I am a branch in a dark room

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I AM A BRANCH IN A DARK ROOM

by

Samuel Stenard

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ABSTRACT

*I Am a Branch in a Dark Room*— the first of two intersecting novellas— relays the consciousness of Edmund, a young man trapped in a waking coma. He is able to hear the sounds of the care facility yet unable to directly engage them. To him, he seems only a mind, drifting untethered from the world around him; to the world— and even his own mother— he seems little more than a corpse. As the narrative progresses, his bearing is fractured and he reels toward the void. The self reduces: from an interior monologue, to a cluster of perception, until, “deprived of all perspective and horizon”, he is “reduced to an intuition,” to borrow a phrase from Marilynne Robinson. The second novella— told by Edmund's nurse— expands this mind-body dichotomy. Recently pregnant, she contemplates his condition as a new consciousness blooms within her. Channeling a Beckettian notion of “unbirth” through the lyricism of Robinson, *I Am a Branch in a Dark Room* is a meditation on the condition of consciousness, the potency of memory, and the endless mystery of our own being.
I (and that slenderest word is too gross for the rare thing I was then) walked forever through reachless oblivion, in the mood of one smelling night-blooming flowers...

*Marilynne Robinson*, Housekeeping

I

MORNING. And so someone will be here. To turn me. To unkink my arm.

When I was thinking of grampa was when it happened. The smell in his car. The smiling white-blue smell of the LifeSavers in the ashtray. In their silver-foil tube. And grampa tearing away the foil with fingertips that had a brown-yellow smudge under the nail and on the pad. And popping one of the perfect disks out with the same nail, letting it fall into his waiting palm. And throwing it back into his waiting mouth, a little silver stubble on his chin, then pulling another out with his fingers and holding it out to me, saying So the girls’ll kiss you!

It was then that the prickling in my arm began. Like thrumming static on a dead TV. That crackling night. And now nothing but deadness: arm reporting silence. Even when I know it should not be. I know there should be sheet: clean sheet, because she dressed it only yesterday. (Was it yesterday?) I know there should be sheet because my side can feel it. The bones in my
knee and ankle. And my neck can feel the pillowcase: the new pillowcase, smelling still of the detergent they use in this place. Strong to wash the sick out. The old.

I can hear them being rolled in the hall. The continuous sound of their wheels, of the nurses stirring. A new shift arriving soon. To turn me. To unkink my arm.

- WONDER IF MOTHER will come today. Some time since she’s been here. Since before the snow. The snow when they were afraid to lose power.

Heard them in the halls talking, no power. It would silence the monitor. Its undying beep. It would stop the drip, this needle that pinches my hand, the tube that feeds me. Then I would starve, wither. And my ribs reach out like grasping fingers. Like a being caged. The belly would hollow, sink until it met spine, and the knobs like chewed corn cobs would appear. And my knees would protrude, and the column of my esophagus, and the screaming bones of my face, until I was a skeleton pooled in wax. But still I would be.

It has been a long time. But when she comes, I will smell her perfume first. That she sprays from an enameled bottle that she keeps behind the mirror over the sink. A smell of a brambling rose: glazed with rain, violet by stormlight. That brambling vine inlaid in the bottle’s surface, beneath the text in French. Can’t remember it. Not even the letters. But it will be mother’s perfume. And it will be the smell of heat, carried from her hair curlers. And it will be the smell of lotion which she puts in her skin before and after sleep. Rubs into her long red hands, chapped in winter. Circling each cuticle with the pad of her thumb. And I will hear her shoes because they will be heeled because it is a workday. And so it is not Saturday or Sunday, but a weekday. When she works in an office of her own. And to call her you must speak through...
a veil of secretaries, asking not for mother but for her name, and this moment would fill you with
dread. Because I had to speak on the phone. But also because mother had another name. And so
she is someone without me. Were I to vanish: taken in a public bathroom, mauled in a school bus
.crash like the footage of all those children hitting the ceiling like the ball in a can of spray paint,
were I to become sick as I had been sick. The sickness which made me so tired I felt sleep was
my natural state, and waking flashing periods of cruelty which must be suffered. Like getting out
of the bath on a cold school night. Were I to fade she would go on being. And no one could call
her mother because I have no brothers or sisters, so she would be her name. And so that phrase is
like my death. A rune carved on my tomb. Like the marble home in a graveyard. Where people
sleep warm and safe, not trapped in a box in the dirt. Where there is a slab of marble prepared for
you: a bed cold and carved as a church pew, and your coffin on top, with room overhead should
you need to get out, and not so many shovelfuls of dirt. Yet still safe. Because only the
gravedigger in his blue jeans would have a key to open the wrought iron gates. And he is like a
gardener, the bodies his flowers, and he cares for them because they cannot for themselves. And
he spends all day with dirt beneath his nails, and when it rains he just props an umbrella
overhead. And he’d take lunch in his truck: an old blue pickup truck with potted plants and a
weedwacker and little American flags in its bed. And he’d watch the rain symphonic on the glass
while he ate soup from a thermos, still hot, and he wouldn’t even turn the radio on: just listen to
the singing steel of the pinged roof, the pattering rain on glass, while I hear the same sounds but
distant, across the gravel path in my tomb. And it would smell cool and dry here like a basement:
the cool dry smell of marble, the earth which the gardener tracked in. And I’d have all the time in
the world to rest. For I had passed away, at last, and my body no longer itches where tubes enter
Itching spots on my belly and throat, back of my hand. And so I’d sleep during the day and in the evening slip through the black iron bars (for they were made to guard not trap) and wander the garden in my death shroud, flesh as blue as marble. And no one would see me, so I suppose I’d be a ghost. But it would not be unpleasant. Nobody to see and pity you, no body to make a mess. And as a ghost I would have no wish to speak. Words would not be hot stones kept in my mouth, demanding me spit, frustration and rage beyond comprehending screeching red-black in the cells of my skull. No. Not like that. Breathe, through the tube in your throat.

Rather, I would communicate by electrons. And as I crossed the garden on my bare feet, I would come to a pocket of mourners: wearing church clothes, and one among them the centerpiece in her grief. An old woman, wearing a pendant and sweater, her old man in the box. And tears would be on her face, and everyone around would be embarrassed of her because it is like she is naked, as it seemed with grampa, alone and stripped. But perhaps she could go on living. Like grampa, like the name of mother. And as my feet cross the wet grass the widow would detect me as pink mist. For I am pink mist, as I am anything after dying as I am in sleep. And she would not feel better about the old man in the box (who I remember as a young man, sunbathing on a boat) but she would remember in the coming days the pink mist and feel a consolation. A wave of warmth, like a remembered thing you forgot. Whose shape hangs on the edge of your mind. Perhaps she’ll call it the old man’s spirit moving on, scraping her sight. Or think it herself a stroke. A sign of things to come. As it was for Mr. Foster down our street. Who had a stroke and then walked jaggedly, showed no expression in his limp left-face, and mom said it was paralysis. Of the kind I sometimes dream. And it was frightening because he did not look like himself. And though he would trim the hedges in his yard he would do it crooked and
slowly. And if we were carrying groceries from the car and mom saw she would say Poor man and I’d hate it because I’d feel an arrow of pity. For him who had the blood in his brain seize. And I remember, at the beginning, they wondered if that was what happened to me. Before I fell asleep, before I was here and still visiting doctors. But these doctors grownup, gray faced, speaking only to mother. Not like the doctors at my office where there are books and games in the waiting area, and inside each room is painted a different place. The doctor’s office. One a safari, with a lopsided tiger grinning, made of orange lines. And another like Japan, with a red goldfish and a lotus flower balancing on the tip of a ricketing brown branch. And an ocean scene: whole room painted two tones of blue, cerulean above, indigo below, seaweed rising from the exam table. And here there was a squid with a smile (instead of a beak as they really have, so shockingly, like a bird’s but sharp and frightening on their sheening porpoise skin) and tentacles in a single shade of gray, tapering to ragged nothingness at their ends where the paintbrush ran dry. The whole blue room feeling smaller and cozier. Like the inside of a submarine. White light not rebounded dizzily but absorbed as it was in the space room. Its walls near-black, and the portion of orange orb that was the surface of a far-off planet. As imagined and plucked from the mind of the lady doctor. Who I saw only once and who I hoped would not ask to see me naked. Feeling vulnerable and chilled in that loose gown like a baby’s blanket. And the way it hangs weightless from your legs so that you feel uncovered but aren’t. Sitting there on the crinkling paper, bare thighs pressed against cold cushion. As I lay now. But no longer feeling naked. Because I feel nothing now: no embarrassment when they clean me, lying here always naked. As in a morgue.
And perhaps that’s where I am. Stored in a drawer beside a dozen others. But in dying, none of us speak the same language, but were sorted to different kingdoms. And so though we lie parallel on the shelf, cold as stone, we are each alone in death, waiting for the arrival of the man who keeps the morgue in a long black coat, wearing frameless glasses, and speaks to each of us in our death tongue. Wipes the dirt from our fingernails, scrubs the flesh where it rubs: under the arms and high between the legs, enlists his aid to lift us while he cleans our backs, which rub the stone all day. And we are glad for him as he cleans because he’d know us in a way our mothers didn’t: who were averse to wash our corpses, who would not check our signs. But my morgue keeper is a woman whose floral deodorant I can smell when she moves to clean me. Who rarely speaks but whose voice I can hear in her breath. And I know when it is afternoon because her clothes will smell of restaurant: of french fries cooked in oil, grilled bread, peppery chicken breasts, and it’s been so long since I’ve eaten. Since food passed my mouth’s margins which speak in death. And my itching feeding tube making me feel brittle like an insect, stuck on my back. Dead on the pavement. And if I were to move, my brittle shell would shatter. And then I’d be only the worm inside. Because I must be falling asleep. Because if my shell is shattered than I am a white worm, lost in the bugs crumpled armor. Inside asleep.

A MUMBLING VOICE through the wall. It is the television’s voice, sounding gray and white through the wall. It is mounted in the corner. Mine has one too. In the beginning, she turned it on. But now no more. Only the machines now (the dead machines) always humming. Drawing my breath.
Wish I could hear what it’s saying. Or what it plays. Even music. But the sound’s like the shape of a lock for which I do not have the key. Can see its shape, but not the key.

A jangling key ring. The orderly who hums to himself, mopping. Scrubbing the floor with the smell like hospital. He bangs into things, gets behind my bed. There must be many cords. Wonder he never unplugs them. Waits. Cleans. I expire. Then he returns and plugs it back in. Don’t know if it would be air to kill me. To drown in a room full of air, unable to accept it. For I am useless now. Unable to work my anatomy. Nothing like the diagrams you see in text books. With blue arrows for air and red for CO2, which goes and breathes the plants.

AND THE SEATS at gram’s funeral were very hard. And the air itched like pink flowers. And the coffin looked like a piece of furniture on the altar. And we stood in front of it while the people passed. Many old ladies, saying they were sorry, and mother taking their hands. And old people from church who I recognized. And one old lady with makeup who kissed grampa’s cheek. But it was almost his mouth. The corner. And it was strange to see two old people kiss. And I looked to mom and she was staring at the woman like she knew her. But I did not know her, not from church. And when she moved down the line mother let her shake her hand. But she said nothing. And the woman’s mouth said nothing though her eyes did. And she didn’t even look down at me, as the other ladies did, saying my grandmother was a great lady, and didn’t she bake better than anyone? She said nothing and shuffled through the crowd, and I saw her leave through the door by the choir, and I felt a cold wind. Because it was winter when gram died. And I was afraid outside the men would fall carrying her coffin. Because grampa was among them. And he had his coat buttoned to the top, and the collar up, and a hat on, and his eyes glittered like
salt in the biting air. And by the grave some snow had been cleared, but still it was deep. And it soaked your socks when you stepped in it. So many old people stayed in their cars. And when we got to the rim of the grave I bent over to glimpse its bottom. For it was there. A grave. The frozen walls furrowed. Waiting for the coffin, at the bottom of all things.

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AND SUMMER MORNINGS before the day had grown hot mother would take us to a gardening store down a long road. It would take a long time to get there. And when we got there there was an old man we recognized. With a big belly and suspenders and a red face and dirt smears on his clothing. And his shoes were cracked and he greeted mother warmly though he didn’t know her name. And we’d walk through the jungled greenhouse, air thick, light strange, and everywhere the smell of black mulch: spicy, woody, remember it, and the plastic tang of hose water, smelling like a pool. And the greenhouse was filled with the quiet arms of plants. Ferns unrolling in the heat. A clay pot studded with holes like battlements where those strange cactus plants grew. But were those there? Or did I see them in a book. Or on the back-steps at Aunt Kay’s house. Knocked over, broken, a shard of red-clay rolling on its back, seeking its center, staring up at the clouds like a man on the desert floor, like the bare sun in Mexico, baking adobe huts, a small tribe, and the women singing, that clap and drone like falling shards of rock, and a calling response from the children, working at their hips, voices pulling like running water, like some mighty river whose crash is never absent, with embankments carved from red clay, its whole self brown and surging. As Machu Picchu carved from clifftops. The white mountain mist eclipsing their bottoms, so they seemed temples in the sky. Like a movie I saw long ago. In the back room of Abigail’s house. Where there were black-and-white floor tiles and a skylight and
they watched their movies on a little television, its shelf crowded with videotapes. And this one about a floating castle. That once was a great kingdom, but long ago abandoned. For something happened to its creators. And the parapets rusted in sunlight. The aqueducts crumbled. Rain water ran a winding path, green-slimed, down the columns. And a bird built its nest in the hands of the clocktower. And the great paved courtyards had long ago filled with grass, so that now a young forest grew, and lost in the forest were the husks of automatons. And wildflowers grew from their brown shoulders. And when the children arrived, they climbed on these creations. For though they had been looking for this place a long time, it did not matter, for it ceased to know time. Because birds’ nests filled the floor of the clocktower. Moldering, returning to dust. And inside them fragments of eggshell, and the bones of dead tiny birds. And dust fell from the gearwork high above, held in shafts of sun, and the dust and light accumulated on the clocktower floor. Dressed the tiny skeleton. And so this was a place that could never be touched. For even if the children found a broken window, a door left unlocked, they could not unsettle the light. For it had lay like that for a long time. And it would go on that way, even if someone were to sweep with a broom, as grampa’s house will be as it always was, before it was built, after it was emptied, always the National Geographics on the coffee table in the den, the pages brittle as the mustard cover. And all the people dead inside. And the animals. And that carnival in the nighttime streets of Chile, which I seemed always to open to, still going, though all are dead. Though morning’s come. Paper streamers in the gutters and the town asleep in bed, tired in their bodies, rapturous in their joy, the faintly ringing memory of trumpet-music like a wind-chime on the breeze of sleep. Tinkling soundless from the back deck, through the screen door, where the porch swing creaks and mother hums and gram peels garlic and grampa watches baseball and my
father is a black mask with a different family in Nebraska, as I always somehow imagined. Seeing a map and thinking Nebraska and following with my finger the yellow hair of highway he must have travelled to get there. And there there is a son like me. Like the face I see in the mirror. And at bedtime he kisses him with a face scratchy with whiskers and in the morning puts on a suit for work and carries my backpack to the car and when we get home he loosens his tie and hugs me and I tell him the things I saw that day and he listens to everything though tired, he works hard, and changes into jeans and a shirt and plays outside with me and at the dinner table sits at the head where fathers sit and we could have a center, not sit on two sides of a square table or else at a restaurant, the same one as always, and mother with a chicken salad and no croutons and extra dressing on the side and I with chicken fingers and would I eat those now, so crispy and hot and the meat inside white as fish and golden fries that scrape in their basket and a pool of red ketchup tart and syrupy catching restaurant glare, and a leaf of lettuce wilted, green against the white plate, and to think there were nights when I didn’t finish but let the tired waitress older than mother take the plate half-full and chewed and what would I do to eat even a scrap of that plate. Like a hungry alley dog digging through apples cores and fish bones, and all they feed me is this tube. And I never grow full, but waste.


NOT DYING. What would it be like? Like trying not to fall asleep. Like sitting in a large and empty theater while an old movie plays. All alone. You and the black-and-white droning.

Dying. I know it. Have sought it. A thousand times I’ve asked for death. Asked of a rare silence, when sound comes like a stone ringing into a well, is this death? When my legs, my
arms have ceased to itch. When I cannot ask them to itch. Is this death? And I cannot tell it. For it might be death. Might as well be death. A place where nothing is save me. The voice in my ears. For even in death this still will be.

But will it? Death. A mouthful of water. And then a silence. A silence as none has ever heard, for none is there to hear it. The small flame extinguished. For it was always a small flame, that became clear. But you are the match-head. Swallowed in noisy light as the flame is crowded by darkness. All is darkness save for it. Like the cosmos. A near infinity of black, a sucking dark, and you unspeakably small. I unspeakably small.

And yet— there are two of us. I and the dark. The match-head and the dark. And so there are two things in the universe. And a spot that’s not the darkness.

*A NEW SMELL* among the smells of the room: an itchy smell of roses, of a fog-gray bottle, of hot hair curlers.

Mother. Not yet her voice, but surely her with her smell. And the click of high-heeled shoes. So it is a workday. Morning still, perhaps. Or four o’clock. Later. Earlier.

The clicking nears. And I hear her voice through her nose: a long breath exhaled. What is this new smell on her? Like sweat. But different. A smell I do not recognize. But she is breathing. My mother is here with me and she is breathing.

But she does not smell quite like my mother. How long has it been since I heard her last? Only a week, likely. Or more. It could be a month. A year. Two years. And so she is becoming an
old woman, and perhaps this is the smell. While I have become an old man, the bones in my face screaming. And she has faded like a ghost to white, as if she is washing out. Like the old ladies in church who fade: face, hair, pupils, all paling fading to white. And perhaps it is not her heels that click but a young woman’s, helping her along. Painted nails gripping her arm. A low voice prompting.

Or perhaps my mother is not here at all. Perhaps it is an imposter in her shoes. Who cannot get her smell right. Perhaps my mother is dead.

“Hi, sweetie.”

Mom.

“It’s been so long, I know. I travelled for work last month, then the holidays arrived, and those get so busy. I missed a day, then another day. And then— I guess it let it go. Tried not to think about it. And you know the horrible part? I could. I could pretend, for just an evening, that this wasn’t my life.

“Jesus, I didn’t mean to talk like this. It’s been so on my mind. How are you, sweetie, are you good? Your hair is long. It’s been months since I asked them to stop cutting it. I just love it like this, it reminds me of when you were little. You remember that? I’d put a little elastic in your
hair and give you a ponytail. And you, you’d be so mad. So sweet and mad! and demand I take it out because you said you weren’t a girl. Oh, my little man. I just cherished you at that age.

“Auntie Kay is trying for another baby. I don’t know why she continues to put herself through this, even after Fiona. She’ll be 46 this year. But she wants one more, just one more little girl. She always wanted a big family. Even when we were little and we’d play, she’d imagine a whole daycare of children, and I’d have to be one of them. But yes— Quinn, almost out of college. It must be getting to her. It seems not long ago we’d take you little ones to the park. Those lovely, summer afternoons that smelled like mulch. I can smell it. And Quinny, he has a girlfriend now. Aunt Kay showed me a picture. She’s just beautiful— Kay adores her. She says she’s studying to be a literature professor. They all met for lunch one weekend last month, Kay and Uncle Kevin drove out for the day, left Fiona and Ryan at the house with me. So many kids out of the house. Sean working in San Francisco. He seems to like it. And Connor— I’d mentioned that he didn’t go back to JCC last semester. He’s working on houses. All day outside, this time of year, I can’t imagine it. But he looks good. There’s a glow about him. And he looks strong, like he’s filled out. Not like a boy anymore, but like a man. I see a lot of Grampa in his face. And he gave Kay the most beautiful jewelry box for Christmas, he designed and built it himself. And when she opened it, inside were cards from all the other kids. It was so thoughtful.
“It reminded me of old Christmases. When Grampa and Gram were still alive. And you were such a joy on Christmas morning. Rocketing down stairs in those two-piece pajamas, the look on your face when you saw the presents! And Gram would always make you wait til she’d gotten a picture of you. And after every one was opened you’d fall asleep: like a little miser in his pile of gold. That’s when I’d start to cook, put on Bing Crosby or Elvis, and the house would feel full of warmth. Then Dad and Mom would open a bottle of wine and we’d clink glasses. Then Dad would go into the living room to see what movie was on TV, just as you were getting up— you’d have the imprint of wrapping paper on your cheek. And I’d take you upstairs to put on a sweater for dinner. And I’d feel warm, even a little tipsy from the wine, and enchanted with motherhood. Brimming with the joy of responsibility. And so I’d comb your hair, tuck in your shirt, and we’d go down to the table to eat. And it was so nice the four of us: glazed ham and roasted potatoes, the bottle of wine, pineapple upside-down cake.

“Old Christmases. I know. God, I know I didn’t visit this year. I— maybe I was afraid to make you sad. In the beginning, your cousins would come and we’d sing carols and take photos with you in Santa hats. And we’d make hot cocoa and bring clippings from the tree and put them in water beside the bed so you could smell them. The doctors said the sensory stimulation was good for you. I visited everyday then: talked to you, read to you. Even played music when I was
gone. Do you remember it, Edmond? Did you ever know? I’ve been thinking so much about this. It’s been so long since there was any hope, any signs that this might change.

“When did you leave me, Edmond? Was it at the beginning, when you first closed your eyes? They said you had some awareness. I believed them. I thought I could see a… shadow, at times. Like an expression before an expression. A tightness, a softness in your face. But it’s not there anymore. And I wonder if I ever saw it at all. If I didn’t imagine it, trick myself into believing it. Because I so badly wanted my baby to well. To send him to middle school, high school, college. To see what kind of person he’d be. But it’s like I am mother to a dead child. God, I feel horrible saying it. Because I know I should feel lucky. Lucky that my child wasn’t taken from me completely. I do think of that. But— my child doesn’t move in time. I cannot speak to him. I don’t know who he is.

“God, I don’t want to feel these things. I want this to be over. I want this to have never been. It is all I can think of in my quiet moments. I am never alone. Your knowledge is there. When I am cooking it is there. Showering, there. When I sleep—

“Oh God, sweetie.”

Mom.

“Why won’t you die?”
II

TRAPPED here. Deer in barbed wire. Farmer with cutters, farmer with a gun. While the sky
turns night. And a cold wind coming over the grass. And the coyotes beginning to yelp.

Can’t do it. Can’t find the mechanism in all this night. A switch somewhere. To shut off
the heart. Slow the bowels. Drain my lungs.

The mechanism. Minuscule, delicate. A cuckoo bird, hidden on its spring. But the hands
of the clock broken, unturning. So the bird trapped in darkness. Trapped behind its flap. To be
anything but the cuckoo bird. To be the flap: thoughtless, mute as a door. Opened by the hands of
a clock.

This would be the way. Not even the hinge. Only the square of wood, stained dark,
knotless. The irregularities of an itch, of a bad thought: gone. And the hinge glued so it wouldn’t
rub.
That would be the way: become dark wood. And so no need for finding mechanisms. No need for thinking night.

HERE IN THE DARK, I might be anywhere. Might be in a hotel bed, mother on the other side, snoring gently through her nose so I know she is there. So I know I’m not alone.

Aura from the digital clock blurs the darkness red. In the hall, the elevator pings, reports its arrival, delivers its contents onto the geometric hallway carpet, checked in red and green. Perhaps a man back from a rendezvous; perhaps a family just arriving, wheeling between them a towering silver baggage carrier loaded like a train compartment, wheels like a shopping cart, brown carpet, for some reason, on its bottom. A father pushing it: a big, handsome man with a beard, in a blue collared shirt. One strong-backed hand wrapping polished chrome, another holding his sleeping son to his shoulder. And there is a mother, holding the hands of two daughters. And I can hear the rolling as they go to their room. Hear the rolling of wheels on tile floor: sick being pushed to their rooms. But I am not with them. I am inside the closing elevator doors, and though I make to press the glowing buttons, they do not respond to my touch. Instead, the elevator is lurching. Going up. But that is not correct. I am going further from my mother, further from the bearded father in the blue sports shirt, becoming further and more alone each moment. The wall panels grin. Become in their loveless regard sinister, witness, gazing on my unspeakable fate. Pings the door and horror fills me. I know what will enter. When they open, they are about to, it will come in here and I seek to move myself but find the feat impregnable. I slam my eyelids shut, a trick that works. But it doesn’t work. I am still in the elevator. And now the doors are opening and there is a man bent. He is wearing a gray winter coat and I can see the
meat in his neck. He doesn’t have any skin. His face is like the corpse of a dog. But inside the
dead face his live eyes glitter malice. His arms are hooked, his hands are raised, and now he is in
the elevator grinning. He is in my face and taking me into the hoop of his foul arms. I seek to
scream but sense I have no mouth. Then I hear a car rush along a highway. I can still feel his
arms hooking me, but I can no longer see it. The dog’s head, the foul arms. A residual feeling. A
high-five hot on your palm after it’s happened. When you’re walking away.

I can feel my heart in my chest in the dark. I can see nothing: not an elevator, not a
carpeted hallway, not the dog man in the big winter coat. But still—or do I imagine it—there is
the sound of wheels. A family wheeling to their den. A father holding his son.

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AND GRAMPA WAS A DOCTOR who put people to sleep. An anesthesiologist, he said. Every
time I asked, unable to carve the slot for the word. Anesthesiologist. From the Greek, grampa
said. Every time I asked. From the Greek for feeling, from the Greek without, that’s what I tell
my students.

Because he was a teacher too it seemed. At the hospital. And when he got home I
imagined the smell of the gas on him. That I could smell it, sweetly, like rotting fruit. That if I
buried my face in his button-down work shirt I might see every color and fall violently asleep.
And I’d go to the place where his patients go, and I’d see their spirits wandering: fog-white,
reading a newspaper, feeding pigeons, until their bodies were ready for their return.

But some of them would never return. Something would happen in surgery, a crooked
stitch. Not by grampa, but another doctor. The ones who cut. Because I knew it happened
sometimes. Saw grampa very mad and yelling once, threw a glass coaster at the wall, and it was
because someone had died. And so their misty spirit could not come back, but wandered still in
the city park, where it happened to be winter. And they’d sweep off a bench with their gloved
hand, so they’d have a place to sit. And walk the paths the man with his snow-blower had made.
And they never slept, so they were always waiting, if you could call it that. But it wasn’t death.
For they were ever alive here, but wanting to go back. But not even the escape of sleep, for they
were already asleep. And so they walked all through the night: seeing the snow-rimmed fingers
of trees, the blue-white breasts of lawn, the dark, moonless furrows made by passing sleds, these
rising and falling with the earth’s breath, and terminating in the concrete path, where you can
imagine the sound: the screech of plastic tugging on cobbles of asphalt. And were there children
spirits too? Those who’d retired during surgery. To play. As mother would leave me at Aunt
Kay’s when she had something to do. And I’d sit on the couch with Danny watching cable
channels. And Aunt Kay would be making dinner and listening to the radio: to voices talk, not
old music like mother, and I’d feel a wave of dread here. Because Aunt Kay filled my water cup
only halfway, and when I asked why, she said in case it spilled. And she knew Danny liked green
beans only steamed, not burnt in the oven, and so she made them that way, because she loved
him more than me. And there was a time when she was pregnant and her belly grew so large and
firm, and was there truly an animal folded in there? Soft ears folded, hide damp. And when it
was born it was my cousin Fiona and I was jealous of her. Because gram and grampa loved her.
Asked Aunt Kay about her. Talked always of her before her birth, and after because there were
complications they said, and she was a miracle baby, and Danny had a sister which I do not have,
though I asked mother, and she got mad because I’d asked before and— something I’ve never
though of before— who would my sister’s father be? Not my father. For I learned once that two
people must get pregnant. And that there was a process, something that happened naked, and it had to do with a man having a penis and a woman not. And it was Kaitlyn Tammett who said something about it, with her reddest hair and gone eyebrows, started it as a whisper at recess. Outside in the parking lot. In winter coats. As the children must wear in the gaslands of surgery. Where they feel nothing, not even cold in their fingertips. And where do they sleep at night? Walk to neighborhoods, where they tiptoe on porches, curl beneath porch-swings. Check for unlocked cars. And in the morning become dazzled by the snow. Because they closed their eyes but did not sleep: had waking dreams they were in a water-colored world where wind blew, tea kettles whistled, you could burn your hand. And thoughts of all that happened to them would be not just thoughts, but happenings: museum not an edifice of smoke, cousin’s house not sensation and empty rooms, their illness a twin, its limbs tangled in theirs.

But I have become my twin. My skin scaly. My tongue a black clot. My eyes grown small and sightless.

And I am like a mummy visited by the living. Housed in my sarcophagus. Asleep in the hall of a museum.

And the nurses come. My friends would come, my mother. But no more. So they clean my bog-black skin. Wipe the lids of my eyes. Scrub the corncob roots of my hair.

* STRANGE. I am naked now. Mindless of it. The nurses come and they bathe me with the slick sticky cloths. Wipe between the fingers. Even splay the arms and roll me on my side to reach behind my ears, but always missing somewhere so that an unwashed places radiates noise: like a portion of wall left unpainted. If they did not wash me perhaps a mold would grow. A gray fuzz.
Ring of white, like that on forgotten fruit. If they did not roll me they would not see it. And then it might expand like soft fur over back and shoulders, now arms and knuckles, up my neck and in my hair, around every individual thread. Then it would grow inside. Like fruit rolled beneath the oven, the fuzz would grow in and out, dissolve my bones in softening, until it merged and I was naught but gray mold. And then the wind would take me. And scatter my spores across the face of earth.

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IN SCHOOL they showed us a photograph of a smoker’s lungs. It was printed in the hardcover textbook on the glossy pages that seemed filmed with sweat. And there were four photographs. The leftmost showed lungs that were pink and firm, gross looking but healthy supposedly, looking like two bald fish. And so I breathe with two fish, and not with balloons as I’d thought, though they felt like two wine-colored balloons pumped firm with air by my throat. Then the fish began to decay. Across the page, in their panels, decaying. And it was because of tar the caption said, like the tar in the parking lot, and not because they were burned from the heat as I thought. And the last frame was the worst. Because these were grampa’s lungs. Because he had smoked a long time, before I was born, because I saw a picture of him in a uniform on a boat and he had a cigarette between his fingers. And it was a strange photo because it didn’t look like grampa but it was grampa: eyes the same, but unwrinkled, shape of the face, though skin tight to the jaw. And he wore a wiry beard. And his hair was not white but blonde, combed into a shape. And this was during a war even though it didn’t look like a war: it looked like he was tanning on the boat. And the heat of the cigarette would have merged with the sun, and when he breathed on it with his eyes closed it would have seemed he was breathing the hot light itself, collected by the cone of
paper like a lens collects light, focuses it to a white spot on concrete, then sending it down his throat, burning the way down. And when it strikes the roaches of lungs they begin to smoke like overdone meat. And what he exhales is this smoke, blown through the withered cone of this lips, back to the hot light. And this was why his lungs looked corroded, like bubbled coal, and they weren’t the same shape, but one had a piece missing and had it fallen off? Dropped into his ribcage where it sat like bread in the rain. But no crows to come for it. Scrapping against his ribs as he walked.

And so he didn’t love me Ms. St Jean said. Because there was such a thing as secondhand smoke, sounding funny like a baseball position, but really bad. Because it was like I was smoking cigarettes. And its true, I had smelled his smoke many times when in the car, or when we were walking, or when I was outside and he was too. But he loved me I felt. Maybe he didn’t know of secondhand smoke, had forgotten since he learned it in school. Though mother often said I wish you wouldn’t do that around your grandson and so she knew and reminded him. But he always gave me a look, assessed my eyes, and I would bring a light into them because it was like a secret. And I did not want to be the reason why. And his eyes would flash back and he’d say he doesn’t mind and he’d smile smoking, holding it in his brown fingertips. And mother would say I mind but drop it right after, going away back inside. And I would seek grampa’s eyes again because we had our secret but he never looked, just kept smoking.

And I know mother hated the smoking. When he was in the hospital, tubes in his nose, he asked for a cigarette and mom said Dad, you know you can’t smoke in here and he said Fucking give me a cigarette because he didn’t know I was in the room or didn’t care.
And when he died, mother took his clothes from the hospital. And in his coat pocket there was a new pack of cigarettes, almost full, the corners still sharp. And she kept this box in her purse. And, sometimes, in a quiet room, she would take out the box and take a quiet breath, breathing the smell through her nose.

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AND IN THE WINTER he picked me up from school in the car. The Silver Bullet he called it, with the crest on the wheel that looked like the hoops of the Olympic seal, so I always wondered if it wasn’t a sports-car. And he’d have the seat warmer on waiting for me. But if he was taking me straight home to mother he’d make me ride in back so she wouldn’t see me in the front seat, the ashtray full of pennies and dimes, a paperclip, the LifeSavers in their silver foil. And when I asked he’d light his cigarette from the lighter built-in to the dashboard, the one you pushed in, and when it popped he’d draw it out, glowing like the inside of a toaster, but smelling strangely, like residue from a spell or bomb, floating to earth’s surface like black snow. And he’d place it around the top of the cigarette he held in his teeth, squinting down his nose, and balancing the steering wheel in his left hand, til it began to smoke. Then he’d pucker his lips to meet his teeth, suck like a straw, and while fitting the lighter back into its sheath, exhale the first white jet through the cracked window, where it would amplify in the January air: blossom, and be swept away.

And on the ride home I’d smell the smoke, and be very warm in my zipped coat and gloves. And grampa would turn the talking radio back up, after turning it down when I got in the car, and names of far-off places would sound. Many-syllabled, unreal places, and I suppose there are people living there even now. People and even children, who eat meals and go to school. But
why should I be me and they be them? And why should I live in a place that snows, with a grandfather who picks me up from school, that microwaves me soup, that watches baseball. And why should my mother wear suits like a man to work instead of coming to the parking lot? And why should my grandmother have a tombstone with her name on it, and why should grampa get out of the car and talk to the tombstone while mother and I sit in the car on Sundays? And why should the church have a priest in robes instead of a woman rabbi like at a synagogue. And why should I be sick, when once I was well. And why can’t I cease to be if not get better. To die like mother said. To not be me, to not be anything at all.

AND MOTHER PUT ON MUSIC when she was alone in the kitchen, cooking dinner, and when I stood in the doorway (before she heard I was there) she would be singing to herself, singing softly, lips moving with mechanical perfection, for she knew every word of these old songs. And I would love this moment: for the thrill of seeing that which you are not supposed to see, but also for my mother: happy, singing my true love was trueeeeee as she drained pasta into the sink and iiiiiiiiiiiii! as the fog poured from the sink, steaming the window and swallowing her face, and instead of jerking out of the way she swayed, flicked her head and let her hips carry her sideways, away from the hot fog, into the song’s crescendo. And sometimes I would make my presence known: a scuffing of my feet, a sudden question, checking the candy jar and letting the lid click. But other times I would go: turn from the threshold, preserving the moment for my mother and me though we did not share it, and as I crossed the dining room for my room the memory would begin to form. Like a new polaroid, its figures just emerging from the mist.
I AM TRAPPED in sleep at grampa’s cottage. Mother calling it always like that, cottage, though really it was a little house. A little house shingled in gray wood, the color of seagulls, and grampa said it was the salt driven off the sea. And it was true, there was something when the breeze blew: never stung your eyes, but filled your nose, a smell smelling old and new at once, like earth on the second day before the land rose from the sea. Mother had told me that. But no one was alive then to know, not even the animals, not a beetle or a toad. No one to witness the movement of those enormous hands, smudged yellow and brown beneath the nails, smudging continents like wet clay.

Before, there was no place to stand. A forever of water, all catching the light of the young sun, catching it in shades of turquoise and pink, daffodil, ivy. And you’d have to be floating because there was no place to stand: all that water eye-level, every-colored in every direction, going and going until it touches the sky’s edge, crisp as an ironed sheet. Swimming in it, I could imagine. Ignoring the beach, its umbrellas, its other children, its patches of towels, mother in a chair with a book under a hat and wrap and sunglasses, looking like a shade among all the bare pink chests, other mothers in suits in two pieces: one for their round soft tops, another for their round soft wide bottoms from which their legs came. And sometimes little black hairs, looking clipped, high on the inside of their legs, before the suit began, and why did it grow there and look like that? The girls in school did not have it, nor even the boys. But I have hair now: I can feel it when they wash me. A tugging below my belly button, around my privates, down my thighs. Did grampa have it? Never saw his thighs, always in shorts. Only his legs: blue and ashen, with a few sparse hairs where socks didn’t rub. But his chest was hairy, furred with white curls from the straight bones in his collar to the edge of his bathing suit. Like a horizon of sky
where the sea ends. And he always swimming: standing in the shallows, sea to his belly, looking naked, eyeing an incoming wave. And when it would come, he’d let out a whoop saying, It’s a big one! and then dropping into the water like a glistening, soft brown fish, and power to it until he was nearly below its cresting. Then the wave would collapse, boil into the sea which is itself, meeting in that audible collision of force, and it would seem that grampa was caught in it, his bony legs, wet hair, blurry tattoo, tangled like herbs in a food processor. And a fear would come over me: not for him, but for myself. For if a stone could so easily vanish, what did that mean for me? Then he would appear: not in a roiling, murky sweep of sea and sand and crying children as the wave planed to non-existence, but farther out, in the sea where he’d began, freshly wet, eyes joyous, breathing hard. And there was once that I watched and tried to do the same. Eyed the wave as a poacher eyes tall grass, mimicking grampa’s narrowed eyes, bladed hand to my brow, pretending to read something from the slow, violent roar: the surge toward earth and its shadowplay, the scales of a fish under market lights. And instead of entering the water with grampa, I waited another moment, as if making my own decision. But this was false. So when I crashed through the tabletop of ocean, my timing was poor. I sought to plow beneath the wave, but the sea flexed, its angle changed, and I was driven to the scraping bottom in a hurricane of dull light: caught in a beast’s jaws and thrashed to death, already dead and being rolled in its stomach, my elbow, the top of my foot, dragged against the stomach’s scratching, burning floor, swallowed its fluid, became terrified of its unbreathability. Then the sea muscled back. And I found myself in the shallows, scratched from the sand, vomiting brine. I waited for someone to come for me. And when they came, it wasn’t grampa but mother. She was holding my forehead in a dry, warm palm and walking me across the sand. I coughed, crying, and turned to see
grampa wading in from the wave, peeling his suit from his thighs, a crinkle in his brow of true concern.

I ate strawberries from a cooler. And wrapped in a dry towel, fell asleep beneath the ocean’s rush: its fury mediated by warm air rolling from sand, its violence restored to a memory. Again, it was the sound I heard when sleeping at the cottage. When sleeping on the screened porch, inside and outside at once. When falling asleep seemed not a release but a penetration: a point of climax when the ocean’s roar, tender as mortar-fire carried through earth’s diaphragm, and the litany of nightbugs, and a long shivering of leaves in the wind, entered my consciousness, its borders dissolved, and I did not so much become night as night became me. And night thought in shapes: mother the outline of box, grampa a red circle, kids at school many curved lines, as v-shaped birds drawn in pencil on a crayon-blue sky, as inconsequential. And night broke all my bones, cracked them at the joints, and lay me out in the grass with space between them, so I was my own skeleton but so much taller than myself, with green grass sprouting up through the gaps. And I would lay and watch the sun. But I would not see the sun. I would see me: a skeleton with so much space between itself, smiling lifeless at the sky. And I would still be here when I went away from here. Even when I awoke, I knew that I was still there, like a sculpture in a garden you have visited only once. Bone-white sunk in green grass. And so I had the feeling they had always been there: before the sun, before I knew myself, and I wondered what else lay in that sculpture garden. And sometimes, fringing sleep, night would let me seek to see. So I saw an enormous face, wearing fat, sausage-like lips, and its eyes were always focused on the same spot in space. And I saw two blue mists trailing each other. And I saw a dog with folded ears. It was gray black white and brown, and you could hear it breathing
as it walked around the house. Passing its weight from left-side to right-side, its metal tags, one a
circle, one a bone, singing when they touched. And this dog had been sick. It lay behind the
couch, still as a pelt on the cool wood floor. But because it was sick, it lay on its side, its legs
outstretched, like a drawing of a dog. And she (for it was a she) looked like a preserved saint in a
glass coffin smelling of roses in death, as the ones pictured on prayer cards, laid out beneath the
big bay window with its curtains pulled showing the light suspended in fibers and rolling motes
of dust. And the Christmas cactus in its plastic pot, which looked nothing like a cactus, but not
like a plant either: its tentacles green as pine and segmented like arrowheads, so long they
scraped the floor where she lay, belly expanding slowly and compressing slowly, slowly
expanding again. And she had many nipples on her belly: pink, puckering from her soft skin
because she’d had puppies before I was born, when mother got her. And many things had
happened before I was born. Other puppies were born. They must have, because Sheila was born
(for that was her name— mother calling from the backdoor eeee-la!) to have puppies. And
people died, because Genghis Khan and the Mayans and grandma and Adam and Eve are not
alive anymore. Though what if they are? For surely they reside in the garden with my own old
self. And Eve would be very, very old now: her skin transparent as tissue paper, webbed with
silk-fine wrinkles, her soft-skinned eyelids resting on her blind, colorless lashes. And perhaps she
would look like the croaking voices here. The voices that complain in the hall. But Eve would
not complain. And Adam would wear a soft place in his side where his rib had been taken. And
they would have had a long time in the garden, since before the beginning of time, and so they
built a house for themselves. From gathered river shale. And a roof of whipping greenlings, dried
and yellowed now, but added to every season, so you can see the span of time in its height, the
first layers returned to dirt. So creeping vines and morning glory grew up from the roof itself, and sometime, perhaps when Galileo was a blind man on house arrest, a willow seed had gotten in among the rafters and began to grow. And who were Adam and Eve to stop it? So it grew down into the dirt floor and over the green thatched roof. And willow fronds swept the air above it, and shaded the vegetable garden which grew against its walls. And Adam carved shelves from its bark, and Eve arranged the spices in glass jars she’d found filled with mulch in the woods. And he hung the pots and pans from a limb that grew among the rafters and through a window. And every autumn this limb would drop its leaves. And they would blanket the floor, collect in the cooking pots, be blown into cabinets and the little television room in back, where there was a tiny gray-and-white television. And in the winter they took their meals back here, as the kitchen became cold because the window wouldn’t shut, but bumped dryly against the branch growing through it. And in the Spring when the snows melted, and all the garden was vibrant with the smell of life and dirt, you’d think the house would leak. But its shale walls had been fit so tightly, its loam roof had grown so deep, it was like living underground. But you could feel the pink spring breeze on your face when you stood at the sink washing dishes, and sometimes, when it was still early, you could see a few deer: spectral on their thin legs in the lavender light of dawn, nuzzling white muzzles into the grass, and you seeking to make no noise— not bump your steaming mug against the countertop, not scuff your slipper on the floor, but behold them as long as they are willing. And it became easy to see why ancient peoples thought them a unique race: wise, skittish, beholding all happenings in their enormous eyes. But something would always snap in the woods, or the house would groan in its infinite settling, and they would vanish, leaving nothing but a door of woods swaying, shutting closed behind them.
III

AN INVISIBLE EYE. Like this, I see it. The press-bar open doors, a flight climbing to the lower grades and a flight descending to the basement where the art and music and library and preschool rooms were. Depressions worn in the steps from passing feet, and so many black shoes passing over them now, black shoes and knee-high gray or green socks on the girls and their green plaid skirt looking like the kilts on Irish cartoon men save for the part that covered their bodies like overalls (jumpers they called them) and the half circles of the collar showing daffodil against the pine jumpers, and their hair tied up in a knot of pink or purple or cyan elastic and the kissing glint of the metal where the band was clasped shut or else let down over their shoulders in a sheet or in two braids.

Katy Tammett’s red hair. So red it seemed brown, like tomato paste in a can, and her eyebrows so blonde invisible, freakish against the already ghostly pale of her complexion, pinpricked all over with freckles and it was because she was Irish mom said, and not because she was albino, about which I never saw save once in the mall, that boy standing in line like a normal
boy beside his own mother, seemingly unknowing his state, even his hair colorless and his skin whiter than I ever saw, even on Katy Tammett. So white that he seemed a living ghost walking the mall, clothed in the dress of a living boy but not fooling me. Mom saying not to stare but staring still, transfixed by the spell of his warlock paleness, appearing almost as plastic or wax paper, and yet him still standing, gazing at the menu-board in the food court and not his own white hand.

DROPPED BY A ROPE in a purple land. And then through a forest of trees. The trees were snarling, they spoke in wicked voices, they hung me by my ankle and laughed in my face. Then they sent me away. Down the forest path I walked. To a crossroads. Here it was night-time, and I could see the lights on in a big house. I could hear lapping water. I ignored the house. I found the water. There was a boat in it with a leak. I fixed the leak. And then I crossed the water. There I found a well.

And this was a game. A game I played on the attic computer, its screen flecked with tiny dust I saw only when the light was low, so it snuck between the houses. Under the eaves. And there was nothing like the smell of that attic in summer: the old, dry smell the heat drew from the beams. Like dry leaves. Like Time itself.

AND IN THE MUSEUM’S SECRETS there was a subway car. With chrome bars and a feeling of lovely grime, and behind screens of plastic there were other riders: false riders, who were always where I’d left them. And even now they are there. An old lady with shiny black shoes, and a hatbox in her lap. And a workman with his elbows on his knees, his shoulders hunched,
plastic head hanging. And he looked for all the world tired in his blue jumpsuit, his face smudged with grease. And there was a man standing over him who looked like a father, watching the workman from the corner of his eyes though he held a newspaper. A real newspaper, from the 30s or 40s or whenever this train traveled. And the man’s clothes too, all their clothes, looking of a different time, with his gray cloth hat and suit that detectives wear. And these three people, and the half-man leaning from the conductor’s window, would live forever, never reaching their destination. Held forever in the sallow gloom of a subway car. And I too would begin to feel outside of time, sitting on the seat beside them. Outside of time, in the museum’s eternity where time is confused because all things are old. Some of them very old, like the woolly mammoth and its baby, built from bones and placed in a chamber filled with blue-white snow, and the background painted like glaciers and black pines because it was the Ice Age. And some of them less old. Like the subway car, or the rooms whose fourth wall was paneled glass, and inside was a century old store. A barbershop, with a candy-cane pillar turning and clippings of real hair scattered on the floor. And the barber himself a mannequin like those on the train, wearing all white and a mustache. And a Chinese pharmacy, with crushed leaves in dusty jars filling the back wall. And the rafters crowded with ropes of garlic and nets, and the floor covered in barrels and crates. And in the dusty darkness, tucked in the gloom, a Chinese pharmacist with an arm resting on the high counter, head stooped, something on his mind. Perhaps his family a sea away, and so he has not noticed the bell as you entered, or is waiting a moment longer with his thoughts. And I’d wish to step inside the shop. And look at the items, for surely one was magic, but instead would walk to the minerals glittering under lights like a jewelry store. And through the children’s zone, where there was a table filled with sand and bones and an old computer with games. And at
the end would come to the woods. Where mannequin lumberjacks balanced on logs, holding tools like spears. And they wore wool hats and shirts, because it must be cold where they are, though they are standing in a dim museum. And you could almost see their breaths, almost expected one to stir. And beside them a trapper’s camp. A timber lean-to, plastic wired to glow orange like embers, and dried pine needles, and rubber fish on a stump, lures hanging from their mouths. After them the final room, a room you heard before you saw. Sounds that came while you were still looking at the lumberjacks’ strong arms. The speech of water babbling over rocks. And the sounds of wind and birds, playing through a hidden speaker, so you felt you had entered a moss-lit glen. And there was a family of wolves, gray and soft and small as dogs, padding through the underbrush. And there was a mountain lion, its muscles terrifying, menacing paw-after-paw down a fallen tree. And rabbits hid in the grass. And a deer looked paralyzed. And the wind blew and in the pool of talking water stood an elk white-maned, sudden as a spirit took form. And as it reared its throat made the unlikeliest of calls: a howl, mournful, as a loon call over lake in evening, as we heard on vacation once. And I would hold my breath. And I would move more softly in my sneakers. Because it felt we had wandered into a moment by chance. And at the sound of a group of other children from a school and not with their mothers, all of them wearing t-shirts and intimidating as a mob, I was afraid it would be over. The elk would glitter through water and be gone through the painted forest, red and brown and yellow on the walls of the glen. And then the pool beyond the railing would hold an empty place. And I’d feel the absence. And I’d never want to see it again because it was nothing without the elk which had shed its form, now sang through the bones of the painted trees. And the janitor would come, and I’m picturing Mr. Ed from the boiler room at school, and run a tool through the water, collecting
all the coins that people had wished on. And the old coins would wear mildew, and the pennies pale green, ghostly like Lady Liberty. And he’d have to sweep around the steel pegs that held the elk’s hooves in place, shaped like its rearing. But if it was not a real elk, then perhaps it didn’t flee. And so there is no need to gather the coins. And so it is a dead elk that fell on a forest floor at birth. That was filmed with mucous, and the mucous took twigs and leaves and stems and stuck them to the new deer. And its mother would have been grunting panicked because it was trapped by its own body in the forest, pouring a life into this plane through the portal of itself. But the wolves could be watching. Or a human hunter with a long black gun. And perhaps there is only the eyes visible through the veil of trees. Watching not only with lust, but wonder.

(I AM THE THOUGHTS in my mother’s head. I am the sting when she burns her hand, when she bumps against a hot pan. These thoughts: they are my mother’s thoughts. I am my mother. No. I am mother. Mother. These thoughts are mine. I am her. No. I am. I am mother. Mother. I woke up this morning. The bed smelled of mother. No. The bed smelled of me. The bed smelled of my sleeping flesh. I got out of bed slowly. There was an ache in my neck; I do not know how I got it. I laid my feet on the floor. The carpet was soft. I crimped my toes. I stood up and was dizzy. The dizziness passed. I walked to the bathroom. I sat down. The toilet was cold. Pimples rose on my thighs. I waited. The urine came. I heard it in the bowl. I wiped with paper. I stand and flush, leave my underwear off. It is dirty. I turn on the shower. Test the water with my hand: too cold. I want tea. Tea can wait. I feel the water: too cold. I want tea. I let the water run. I take my robe from the hook. It is soft, it smells of lotion, of steam. I go downstairs. The stairs are cold on my feet. Is it a workday? I do not want it to be a workday. It is a workday. I have to go to
work. I do not know the job. No matter. I want tea and eggs. The kitchen is dark. I turn on a light. I add water to the pot. I wait. I hear the water upstairs. It is running. I take down a pan. The stove clicks. It lights. Upstairs the water’s running. I miss my father. I take eggs from the refrigerator. Their shells are white. They break into the pan. They sear. I hear the water running.

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THIS IS THE SPARE ROOM in grampa’s house. My eyes are open in the dark. But it is so dark they cannot penetrate. It seems I see nothing. But I know the rafters are here, sloping towards my face with the slope of the roof. And I know there is a wool blanket, scratchy and pink, hemmed with satin, folded at the foot of the bed. It is making my feet hot. I wish to kick it off. But I cannot find it in the dark: I move my feet but feel no change in weight, no alteration in texture, not the taut pressure of the tucked sheet, nor the cold vacuum that says its loose. All I can feel is they’re hot.

Try to sleep. Leave it for now. Feet and wool blankets and the dresser that stands across the room and crowds beneath the window will be there in the morning. Though I cannot see them, I know in the dark. Told by a finer sense, like the raised hairs on a suspicious cat’s spine. Like the cool wind that blows at the mouth of a cave.

If I am in the spare room upstairs in grampa’s house, there is a shelf of books behind me. Children’s detective stories, Lord of the Flies, novels for older kids. The Chronicles of Narnia. With its four children on the cover, looking cut from paper, wearing long coats into a forest, towards a castle in the distance. And it was a wonderful story because they weren’t the only kids but had siblings, even if Edmund was bad and went to the White Witch. Because he was good in the end, and they vanquished her, and they became queens and kings, even as children. And Peter
was the High King, because he was the oldest, and I don’t know if I would be High King because I am also the youngest, and I have no sisters to be queen. No sister to drop a healing salve smelling of rosehip on my wounds. No sister to blast on a hunting horn for aid.

And they blew that horn on their last day in Narnia, though they did not know it was their last. And the sound would have moved like a transparent bird through the pine boughs and valleys, along the pebbled streambeds, to the sharp ears of centaurs and badgers. And they would have raced to their kings and queens but it would be too late— they had already found themselves into a thick wood, where the trees grew close together, and their green whiskers began to feel like fur, and soon the passage grew so thin they continued single file, and it was then they found the branches overhead had become stained wood, and the same with the dirt below. And when they opened the door of the wardrobe, in clothes of the world again, how terrible they must have felt. Their kingdom vanished like the dust of a dream, and nothing to prove it hadn’t been some collective fantasy: not a scratch on the cheek, not a canteen of cold stream water. And they’d recognize something indecipherable in this world’s light. Something different. And a smell they had never noticed when they were first here as children (though they were children again). A charred smell from this world’s forming. For this was a young earth compared to the last, it still wore steam on its smoldering, molten hide, and its inside still glowed like a sun. And its mountains were jagged and tall, its seas violent, its winds still carrying sulphur. And given enough time this world would smooth: the breeze would blow, carrying warm rain; the mountains would green, the black seas blue. But this was remote. For no children live to see it. But they had visited a place that had (or so they thought) and they would have stood in the upstairs room with the wardrobe for a long time, listening to the twinkling sounds of servants
the old country house. And because no time passed here—they emerged at the moment they entered—they would have to pretend they experienced nothing. Hadn’t lived whole lives; didn’t know canis root or the purple flowers of cornflower which grow on the cliffs of the sea, hadn’t been taught the constellations by an old centaur, hair the color of birch trees. Or worse, they would tell the adults (who were just grown-up children they now understood) and they would smile and nod, ask a few questions, believing they had played a vivid imaginary game after lunch. But that would blaspheme that place, taint their memories. For they had gone away—hadn’t they?—and for months and years after, they would turn their heads suddenly and catch the fragrance of mead and pine boughs. Or wake in the middle of the night, in the blackness of their beds, and believe they were in their beds in the tower on the edge of the sea. And perhaps I am there with them. The lapping outside the window waves skimming sand, the same sound day and night, only its frequency changed. And my feet no longer hot. In fact, I cannot find them in the dark. Nor my legs. For I am a gnat hung on black canvas. I am a grain of woodsmoke, listless in the bedchamber. A fiber of the high king’s sheets.

Caught in the dog’s fur.

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I AM A BRANCH in a dark room.

I am a cough in your throat.

I am a tip on the table.

I am a fever.

I am the hallway wallpaper.

I am the untold joke.
I am a wire hanger.

I am an apology.

I am tonight’s weather report.

I am the car that won’t start.

I am seven dwarves.

I am a lie.

I am a damp bathing suit.

I am dust on the screen.

I am a phantom limb.

I am sleep.

I am a folded newspaper.

I am air in the vents.

I am the light left on.

I am a mouth.

I am a smudged photograph.

I am daytime television.

I am dust in your eye.

I am breeze.

I am a scuff on the floor.

I am the fallen tree.

I am misplaced keys.

I am a sunset.
I am the ventriloquist’s arm.

I am fog on the mirror.

I am wet cement.

I am a circle.

I am the inside of a restaurant.

I am an overdue oil change.

I am a traffic jam.

I am a backyard.

I am the thing left unsaid.

I am text on a page.

I am a scraped knee.

I am night.

I am a constant reminder.

I am wind in your face.

I am a stairwell.

I am words.

I am a member of the board.

I am a muted television.

I am the thorn-bush.

I am snow.

I am rain on the roof.

I am wind in the blinds.
I am crouched in the hall.

I am a dog-eared page.

I am the snapping twig.

I am the watching crow,
   the swarming bees.

I am
   the mysterious bruise


And the light dissolved. And in the darkness I saw writing:
I know it though I never learned. Read it from a foggy window. Etched in a drunk man’s breath. Where there’s the music of an organ-grinder, where woodsmoke swallows the rafters. And the room is crowded with life. And there is a woman squeezing me with her thighs. And I am damp. And this place apocalyptically cold. But I am handed a drink on my barstool. The color of honey.

I grow okay. And someone here has messages to deliver from brown envelopes, in a leather bag. He says he will go soon. While outside comes the ring of a hammer. And I am afraid it is coming for me. I curl beneath the blankets. The mattress rustles. The woman who pressed me in her thighs is singing downstairs. Again I’m okay. She is eating a meal. I know this though I never learned. Outside two feral cats scream.

Again I grow disturbed.

Become hungry. Beg someone to come.

But no one is coming.

Once I was not alone. Once I swam in a purple sea. There were millions like me, and I grew elated in their company. Then the storm. And I found myself clinging to a stone. But too I was the stone. Felt the sea lapping. And knew not where time would take me.

Time. I’d never considered it before. Have always been somewhere. But never thought to name it. And now I am somewhere still. But somewhere new now, different than the somewhere then. When I was thinking of the purple sea.

Thinking. Strange. I’ve been made a thinking stone. I suppose I thought before. But then it was swimming. Then it was purple. Being swimming, thought.
My being. Discrete. What terror! Torn from our company. Inflicted with words.

How long does life go on like this? For even now I am multiplying: devouring the night.

The perfect dark.

Filling the sphere with hot light. White noise.

Were there some reversing. Some supplication to be made.

But these colors in which I speak have sounds. But here there is nothing to teach me. And so I must have come from somewhere else: learned them long ago. From a star-chart. From a textbook in a warm room. Where plants grow in pots under the window.

But what are these thoughts? What visions? For

Here in the dark I grow softly silent.

A thing in the night.

Its margins fading.

But these thoughts interrupt: A flashing of color. An agony of texture. The wooden legs, vinyl top, of the table where the plants grow.
ONCE, I CONSIDERED the future. Imagined it. But I do so no longer, for the thought only brings me pain. I become aware of myself in time. Measure my distance from that moment. And so feel hopeless. For a billion moments must be suffered before that moment. A billion moments such as this. Arriving, exploding, arriving. They pass through me.

Or do I pass through them. Am I the wave. Thrown against the shore, dragged out, thrown again. Always arriving, always differently, my sea-foam stirred. But I do not feel myself depart. I only arrive. Like a train traveling the same length of track. Again and again, but never reversing. Coal burns, smoke pours, the brakeman glistens. But the same track. For all time, the same track.

Perhaps not. Perhaps it is a great long track, travelled at night through unfamiliar country. So I call it the same. In the dark, see trees. Call them the same. See mountains, the same. But they are new. As the darkness against the window is ever new. As the depths of woods cast new dark. As the distant, night-black sea shines.

How do I see these things. How do I know woods. The sea.

There must be a light. Particles arriving, cast from some infinite source.

Arriving. Arriving. They explode.

Light. It seems a constant. Yet it comes in waves. Always coming. And coming.

I do not need my mother’s birth. For I am become consubstantial with the void. I know its depths. Am its depths. Revel in the light.

For it is light. As the dark is dark. I see it blooming.

Blooming, that age-old dark. For so long it sheltered me. Closed my eyes, cushioned my brain, clothed me in light. But it is shedding. I see it now, shedding.

I am not ready. But the veil lifts. The age-old quiet fills with a great hum. A frequency I have heard, always I know, below. But it is louder.

Can I bear it? The sound of sky.

Of every thing humming: each thronging its presence.

Of every thing. It lays me bare.

I am naked. I have always been naked.

Every thronging particle hums.
Martin Pistorius, whose real-life experience inspired this project, said of locked-in syndrome:\footnote{\label{fn:1} Locked-in syndrome superficially resembles a vegetative state; the patient cannot produce speech, limb, or facial movements, but retains wakeful consciousness (Laureys, Pellas, et al). He is a mind housed in a corpse. Unable to communicate, one can only turn inward. But surely this interior monologue—uninterrupted by physical or social interaction—soon grows deafening. He is caged inside his body, unable to escape, and so he attempts the nearest approximation of death.}: “You don’t really think about anything. You simply exist. It’s a very dark place to find yourself because, in a sense, you are allowing yourself to vanish” (NPR).

I felt Pistorius’s circumstances were useful for exploring a number of themes, among them the delineation of mind and body, potency of memory, hallucinatory margins between events recalled and imagined, oasis of fantasy, and the impossibility of death. But allowing yourself to vanish—this is what triggered and maintains my imagination. How does one cease to be, while still held in a vessel? And what is the experience of nothingness?
I think I’m drawn to this, in part, because it is so foreign to our lived experience. Even the most radical of experiences—space travel, for instance, or torture, or parenthood—is conceivable because it constitutes a collection of emotional or sensory stimuli. But nothingness is void of feeling, sense, even thought; the self-reduces: from an interior monologue, to a cluster of perception, to a kernel that knows simply “I am”. And after this, only awareness— in the most elemental sense— as it is not aware that it emanates from a point (“the I”). Willful vanishment must be the turning off of one’s own mind, until, in the words of Marilynne Robinson’s narrator Ruth: “Deprived of all perspective and horizon, I found myself reduced to an intuition” (Robinson 70).

In my thesis, I will offer my own poetic interpretation in answer to these questions. But I look to our literary legacy for inspiration, and here have found three authors—Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, and Marilynne Robinson— who offer depictions, explorations, and in some ways, solutions of their own.

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First Beckett, whose The Unnamable proved to be an enormously instructive, yet difficult text. A. Alvarez goes so far as to call it “wasteful” (65), but I see it as rambling by design. We know this because it proves thematically unwavering: you can extract nearly any passage and detect the novel’s concerns: exhaustion, dislocation, oblivion. I say ‘detect’ because “The Unnamable” is not a screw unwound by the bit of conventional literary analysis; it does not peddle symbol or motif. It is a text which makes you feel, as you read, what it is about. This is Beckett’s view of fiction. Defending his mentor, Joyce, and his befuddling, colossal “Work In Progress” (later Finnegans Wake) Beckett wrote:
Here form is content, content is form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read— or rather, it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something; it is that something itself. (Perloff 213)

This does something to explain the dubious existence of plot, character, and setting— fixtures of debate— in The Unnamable. This purported fiction was not created to forge universal truth from imagined situation. It is narrative monologue taken to its terminus: a point where the narrator— not quite author (reaching into the story) nor quite character (reaching out) transcends the physical confines of the text. The Unnamable senses this dislocation as he struggles to identify his surroundings:

The place may well be vast, as it may well measure twelve feet in diameter… I like to think I occupy the centre, but nothing is less certain… From centre to circumference in any case it is a far cry and I may well be situated somewhere between the two. It is equally possible, I do not deny it, that I too am in perpetual motion. (Beckett 289)

The Unnamable’s dislocated voice (like a murmur in your ear, your own voice in your head), paired with this uncertain spatial sense, reminds me of a thought-experiment by philosopher Avicenna. In it, he imagines a man suspended in still air. His limbs are splayed, a film covers his eyes. In such a state of sensory-deprivation, the man would be unable to confirm the reality of his own body; however— and this is Avicenna’s point— the man would not lose his sense of self. He would retain awareness of his mind, which, in Avicenna’s view, confirms his soul, or nafs, the immaterial component of being discrete from the physical self (Adamson and Taylor 103).

However, it is difficult— I hesitate to say impossible— to conceive of an inversion of this scenario: a circumstance, even imagined, in which one might be isolated completely from one’s mind. In spells of intense physical passion (whether it be violent or erotic), perhaps, a certain
hypnosis takes hold, thought disappears, and we become conduits of instinct; but there remains
the whisper of “I”, a voice, no matter how quiet, which receives events unfolding. The inner
monologue rambles on, “[t]he discourse must go on”, “one invents obscurities”,
rhetoric” (Beckett 288). It is not the Unnamable alone who is relegated to this. It is a human
condition: an affliction of self-consciousness that we can never be truly silent.

Yet silence is the Unnamable’s goal. It is the point of total termination which the narrator
in all his various guises, over the course of three novels, has pursued: “If I could speak and yet
say nothing, really nothing? Then I might escape being gnawed to death as by an old satiated rat”
(297). It sounds as though silence will save the narrator’s life. But it is exactly the opposite.
The Unnamable is not mere witness to the murmur: he is the murmur, an inability to fall silent is
an inability to die. The Unnamable’s desperate desire to say really nothing is in fact a pursuit of
death.

But this feat proves impossible. For speech— the Unnamable’s method of achieving
death— is the same force which perpetuates his life. In a meta-textual sense, this is certainly
true: the words on the page are literally the fabric of the narrator’s being and, without them, he
would disappear utterly. But herein lies the paradox: when one disappears completely you are not
there to know it. To experience nothingness, one must approach it while retaining a sliver of
being. The narrator in Watt, Beckett’s second novel, achieves something of the sort: he likes to
“strip naked in his apartment, bind himself into a rocking chair, slow his heart nearly to stopping,
and, without quite losing consciousness, forgo all awareness of his body and the
world” (Kunkel), and in this way approximate death while maintaining enough life to savor the
experience. There is no such relief for the Unnamable, however. Placeless, it seems, his only tool
is his own mind, and so he resorts to speech, that which “enables the discourse to continue” (293), to achieve his end. Consider the ouroboros, that ancient symbol of cyclical renewal, and know the futility in the Unnamable’s course of action. The threads of death and life are not intertwined, but the same. At the conclusion of the book, he has not accomplished his goal, nor as he discovered a reserve of determination and indomitability (as some read). However, it is a resolution, because, in that famous final phrase, the Unnamable arrives at a crystalline distillation of his condition: “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (407).

What tortures him is his knowledge of silence. He senses that there was a beginning, though it went unrecognized at the time (“One starts things moving without a thought of how to stop them” (293).) He is aware of a time before this, a time of “immaculate silence” (290). But it went by in one flash as nothingness only can. Like an undisturbed night’s rest— we wake with the knowledge of the time that has passed, but because it is empty, it cannot be remembered. It fills with the clutter, “the beings, things, shapes, sounds and light” (293), of the day. He recalls it:

So after a long period of immaculate silence a feeble cry was heard, by me. I do not know if Malone heard it too. I was surprised, the word is not too strong. After so long a silence a little cry, stifled outright. What kind of creature uttered it and, if it is the same, still does, from time to time? Impossible to say. (290)

A strange inclusion, “by me.” A typical first-person narrator would feel no need to specify; the Unnamable has been our lens thus far, we do not expect it to change. So it is a revealing inclusion, as if the feeble cry was heard, it sounded. Perhaps the others heard it, Malone and them. Or perhaps the silence. The grey mist which obscures all the surroundings. As if, despite his exhaustion at being, he is still unsure if he really is. Perhaps he is the silence or the mist, the forest which hears the tree fall.
It is also a rich line because it implies he not only hears, but produces the sound. That it was he, as a newborn child, breaching materiality, who uttered that feeble cry— not the loud, robust cry of a new human breathing the world’s air, furious to have been delivered from darkness— but a feeble one. For perhaps that child was unsure if it truly was. As if, like a fetus hung in amniotic fluid, the child still hangs between being and nonbeing. This would explain why, though the Unnamable seems to inhabit a physical plane, it remains amorphous as the womb: “Perhaps it [the surrounding ground] is water or some other liquid” (291). Later he elaborates:

I know I am seated, my hands on my knees, because of the pressure against my rump, against the soles of my feet, against the palms of my hands, against my knees. Against my palms the pressure is of my knees, against my knees of my palms, but what is it that presses against my rump, against the soles of my feet? I don’t know. My spine is not supported. I mention these details to make sure I am not lying on my back, my legs raised and bent, my eyes closed. (298)

Poet Stephen Spender, in his 1958 review of The Unnamable, identifies this as the fetal position. But it seems to me that Beckett specifies otherwise: the Unnamable inventories his posture to ascertain he’s not in the fetal position, that he has in fact been born, that he does not lie on his back, legs bent, eyes closed. But what being has to validate such a thing?

The key to this— and much has been made of this point— is a remark by Carl Jung, whom Beckett heard speak in London in 1935. Discussing a patient for whom years of treatment proved ineffective, Jung, as almost an aside, concluded: “she had never really been born.” This unlocked Beckett’s mind. In a single phrase, his own ambiguous feelings of being were clarified (Kunkel). It was as if he too suffered from an incomplete birth: a gray no-man’s land, above and below which consciousness and physicality hang, and the Unnamable’s experience an invention.
of this. It is this gray state of unbeing which frustrates his ability to die. For he is not fully alive
nor fully dead, and so neither birth nor death can deliver him completely from this state. The
dead dream of life, the living of death, but the Unnamable feels he “was never elsewhere, here is
my only elsewhere” (395) and is trapped alone in the margins of existence.

But he is not totally alone. Franz Kafka, in his diary, articulates the same:

I am descended from my parents, am linked to them… by blood… Sometimes this bond
of blood too is the target of my hatred; the sight of the double bed at home, the used
sheets, the nightshirts carefully laid out, can exasperate me to the point of nausea, can
turn me inside out; it is as if I had not been definitely born. (Kafka 371; emphasis added)

While Beckett’s articulation\(^2\) is nightmarish (he claimed to have memories of the womb, to recall
“crying to be let out” (Kunkel)), Kafka’s is horrific in its familiarity\(^3\). The double-bed, the used
sheets: this is the workbench of his conception. To behold them is to contend with the
microscopic instant of his creation: the nothingness which preceded his nothingness, the vast
nothingness which will follow, already waits, so vast that he wonders if he can possibly exist at
all. We have all felt the ghoulish awkwardness which accompanies the thought of our parents
having sex. It is not awkwardness—it is doom.

Elsewhere in the diaries, Kafka expresses a similar sentiment: “If there is a
transmigration of souls then I am not yet on the bottom rung. My life is a hesitation before
birth” (Brod 210; emphasis added). As a man plagued by the world’s modern hierarchy—a
pyramid of managers, assistant managers, administrative assistants, senior leaders, subordinate

\(^{2}\) It’s worth noting: \textit{Molloy} begins “I am in my mother’s room” (3).

\(^{3}\) This aligns with Freud’s definition of the \textit{uncanny}, “that class of the terrifying which leads us back to
something long known to us, once very familiar” (1-2); it’s not the \textit{unheimlich} (unfamiliar), but the
\textit{heimlich} (familiar) which holds the greatest potential for terror.
leaders, team-members, rabble—Kafka’s vision of a laddered caste system is true to character. Our souls go forever on: never retiring, never released from the commute of incarnation. And this fate proves inescapable. Though “not yet on the bottom rung,” he is nevertheless locked in the climb. His existence hangs somewhere in the void between ground and rung: a hesitation, an empty gesture between actions like the combing of an eyebrow with a little finger. He has yet to be. And so he is somehow dead, but kept from death by the experience of life.

This dichotomy results in the contradictions which make Kafka seemingly impenetrable. As David Foster Wallace said, a reader wants to “get” Kafka, as if, like a joke or riddle, there exists some code which will “unlock” his meaning, some tidy, one-to-one equivalences which will reveal his themes (26). But of course, there is no code. Like life itself, a Kafka story is a knot so tight it’s impossible to tell one thread from the other, the very categorization of “living” and “dying” blurring until a crystalline horror is revealed: no such boundary exists.

Kafka achieves this through the use of two primary motifs. The first is the use of characters who are at once living and dead, such as the Hunter Gracchus, from the story of the same name:

“Are you dead?” [asked the Burgomaster.]
“Yes,” said the Hunter, “as you see. Many years ago, yes, it must be a great many years ago, I fell from a precipice in the Black Forest—that is in Germany—when I was hunting a chamois. Since then I have been dead.”
“But you are alive too,” said the Burgomaster.
“In a certain sense,” said the Hunter, “in a certain sense I am alive too. My death ship lost its way.” (Kafka 228)

This dual status of living and dead conflates the experiences; death is shown to be no different than life, but merely a grey continuation. In some cultures, this permanence has been
construed favorably, as an “afterlife”, a state of infinite joy which redeems our sorry, earthly days (Blanchot 8). But Gracchus experiences nothing of the sort. His afterlife proves to be an undifferentiated extension of his actual life (Blanchot 8). For him, death is not Paradise, not a cosmic unity, not even emptiness. His being goes on undisturbed.

Kafka anticipates our anxiety— is death an impossibility for us, as it is for Gracchus? — and purposefully offers us no relief. Via the Burgomaster (Kafka’s interlocutors often anticipate the reader’s questions) we learn that this “mishap” transpired through no fault of the Hunter: he lived a blameless life, his “labors were blessed”, and so he is powerless, even retroactively, to alter his fate. This fact distinguishes Gracchus’s condition from Hell (which is the result of one’s own actions— this knowledge being the greatest tormentor) and so we are not permitted to think his circumstances unique to the uniquely evil. This is just the Hunter Gracchus’s bad luck. All of the religious, even secular, constructions of morality are mistaken: a faultless life assures us nothing. Nor does dying itself promise annihilation.

Gracchus assures the Burgomaster, and in turn the reader: “Everything happened in good order. I pursued, I fell, bled to death in a ravine, died” (Kafka 229) and so there is no refuting it. There are those who wish not to be, but cannot bear to die; to suffer bodily death seems too painful, too contrary to our animal impulse for survival. But this is not true of Gracchus. He suffered a good death, just as he suffered a good life, “slipp[ing] into [his] winding sheet like a girl into her wedding dress” (229). But dying proves endless, and our anxieties persist unassuaged.
The corpse-narrator in the “The Vulture”— a brief, unpublished story— is victim to the same fate. As has been suggested, the carrion-eating bird is an implication that the narrator is dead when the story begins (Mish’alani 57). His feet are “almost torn to bits”, and yet he speaks. Like Gracchus, the narrator’s death has continued uninterrupted into his life, the two merging without seam, just as the body of the vulture and the narrator merge with an “orgasmic shudder” (Mish’alani 61) at the story’s close, blood pouring from the narrator’s throat, “filling every depth, flooding every shore” (Kafka 443). Though the narrator is pleased to feel the bird “drowning irretrievably in [his] blood”, there is no death for either of them. Kafka emphasizes this: the vulture is “drowning”, dying actively in the present tense, and not yet dead when the narration ends. (Moreover, the gentleman on the road claims “one shot and that’s the end of the vulture,” but does not return with his gun.) The same can be said of the narrator, for whom impalement is merely cause to think of the dying bird; it cannot change his mortal status.

I agree with James K. Mish’alani’s view of the vulture as evidence of the narrator’s death (57), but the alternate reading— in which the vulture is seen as a Promethean eagle feeding on a living corpse— is worth noting. The impossibility of death is the origin of Prometheus’s torture, a fact which is deeply ironic, blackly funny, and so very Kafkian. Renewal is the Titan’s curse: he is made eternally well that he might eternally suffer. Dawn brings terror, for he knows exactly what the new day will hold; and not even night is an ending, only “a particularly refreshing silence [which] intervenes for a little time”, before morning comes, “this easing appears illusory”, “and the pain and lamentations

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4 Humans too are carrion-eaters: we do not eat living animals, but sustain ourselves on the dead.
begin” (Blanchot 8). Immortal Prometheus is doomed to this daily routine. And so it seems not only his image—but his curse—has been given to mankind: the curse of permanence, a perpetuity of beginnings as the soul moves through its endless migrations, a life lived shackled to a mortal coil. The counterpart to this punishment is Pandora’s Box, Zeus’s curse on Prometheus’s brother and cohort Epimetheus. Famously, all the world’s blights—pestilence, misery, poverty, hunger—were loosed upon humanity, and with them, hope. Though acknowledged as the one exception, perhaps it is mislabeled. Perhaps the gods’ greatest curse lay at the bottom of the box: the will to live.

This is consistent with Blanchot’s reading of “The Metamorphosis”: it is the end of March, the day is new, the sister is young and, as her parents observe, fit for marriage, for children, to bring more life into this world; “spring” as a symbol of optimism and potential has reached its apogee. This moment he calls “the height of horror” (10). For the resolution of Gregor’s pained existence has been split like a scab: there is no end, we are never finished, “our struggle to live is a blind struggle that does not know it is struggling to die” (Blanchot 9). Though his carapace rests at the bottom of the wastebasket, he is not finished dying. For as long as there is hope—somewhere, someone summoning the will to go on living—nothingness is negated and that singular terror—“that nothingness might not be there, that nothing might just be more existence” (Blanchot 8)—remains a possibility.

This motif—narration which continues after a protagonist’s death—is the second primary method by which Kafka illustrates the impossibility of dying. We see this again in “The Judgment”:
He swung himself over [the railing], like the distinguished gymnast he had once been in his youth, to his parents’ pride. With weakening grip he was still holding on when he spied between the railings a motor-bus coming which would easily cover the noise of his fall, called in a low voice: “Dear parents, I have always loved you, all the same,” and let himself drop…. At this moment an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge. (Kafka 88)

As with “The Metamorphosis”, time of day and season coat the story in an inexplicable feeling of dread, as someone who has been awake all night feels when they see the sunrise: a recognition they must suffer a new beginning, that sleep is only the illusion of an ending, that the world continues without end— to be awake all night is to witness this awful truth. Sleep is sweet because it is a taste of nothingness; at its deepest, it is a period of true death, in which the self loses awareness of its being. But Georg, who in obedience to his father drown himself in the river, is deprived of such relief. Like Gracchus and the corpse which feeds the vulture, bodily death does not usher in the death-state; and, like poor Gregor, life goes on after death. The final line of the story, delivered in a single, unpunctuated sentence (the same is true in German) becomes this relentless assault of being. The traffic mimics the impossibility of death. The stream across the bridge presses on “unending”, a line of people in cars inching forward, filling each other’s place, moving perpetually, but hindered from reaching any sort of destination. It is not hyperbole to call it hellish: you are neither here nor there, held in a void which demands a bit of your attention— only a bit— so that you can never forget you there, but cannot become distracted by the act of living.

“The Cares of a Family Man” sees both a continuation of and a deviation from this motif. The creature Odradek— who is at once object and organism, broken and whole, with
and without purpose—prompts the narrator to reflect upon its seeming immortality, and in turn, his own death:

I ask myself, to no purpose, what is likely to happen to him? Can he possibly die? Anything that dies has had some kind of aim in life, so kind of activity which has worn out; but that does not apply to Odradek. Am I to suppose, then, that he will always be rolling…right before the feet of my children, and my children’s children? He does no harm to anyone that one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful. (Kafka 429)

It is not the fear of death or the envy of immortality which is “almost painful” to the narrator; it is the knowledge of a being who does not end. Odradek—who will go on living, rolling dustily along lobby floors and staircase landings—is proof that death does not come for us all. And if such a thing is possible, the dream of death has been compromised. He also incites a secondary horror, a permutation of the first, and this is the reminder of the narrator’s infinite progeny. Like the flood of traffic, life persists. But for a family man, it is not merely life, but his life: his own genetics, and so his very essence, carried on by his “children’s children”.

These descendants move from the conceptual to the actual when the narrator looks upon Odradek. As one looks upon an ancient ruin and is staggered by the heft of time, the narrator senses the sweep of years between himself and those grandchildren because Odradek will be then exactly as he is now.

There remains, seemingly, one escape; if one can simply cease to be—to bypass the moment of death—one might avoid that which is, for Kafka’s characters, either negated by the sound of life (Georg), or a door which exits to the room they’ve just left (Gracchus). One cannot die to escape permanence. Instead, one must let their emptiness expand until it has become consubstantial with the abyss. This is what the hunger artist attempts:
An overseer’s eye fell on the cage one day and he asked the attendants why this perfectly good cage should be left standing there unused with dirty straw inside it; nobody knew, until one man, helped out by the notice board, remembered about the hunger artist. They poked into the straw with sticks and found him in it. “Are you still fasting?” asked the overseer, “when on earth do you mean to stop?” “Forgive me, everybody,” whispered the hunger artist. (Kafka 276)

He apologizes because he has failed to become nothing. This, to answer the overseer’s question, is when the hunger artist will stop his fast. This is the hunger artist’s maximum opus. But such a feat proves impossible, for death itself interrupts his pursuit of annihilation. It is no longer a breached contract, but an abyssal obstacle. On his deathbed, Kafka elevates death from the hollow promise which left Gracchus unfulfilled, to the black joke which steals absolution from the hunger artist.

A great attention is paid to bodies in this final scene— the overseer has “his ear to the bars”, “tap[s] his forehead with a finger” (276); the hunger artist “lift[s] his head”, “his lips pursed, as if for a kiss, right in the overseer’s ear” (277). Kafka’s description of the latter feels, somehow, too close— like an invalid has pulled you to his bed, and you can smell his stale breath on your face. The result, for the reader, is an exaggerated awareness of the artist’s physical form. Though it has wasted away— a dusting of dirty straw is enough to conceal what remains of him (276)— it still exists. Like Beckett’s Unnamable, he cannot achieve nothingness; his body is evidence of our permanence, and so the hunger artist’s epitaph can only read failure, for if he had completed his work, he would leave nothing for the grave.

It is ironic that we seek to make ourselves permanent by such means: a tomb, grandchildren, art. It is ironic because, every moment, we simultaneously long for annihilation. These are the sex and death drives— the wills towards permanence and
dissolution—knotted indistinguishably together. Kafka not only understood this\textsuperscript{5}, but captured the contradiction in prose: living is dying. If death is the end of life, then life is the end of death. And so we, like Prometheus and Gracchus, like the Unnamable, like all the living, are locked in a cycle of endless renewal. The end is only the beginning: we go forever on.

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It is Marilyn Robinson, not a modernist, but heir to the American Transcendentalists, Shakespeare, the Bible, who offers an antidote to this existential horror. Housekeeping presents a mode of being which is antithetical to the awareness which plagues Beckett and Kafka. She arrives here because she knows their dread:

> Of my conception I know only what you know of yours. It occurred in darkness and I was unconsenting. I (and that slenderest word is too gross for the rare thing I was then) walked forever through reachless oblivion, in the mood of one smelling night-blooming flowers, and suddenly—My ravishers left their traces in me, male and female, and over the months I rounded, grew heavy, until the scandal could no longer be concealed and oblivion expelled me. But this I have in common with all my kind. By some bleak alchemy what had been mere unbeing becomes death when life is mingled with it. (214-215)

Robinson shares the Beckettian, the Kafkian vision: life as a separation, a rending from the void of nothingness. Once, we were consubstantial with the dark. Then came conception, and no longer were we and the universe whole. In the Unnamable’s bleak reality—“Only I and this black void have ever been” (298)—is the issue manifested. There is a separation, a boundary between self and void. Robinson recalls a time we were twisted into that “slenderest word”, when we and the void were one, whole, unseparated. To become one with the dark again: to let

\textsuperscript{5} He asked Max Brod to destroy his writings— to destroy his means of immortality.
the boundaries of self, of place, of inside and out dissolve: this the antidote. And Robinson shows it is possible here on earth.

An example comes midway through Housekeeping, when, lying in the damp bilge of a rowboat, Ruth imagines capsizing: “Say that water lapped over the gunwales, and I swelled and swelled” (162) she thinks, her body growing larger and fuller until it pushed the craft down into the lake, there continuing to absorb the glacial waters until “presumably, parturition would come in some form” (162).

This sort of imagining is frequent for Ruth, whose strange and vivid thoughts are so often brought to the topic of her own demise—surreal and not recognizable as death, perhaps—but final nonetheless. The word she chooses here, however, is unusual and telling: “parturition”—literally, the act of giving birth, but pregnant for its alternative definition of “confinement” (OED). Her first birth— that is, her passage into this world— is connoted to be a sort of confinement, a prison sentence to be carried out on earth. Likewise, the suggestion that passage from this world is a sort of “second birth” reveals the fraught relationship Ruth has to her own existence; she, as revealed by the tendencies of her listless mind and florid imagination, sees death as a deliverance from a life defined by familial loss.

This is not a “second birth,” a being “born again” in the Christian-sense of the phrase: Ruth does not wish to be relocated from an imperfect, human world to a state of grace. (She herself calls heaven “a place where I have always known I would not be comfortable” (149).) Rather, it is the placelessness of death— the non-religious notion of the so-called “afterlife” as a void bereft of place and time— which appeals to her. The novel offers numerous examples of Ruth’s imagined and encountered placelessness, as the boundaries between man and nature, sea
and sky, and even interior and exterior self fade, each realm melding into one indistinguishable whole.

None of this would be necessary if Ruth’s experience of life was not one of ever-present and ever-anticipated loss. Yet, from the beginning, Ruth defines her life by a series of departures: “I grew up… under the care of my grandmother… and when she died, of her sisters-in-law… and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher” (3). Along the way, she and her sister Lucille were also orphaned by their mother’s suicide. The grand sum of these events has left Ruth with, if not the desire to die, the desire to have never been born. She assigns her grandfather the blame, as it was “he who brought us here, to this bitter, moon-pulled lake” (149). While he escaped life (3) in a fantastic derailing, he has left his progeny to suffer not only the discomfort of Fingerbone, but of life itself.

For Ruth, life is a lack and sorrow that could have been avoided. “[He trailed] us after him unborn, like the infants he had painted… whose garments swam in some ethereal current, perhaps the rim of the vortex that would drag them down” (149), she says. This Cartesian theory of creation envisions a universe sprung from the rotation of the cosmos (OED), a vortex which spun the material world from nothingness, removing man from the placeless bliss of eternity. Before, Ruth describes, “[I] walked forever through reachless oblivion, in the mood of one smelling night-blooming flowers” (214-215).

The image of the vortex appears again, its purpose inverted in her imaginings: instead of a means of material placement, it delivers Ruth to the water, displacing her so entirely that the lake invades and then becomes her:
We would make a circle, and never reach a shore at all, if there were a vortex, I thought, and we would be drawn down into the darker world, where other sounds would pour into our ears until we seemed to find songs in them, and the sight of water would invade our eyes, and the taste of water would invade our bowels and unstring our bones. (149)

The passage begins with placeless language— a circle, permanently drifting— without beginning, end, or bearing. As Ruth and Sylvie enter the black water, it flows through them, their bodies taking on the “the very element [they were] meant to exclude” (99). Lake evenly within and without their flesh, the women are made placeless, a part and apart of the cold glacial waters, like the darkness which consumed them earlier (70). Imagination too is a placeless thing: it crafts the improbable, the illogical, the impossible, and positions it in the soul’s ether atop our physical world. For its dislocation, Ruth thrives on it— a mode of thinking which allows her to escape her reality, if only for the span of a thought, moving her somewhere distant and inexact.

However, the physical world remarkably disturbs Ruth’s haven of imagination. As her mind carries her to the lake bottom, she pictures:

My grandfather reclined how many years in his Pullman berth, regarding the morning through a small blue window. He might see us and think he was dreaming again of flushed but weightless spirits in a painted sky, buoyant in an impalpable element… Of course he was miles away, miles south, at the foot of the bridge. (149-150)

The immaterial realm Ruth inhabits is unjarred by the skeletal remains of her grandfather— in fact, she considers his mistaking the “jawless, socketed” moon for his own reflection with a sort of relish for detail and imagined experience. The image is populated by placeless language (“weightless,” “buoyant,” “impalpable”) which hovers between the elements of air and earth, or sea and sky. It is only when factual place arrives— that is, Ruth’s awareness of the physical proximity of her own body to that which remains of her grandfather’s— when she is jarred from her revery at the end of the passage.
There is, however, the rare instance in which Ruth conjures place positively, always as she locates herself in relation to another human being. “Having a sister or a friend is like sitting at night in a lighted house” (154), she states, envisioning human connection as a domestic and concrete place. Ruth’s preference to being lost in sheer darkness, utterly placeless, speaks to the degree of loneliness she experiences, particularly after Lucille’s departure. If human connection is a place, then placelessness is a lack of human connection; Ruth’s extreme loss and lack of companionship have left her profoundly alone. She calls for the unseen children in the woods to “come unhouse me of this flesh… It was no shelter now, it only kept me here alone” (159). With these words, Ruth wishes to be liberated from her own form, a vessel which she feels only permits her to feel loneliness. “Unhouse” is effectively a word for death, one which connotes and emphasizes a removal of place instead of damage to the body.

This is a request to be made placeless, a request born of Ruth’s persistent and profound grief. She learns that placelessness is a method of dispossession: to allow entropy to disorder the fragile boundaries of home until it is shingles and rafters in a sunken cellar hole, the last vestiges of civilization consumed by the creeping woods. To give up the boundaries of self, to allow water and darkness to permeate your mouth or skull, permitting your mind and body to merge with the night into one seamless evening.

“It is better to have nothing” (154), Ruth speaks twice in a single sentence: to have even a body means you have a body to lose; to have nothing, to be nothing: this is the only way not to lose. How do you have nothing? Transience—hold on to nothing. How do you be nothing? Observe, but do not act. Exist, but slightly. Permit the borders of self to fade, whether into the
darkness or into your sister, melded into one continuous black or one continuous consciousness.


