor looked deeply into the eyes of his faithful congregation. They searched him as well. They looked for words that would keep them from their graves. They looked for words that would make them live forever. Emerson felt their wanting. He sensed their desire to continue, but he had no mercy for such desires. They could continue at any time. If only they looked within and found the people there, just waiting to make amends. Then every moment of their lives could slow down.

And when the moments slow to a still, when dewdrops sparkle on windowsills like fallen angels, when cats waltz about rooms and the sunlight brings alive dying leaves, when it becomes more than just matter and mirth, when the storms within our souls are searched, when we have the courage to internally investigate and come out with something mystical to say...

That moment, that moment is the moment his congregation had not yet known, yet it beckoned them, it beckoned them all. It flew past them in sun kissed molecules of dust, rising, always rising, upwards towards the breeze. And into that breeze, Emerson spoke,

“Forgiveness, dear friends. That’s what is required in this world. And we cannot forgive ourselves, that’s just not the way it works, no matter how hard we try. Forgiveness is about giving power away, so how could a person forgive himself? What would be given away?”

And when we forgive people for their actions, really forgive: When we transcend the classifications we have handed out, when we forget the words...to simplify, to not carry the guilt, the weight of every action, to know that it is possible, to have faith that it is possible...that is to know God. And that is universal, dear friends, that is universal and unifying and what all of this is all about.

We cannot forgive ourselves and so we must forgive each other. We must forgive all people for the things we would forgive ourselves. It needs to come from us all, every one of us, man and woman. We need to believe that the security we toss aside when we make decisions will come back to us in forgiveness. Then we can feel free to believe that what makes us human does not make up what we can become. We can change, we can transcend. We can become...always. If we can continue to forgive we can continue to become.

{Praise what we can become}

Emerson walked away from the pulpit with a smile on his face. He knew the ending to his sermon would not sit well with the congregation. It gave them nothing firm to hold onto. But he was not concerned with their ability to hold, he was concerned with their inability to let go.

Oh, silly, silly words...good God! – The way they play with us all, he thought.

And with that, Emerson Marin, human being, felt aligned. He walked with the breeze, lacing all the energy together. He sifted through space and time. He rose with the light, with all the molecules of the wind. And in its current he strode.