A GREAT AND SPHERICAL ZERO: CREATIVE WORKS

by

LIDA FORD

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Approved: _____*Derek Palacio*_____
Primary Thesis Advisor

Inspired by the concept of "zeroness" as defined by the late Swiss writer Robert Walser, *A Great and Spherical Zero* is a collection of fiction that addresses what it means to be small, or find smallness, and how greatness is often hidden in small places. Using a variety of experimental writing techniques, the 15 stories in this collection play with the idea, posed by Walser, of zeroness. The juxtaposition of what it means to be both "great" and "zero" is central to this collection. The pieces are additionally unified by their attempt to experiment with literary form – ranging from the most extreme works of stream of consciousness representation to the more traditional stories that feature newly assertive narrative control. The collection is a representative of my inspiration from four years of undergraduate study focusing on the modernist/postmodernist literature of the 20th century, and an attempt to add my own work to the history of experimental literature.

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Introduction

When I was a girl, maybe eight or so, I used to practice making myself invisible. I would try to walk as inconspicuously as possible, turn corners slowly, and hold in my breath should any one pass me too close. In this way, my young mind figured, even if I was still physically present, I could blend into a crowd and make myself practically, if not truly disappear. To be a young girl, and an odd, knobby-kneed one as I was, is in many ways as invisible as one can get. Originally faced with this reality I first attempted to rebel against my own insignificance; I wore bright neon clothes and was as loud and disruptive as possible. When these attempts failed, as the world is often more unkind to loud girls than quiet ones, I felt the need to turn my failed bid for significance into a superpower of its own.

While smallness, and by extension what it means to be small, has always been a consistent theme in my writing, it was not until I discovered the Swiss writer Robert Walser that I knew I wanted to explore the idea more explicitly. Robert Walser, as a writer, shared my fascination for smallness in all things. He even went so far as to write many of his work in miniscule lettering on tiny scraps of paper that, if not for the work of some dedicated graduate student, would have disappeared entirely – being discarded as trash or the incomprehensible musing of a mad man (Sullivan). Of the novels he did write, the first I encountered was *Jakob Von Gunten*, an odd fairytale of a book that tells the story of a disruptive pupil as he makes his way through a boys' servant school. Through the novel Jakob routinely lies and retells history and it through his unreliable narrative that we can see him grapple with fantasies of grandness, in an environment

that literally asks him to remain small ("Jakob Von Gunten"). There is a line in the book, underlined three times in my paperback copy, that I have adapted for the title of this collection. Jakob reflects, "We are small, small all the way down the scale to utter worthlessness. One thing I do know for certain-- in later life, I shall be a charming, utterly spherical zero" ("Jakob Von Gunten" 38). It is not clear whether Jakob is joking or sincere here in his wish to become a zero. That is, I think, the part I like the best.

During his life, and even after death, Walser had never been never particularly successful writer but for those who know what it is to be both very large and very small, his stories ring out to us across the years. His smallness in life makes him feel that much more special to those of us who admire him in death. One of the graduate students, Bernhard Echte, who spent 20 years deciphering Walser's microscripts, ended up living in his old house. The writer Lily Sullivan, who first came to Walser through his satirical account of a job interview, ended up becoming his first English biographer (Sullivan). My own introduction to Walser came in a seminar with five students– the only graduating seniors in a tiny department. Between my professor and my classmates Walser has become almost like an inside joke – a secret we share between us.

In tandem with my personal history comes the history of great writers – those I have studied and learned from through my college career and of whom I now imitate and owe for my own writing. Experimentation in its own right has always appealed to me, both in my creative and scholarly work. Recalling his first encounter with experimental literature, the great writer Gabriel Garcia Márquez reflects:

> One night a friend lent me a book of short stories by Franz Kafka. I went back to the pension where I was staying and began to read The Metamorphosis. The first line almost knocked me off the bed. I was so surprised. The first line reads, "As Gregor Sansa awoke that morning

> from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. . ..” When I read the line, I thought to myself that I didn’t know anyone was allowed to write things like that. If I had known, I would have started writing a long time ago. So, I immediately started writing short stories (Jordanson).

I too, had a similar experience when encountering the works of the 20th modernists, Kafka among them. I remember well, in high school reading Samuel Beckett’s beautifully bizarre play, *Waiting for Godot*, in which nothing happens, and yet a great deal happens all at once. Beckett’s work taught me something new; it taught me the literature was not meant to only teach but also to question – and from that point on I ferociously sought ~~out all those types of~~ writing that dealt in ambiguity, ingenuity, and worldly absurdism. I was (and am still) continuously confronted with a world beyond reason. The logic of fate, of gods and men and tragic heroes that all thrive in the worlds of classic literature did not belong in my own reality– that of a rather odd, round, teenager roaming the streets of West Eugene. Rather, it was those strange lost and wandering creatures that appealed to me; Bloom on a June day or Swann caught only in the memory of a madeleine, that were a reflection of the distortion of the modern world, and by extension, I felt represented my own life.

It was these writers that were my teachers, and by finding them I found my own voice turn. From Ernest Hemingway I learned to cut my prose into blocks and lines, and from Gertrude Stein I learned to scatter them into the air again. It was Virginia Woolf who showed me how to live as a woman, and more modern yet ever modernist Eimear McBride taught me all the different forms that womanhood could be. James Joyce let me discover big truths in the smallest of moments. The Beat writers, gave me the permission to take my own surroundings and let them find their way as literature of their own. Finally, from Marcel Proust I explored own memories – and discovered that

I, like him, wished longingly for a boyhood that could have never been. It is this boyhood that comes to live in many of the stories from the following collection: just as the girlhood of my reality appears, contrasting, in the others.

Longing, whether my characters' or my own, categorizes these stories most of all. In some stories character's long for childhood, for love, for safety, or for meaning. Others just wish for a moment of beauty, a pause in the chaos to notice the view. Some stories find that pause and lose it, while others never make it even to that small apparition. These are in many ways both my own longings and longings quite distanced from me. Both "Shoelaces" and "The Third Line" focus on Veterans from wars long before I was born. "Dormancy" describes losing a husband I've never had, and likewise "Expectations" asks questions of motherly intuition that I myself have never known. My own experiences weave in and out of this collection, like the threading of the needles in "Curtains" which, most of all, deals with the juxtaposition of what is an intimately known truth, and what is fiction. However, I have known what I believe to be love and joy and pain, and these feelings, alongside with the images of my own world populate these worlds.

Although I never intended this explicitly, I found that like my own experiences, my own town flutters in and out of the collection. Not all of the stories take place in the same city, nor are they meant to, but having spent 21 years growing and living in the same place, little bits and pieces of populate my fictional works. For example, I could not help but include two stories detailing of children wandering the banks of the Willamette river as I myself have done. I can also say completely sincerely that when my nameless chorus of boys in "The Boy King" proclaim that the 7/11 on 18th is the

best one in town, that they are speaking with my own first-hand knowledge. Little characters too, mirror the real-life environment of my hometown, though to a lesser degree. My last project, a thesis for my departmental honors, was as close as one can get to a true autobiography, and as such I felt that the stories in this collection should have some much-needed distance from myself. However, like any work truth and fiction certainly muddle into one another in my stories – the smallest details of my own world finding a a new significance my fiction. I think it is Hemingway who summed up the murky distinction best when he wrote:

> When I read [my own work] I am in complete astonishment that I could have invented as a I did...I You have to take what is not palpable and make it completely palpable...[but]I am such a simple writer that in my books the temperature and the weather of the day is nearly always that of the weather outside (Hemingway 138).

While the details of the worlds and characters presented in the collection may come from a place of familiarity, the form of the writing, if I have succeeded, should push unfamiliar boundaries. Focusing my academic studies of the last four years primarily on modernist and post-modernist experimental language, I have been obsessed with the looming inquiry of what's next?. How does literature continue to evolve into the 21st century? Given the great language experimentations of the 20th Century, where is there room for innovation?

James Joyce, is most well-known for writing *Ulysses,* an experimental novel that plays with a variety of forms, most notably the use of stream of consciousness. Joyce is also famous for his short stories, especially his collection *Dubliners* that focus on the normal, everyday lives of people in the Irish city. These two innovations (though not solely employed Joyce) both feature heavily as influences in my collection to follow. In *Ulysses* as well as other works featuring stream of consciousness representation. Joyce

breaks the line between thinking and speaking, projecting the reader into the character's thoughts. In "Grapefruit" I employ a similar technic, blurring the line between narrative and represented consciousness. Additionally, Joyce's short stories – specifically those that deal with the everyday lives of people– act as a foundation from which this overall collection is built. Generally speaking, the collection is unified by its focus on the ordinary, or even more specifically by its focus on the extraordinary found within the ordinary. In "An Encounter" for example, the daily routine of two boys is only slightly interrupted, but the interruption leads to the boys longing for their unextraordinary, yet preferable normalcy (Joyce). This idea of "ordinariness" evolves even further when influenced by another great innovator: Gabriel Garcia Márquez.

The relationship between Márquez's innovations and Joyce's is in many ways linear, or at least in the sense that Márquez's work represent the next step in a literary evolution, after Joyce. Joyce's short stories focus in on a seemingly ordinary character and then track the character's movements until the character arrives at an epiphany. Literary theorist, Charles Baxter wrote extensively against the now familiar trope of epiphanies. Literary epiphanies, for Baxter, "continually aim for a climactic moment of brilliant transforming clarification. The clarification happened on the page, even if it does not become visibly apparent to the characters" (Baxter 44). While I believe that Baxter's particular condemnation of epiphanies are up for debate, it is worth noting his definition when it comes to Márquez's stories.

Márquez, somewhat like Joyce, writes everyday people. His short stories famously feature small towns and people with everyday lives. The twist of course and what Márquez is most known for is the occurrence of magic within the realm of the

everyday. Throughout the collection Márquez's magical realist influence appears in the collections surrealist moments as well as its focus on the everyday. However, it is how Márquez uses this magic to create subverted epiphanies in his stories. While Joyce's characters find magic in everyday life *figuratively*, via their epiphanies, Márquez's characters find literal magic that more often than not does not lead to a "magical" ending. Both authors write parables, but in the case of Márquez the epiphany of the story is often much less clear.

Both of these authors heavily influenced my conception of this collection as a whole. The stories, whether strictly surrealist or not, attempt in some manner to take on the everyday (as Joyce does) but with a twist end or resolution (as Márquez does). Almost every story in the collection focuses on the everyday and attempts to subvert the expected epiphany. Overall each represents a conscious attempt to marry innovation in form with quality in content.

Originally, I had conceived of the collection as an entirely flash fiction collection – containing only stories that were limited to the very generalized 1000-word upper limit. But that categorization proved very limiting, and I found myself and my work pushing against it time and time again. In fact, in the final collection works range from a single sentence to a more traditional 15 pages. Of course, there exists too, a spectrum of those in the page lengths in between, and at least one work that could easily fall into the category of poetry. As such, the flash fiction distinction simply would not do, nor did I want it too. I settled on, as a subtitle, the vaguely defined phrase "collected works".

I came to consider myself a writer in the serious sense only recently, but I came to book long before that. My mother, still in college, and having taken a course on childhood development learned from a lecture the importance of reading to children from an early age, and as such did not let me get far without a book in my hand. Though in many ways still a child herself, she would patiently read to me for hours, from great stacks of library books. There is a history of dyslexia in my family, and in its more extreme forms illiteracy, and she took great care to offer me a different future. It is from these long summer afternoons, lying with her in the shade of a stack of library books that the first glimmers of this collection begin.

It, once again, in the words of Robert Walser, who's influence on this collection will become more readily apparent if not already so, that I found the best description of how I conceive of my own writing. This quote, by Walser, prefaces his own short story collection and given its relevance, I thought it prudent to include it in its entirety here as well. Walser writes:

I am a kind of artisan novelist. A writer of novellas I certainly am not. If I am well-disposed, that's to say, feeling good, I tailor, cobble, weld, plane, know, hammer, or nail together lines the content of which people understand at once. If you liked, you could call me a writer who goes to work with a lathe. My writing is wallpapering. One or two kindly people venture to think of me as a poet, which indulgence, and manners allow me to concede. My prose pieces are, to my mind, nothing more nor less than the parts of a long, plotless, realistic story. For me, the sketched I produce now and then are shortish or longish chapters of a novel. The novel I am constantly writing is always the

same one, and it might be described as a variously sliced-up or torn-apart book of myself ("Selected Stories" 9).

The idea of this collection, indeed of all my writing, as being a "torn-apart book of myself" is one that Walser and I share. I have discussed already the various threads of autobiography and personal longing that connect the works in this collection. But the stories are drawn together but another Walserian concept, one that shares its title with the collection: the idea of a great and spherical zero. Out of all the stories in the collection, there is a passage from "The Boy King" that I permit myself to be provisionally proud of. It occurs in the story when a group of boys, wild and untamed, are walking and find an awareness of their own smallness in the world:

> We moved down the sidewalk in a great bulge, crawling and pulsing, so if you were to view of us from above we would appear to be one great creature, an amoeba in a microscope, at once both very large and at the same time infinitely aware of our smallness, so insignificant we were to the great cosmos of the street. We did not belong to the suburban fathers who glared at us from porches as we trod on the edge of their freshly cut lawns, pushing each other and vying for the chosen spots on the sidewalks. Nor did we belong to those makeuped mothers, whose fluttering eyelashes pitied us from rearview mirrors. No, we belonged to a different breed of children than theirs, those whose fathers' worked long hours at the mill or at the bottle; those whose mothers' faces were marked only by the bruised kisses of hungry lips, with front yards swimming in toys and cans and dried up grass, such was our belonging and as such we belonged to no one.

It is this idea of a unity in smallness that I have attempted to weave throughout this collection. While my own life weaves in and out of these stories it is the group of boys in The Boy King that I find myself most fond of, and most heartbroken over – if one can feel that way about their own creations. The nameless group of boys in that story use their invisibility to their gain. I like to imagine them stealing candy bars off shelves or sneaking into movies at the mall. In the collection's first story "The Hat" the

character of Georgie was one of the originally named boys featured in The Boy King. Georgie, longs for a freedom that I permit to my lost boys in The Boy King. I suspect, despite our obvious differences, I am most like him of any character in the collection.

In her novel *Sidewalks,* Valeria Lusielli describes Walser's writing as "a chink in the wall, for looking through to the other side" (120). I feel her metaphor extends. If we think of Walser's work as a representative of all zeroness, then I believe that Luiselli is right when she views it as not a dead end but a significant, if not small, opening. For me, to embrace zeroness is to come to a freedom not previously permitted. In a world where we are haunted by the stories of great men and women who have failed before us, being a zero offers no such warnings, no such hazards. Zeroness frees one, like a small child, to steal the metaphorical candy bar and run.

A zero, as it turns out, is not a bad place to start. A zero is the smell of a new car. A zero is a string of bright white Christmas lights. A zero is a note written by your lover on a piece of old junk mail, reminding you not to forget to get milk on your way home. A zero passes other zeros, day in and day out in the tight spaces of a musty subway car. A zero waits in line patiently at the grocery store and makes small talk with the cashier. A zero has two dogs and a picket fence in the suburbs. A zero will stop, just for a moment on their morning commute, and breath in the way the light hits the clouds, on a particularly nice day.

In a work originally conceived as flash fiction, it only felt right to pay homage to such a smallness. Like my eight-year-old self I could not resist attempting to turn insignificance into a superpower. The characters and worlds in the stories that follow attempt to do the same. My lost boys in "The Boy King" make something very small,

very large. In “Eggs” I squeeze a relationship into a single sentence. “Expectations” find truth in an insignificant moment. In “Shoelaces” and “The Third Line”, when faced with the horrors of war and death, my characters turn to the smallest items – a pair of shoes or a miniscule animal – for comfort. In “Lemon Chicken” and “Dormancy” magic occurs in the smallest of ways, in the most hidden of places. “Curtains”, “Rules”, and “Riverbeds” all find a child grasping tight at the smallest of details and never letting go. “Momentum” and “Saturday” pause time, and “Grapefruit” asks what we can learn from jagged thoughts, scattered fragments, and the promise of a better breakfast. The collection tells of people that find something large in something small or are small people themselves who stumble upon their own significance.

A Great and Spherical Zero represents a year of careful thought, works, and lots of editing. As I move from my own small place within the even smaller undergraduate world, I am happy to carry with me the fragment of my time here now completed in this collection. It is only a small drop, in a vast ocean of literature, but in that smallness, I hope you too, may find something greater.

The Hat

The hat was his father's–a great mighty thing. It hung from the nail above the door frame, so if Georgie craned his neck all the way up, and the morning light hit just right in the window, it would cast a hat sized shadow right on his face darkening his small, speckled nose.

Georgie wanted, more than anything, to stack all the books from the study in a great pile and teeter all the way to the top of them, reaching out his chubby arms, to firmly grab a hold of the brim. But he had tried that one afternoon not so long ago, and the stack had toppled over–books shifting in a great mudslide with Georgie, plumply falling on the summit of the fallen pile.

Lying there, in the remnants of his failure, Georgie looked at the hat and dreamed of another life. A life in which he had, finally, triumphantly brought that hat down to be his own. A life of adventure, where Benji was not a small boy but a great forest ranger, and he strode through the tall grasses of the Cleveland Savannah, his trusty companion Tiger, following in tow.

ONE TWO HUT! TWO TWO HUT! Georgie knew how he would march, arms and legs swinging in time. He saw his journey through backyards, cutting back weeds with his plastic shovel machete, clearing a path through the dense underbrush. Tiger would have his back and be on constant lookout–pouncing on ladybugs, ears perking up at the cries of the monstrous cicadas. All-day they would journey, the sun their map, reaching hilltops and trampling forests. The world his with nothing to stop him, nothing at all, but all of it, all lands and creatures and the mysteries they contained–all his–only

his! As the day grew on the light would grow long and warm, the countryside more wild and dangerous. But Georgie would not be afraid– this world was his to own, and he, the mighty hero would stand up, chest puffed, head tall, staring any danger down with a menacing glare. He would continue his journey, hour after hour, the miles behind stopping only when his mother, cautious of the evening wind, would call him home for dinner, tuck him in tightly, rub his head and sing him to sleep with ballads of his great adventures of the day.

Shoelaces

The old man wore his shoes everywhere, even in the shower. He laced his laces up much too tightly as well. He laced them that way because he had been in the army and in the army, you had to lace your boots a certain way to keep the mud, and bugs, and rats out of them. He had never broken the habit. When he walked, he stood up too straight – like a fence post. He stood up this way as his father had once beaten him as a child for slouching at the dinner table. He had never broken the habit.

The man was horribly set in his ways about most things, but the boots were really the worst of it. He wore the same ones, every day, and never took them off for a second. They were high-topped, sturdy things that had once been green but now were brown after years of use. When he bathes, the water from the shower head would run off the boots edges and leave his bathtub a muddy pit. He knew this was odd but did not mind – he simply liked how the leather felt when it was wet and squished and slushed beneath his toes. He knew that in the army he would have been yelled at for showering with boots on, shot possibly depending on when the commanding officer had last had a smoke. But he liked how the soap felt too – trickling down the back of his socks, which by now were nearly disintegrated; and he just could not bring himself to untie them. When he got out of the shower the leather boots would dry and fit even more snugly around his feet. This is what the man liked most of all and the man would be sure to stand a little bit straighter, his ankles now pinched ever so slightly.

He wore the boots to bed as well. This was an annoyance that his wife quietly tolerated until she didn't, but he found the shoes kept him company even in her absence.

When the nightmares would come, he would wake up with the reassuring squeeze of his boots around his feet, as if should the need arise, he would be ready to flee at a moment's notice.

He wore the same outfit most days as well. Cargos and a button down – all carefully washed, ironed, and folded by him the day before. This was out of habit more than anything and as he did not love his clothes that same way, he loved his boots. On the day of his brother's funeral, however, he awoke to a 3-piece suit there instead. There was an accompanying black tie hanging over the back of the chair. He struggled for a while, taking longer than usual to cram his boots through the pant-holes of the suit – which were a fair bit narrower than he was used to. He tied his tie, brushed back his hair, and before his boots gave a tug and he knew it was time to go.

At the service, the old man stood as straight as he could. His boots sunk a little into the muddy grass and he had to keep re-adjusting his posture. The vicar was very boring and gave the service in a dragging dull voice and no one paid much attention.

The man flipped between emotions in his mind – unable to decide if his brother's last act was very brave or very weak. The official report ruled it an accident – a nicety by the coroner so he could still be buried in Saint Mary's cemetery next to his wife. But the funeral guests all knew better. As did the old man.

That had all been years ago and the man hadn't been to Saint Mary's since. He was retired now, and his boots were worn thinner than ever. A hole had started to form in one of the inner corners so that if it rained hard enough his left toe got just the slightest bit wet. The laces, however, remained tightly bound.

On one particular morning, his boots decided to take him for a walk. Helplessly trapped, though not quite panicked, the man was taken with them. They roamed for about an hour, stopping here or there to admire a particularly nice tree or patch of sunlight. Then, inevitably, they ended up at his brother's grave.

He had not thought about – or rather had forced himself not to think about – his brother in some time. Even at the funeral, he thought of only his brother *dead* or his brother *almost dead* which is substantially different than his brother alive. But standing in front of his grave now, the man's boots suddenly felt far too tight. He tried to turn away, but they remained steadfast in the mud. He could not help but to think of his brother.

His brother, as far as the man knew, wore many pairs of shoes in his life. He had been ten years younger and missed the draft, so he had no need for the boots or their laces. His brother, instead, had been completely and thoroughly *more* than he had. More outgoing, more adventurous, more full of life. He always had a joke waiting, a wink or a smirk to follow, was always the favorite. He did not fear like the old man did, did not jump at loud noises or hesitate around corners and he did not sleep with his boots on.

He thought of his own life, carefully combed and inspected. Every day since the deployment the same set of steps. Checking off his to-do list. 5:30: Wake Up, 6: Shower, 7:15: Dress, 7:30: Breakfast, and so on and so on and so on, until 20:30: Sleep, 1:30-3: Nightmares, 5:30: Wake Up. He could not, in all this time, remember a day when this had been broken.

When he was a young boy, he had read a book about Venice and wanted to go very badly. *Perhaps I will be more like him and go to Venice*, the old man thought. But

this was pushed forcefully from his mind. *He still ended up dead anyway.* The old man reasoned. He reached down to adjust the bow on his laces. *Venice is expensive this time of year.*

Momentum

On a spring day, with my mother in her grave, I thought of a September afternoon, when time came to a stop.

The tines of my bicycle wheel, rusted from the autumn rain, were silenced briefly from their ceaseless rattle.

A professional rushing to work, late for spending too long examining a grey hair in the bathroom mirror, enjoyed a brief whiff of her strawberry shampoo.

A musician on the corner got stuck on his least favorite chord, willing his calloused fingers to stretch to that final string.

A man is spared, ever so briefly, from the cup of coffee, cascading in a wave, about to burn his lap.

A small girl wearing a bright yellow raincoat splashed in a murky puddle. Specks of mud flew up to splatter her hem.

The sun shattered into leftover raindrops, that dropped like honey from the edge of the spoon.

The leaves of an oak tree, just torn from their branches by a large gust of wind, floated in the thick air. They were the brilliant red of the jacket my mother used to wear when I was young. A brilliant one danced through my eyeline, and was carried away on the wind, back into the bustle of the busy street. I wished to reach out for the leaf, to take it for my own and put it in a book, pressed between two pieces of paper, hidden away on my shelf.

The Vicar

It was a modest, yellow church in the countryside. The paint was chipping, more or less, and there was no stain on the dirty windows. In the morning the sun would rise up over the rolling hillside, casting a glow on the grasses and shooting a bright ray of light through the bell tower and down into the main hall. Dust would sparkle in the sunbeam and this, the vicar had once believed, was proof enough that divinity approved of this church on the hill. This had given him great purpose. But that was a long time ago and now he slept with a tattered book by Nietzsche under his mattress and didn't much believe in God at all.

When Sundays came, as they always did, the vicar would speak as usual, gently proselytizing to a half-awake crowd. He would read Psalms and call for Prayers until it was 9 o'clock and all the good Catholics could go on their way. He knew his words to be untrue, but he told himself that this didn't much matter as long as the congregation believed them to be so.

He had started in seminary too young to really know the world, and it wasn't until the world showed itself to him that he felt his faith leave. Once the funerals began, that he knew it was truly gone forever. With the Great War came the great deaths, and time after time he would conduct the solemn rites, so often that the hymns were memorized by himself and the town. The women would weep, and the men would try not to, and all would gaze blankly at the casket, until the faces became indistinguishable from one another. It was at one of these affairs when the mother of the boy let out a

particular shriek; so sincere in its misery, that the Vicar knew that there was no God left for them on this earth and that there hadn't been one in a while.

The vicar did not want to stop preaching, as being the only church in town, he did not want to upset the townsfolk. The townsfolk went to church as they liked the vicar very much and did not want to disappoint him. Each one would light a candle for a sick mother or brave soldier or even themselves, scared as they were, and the vicar did very good to be sure the candles never went out and the town knew their prayers were in very good hands.

At night everyone said their prayers and slept soundly as they could with a war on and no one had Faith, and everyone had Faith and the weeks came and went and came and went and that was that.

But the church was very pretty, and the town was very pleasant.

Saturday

It is too late on a Saturday morning.

I stir a little, barely leaving my dreams. I can feel you breathing next to me, almost snoring but not quite. The sunlight floats in the splintered window we painted by hand. The white is chipping away already but I do not notice, only seeing the memory when I open them each evening. I always sleep better in the cold. You never seem to mind.

Here, now, the warmth does not bother me. I watch my papers flutter in their stacks. The girl dances in the poster on my wall. The golden light fills every corner and rests on your forehead. This makes you stir a little and you try and swat it away. I turned to fall back into the tangle of limbs that makes up our bed. The moment has only just passed. The morning presses, waiting impatiently on the panes of glass.

It is too late on a Saturday morning. I cannot bring myself to mind.

Rules

Don’t come in here. Don’t interrupt. Don’t talk so loud, don’t pick that up, don’t run in the hall, don’t leave, don’t leave crumbs on the table, don’t track dirt on the carpet, don’t linger by that house, don’t stay out too late don’t fail all your classes don’t talk back to your teacher don’t smoke this that or definitely not the other stuff don’t eat sugary foods don’t forget to lock your bike don’t drive there too late don’t stay in that house don’t stay with that boy don’tkissthatgirleither don’treadinthedark don’twatchbadTVdon’tsleepwithwethair don’tmovetothatcity don’tpayforthatclass don’tforgetdon’tforgetdon’tforgetwhatItoldyou.

The Third Line

To start things off, you should know that this is a story about the First World War, of which I know very little. You should also know that this is a story about Johnny B. Goodey, an American Private from the 133rd, who I have just now invented, and who would go on to die in that war, much to his dismay. But, as the title may have tipped you off, this is mostly a story about the third line; about what it means to stand on the third line, to watch those before you charge into battle to die a horrible, death and to have to charge right on after. It is the fate that our poor Goodey ultimately will face. Finally, this is a story for you, written as a reminder that you, like Goodey, you will die; but unlike Goodey, will likely die in such a way that you are able to have an open casket at your funeral, and I think there's a great deal to be said in that. So now, if you are willing, I would like you to travel in time with me, just for a moment, to the trenches of The Great War, where our friend Goodey, was having a serious problem. A problem, which above all else, started with his nose.

Unfortunately for Goodey, he had inherited his mother's nose, rather than his father's; a detail that ended up causing him a lot of trouble in the war. His mother could smell quite well you see, it had always been a certain superpower of hers. If there was a pie baking a mile off, or even the tiniest bit of food gone bad in the back of the cupboard, Mrs. Goodey could sniff it out. She would squint her eyes real small, stick her nose way up in the air, and flair her nostrils aggressively. It was quite a sight to see – a housewife with the sniffer of a bloodhound – and Goodey would have chuckled at the memory if his nose hadn't caused him so much grief in his own life.

In the trenches of the Great War, the ground smells like shit – and for a good reason: it is partially made of shit. The walls smell slightly less of shit but are still of the same consistency, so it is hard to tell the difference. That's the real reason for the masks - not the Mustard Gas but the shit smell. Trust me on this, history is almost entirely written by people who were never actually there. They call us *authors* if we are successful and *homeless* if we are not. "Write what you know", they say. But sometimes they are wrong.

Outside the shithole bullets whizz past one another like tiny dragonflies. They make a lovely whooshing sound when they are not making contact with someone's head, whereupon the sound is closer to a horrendous squelch. That is what the trenches are for; to keep the enemy bullets whooshing, rather than squelching. It was a very important task for a literal shithole. And Goodey – with his incredible nose, could smell all of it, from the shit to the squelching, in perfect 4-D technicolor.

Goodey kept running into nose related difficulties as the war went on. They had been in the trenches for weeks now, which means that all of the soldiers with all of their normal noses, had grown relatively accustomed to the smell by this point. Goodey, with his superior nose, had not, but could do nothing but watch in mute horror as the rest of his regiment started using their gasmask for gas-only purposes, rather than wearing it all day, every day, to keep out the smell. Goodey did not want to be the only one wearing the mask. He did not want to be laughed at, which is something you can surely understand. So, given that the mask was now out of the question, he now had to look to other methods of protecting his nose.

The U.S. Army has certain morals and standards are vital to its function as an organization. The most important one is also the U.S. Army's motto: "In This We Defend". In Goodey's case "This" happened to be the trenches, so perhaps the motto should have really read, "In This Shithole We Defend", but that is beside the point. The second most important army standard is no women or queers what-so-ever. The third is that, in addition to the regular army T-shirts, and jackets, each soldier would be given an additional sleeveless shirt, to wear under their normal T-Shirt, and to use at their leisure in times of need. And John B. Goodey's time of need had come.

Goodey had taken off his standard-issue, army-quality, all-so-important-sleeveless-shirt, and was attempting to fasten it into a bandana, which he could use to cover his nose, from the oh-so-awful smell – which, in addition to the fecal matter, had now taken on an additional, distinctive gunpowder quality. The newest addition to this delightful array of aromas was caused chiefly by a gruff-looking soldier who sat across from Goodey and amused himself during their off-hours by shooting rats. Goodey watched as the man carefully spooned a bit of army rationed Maconochie Canned Meat, on to the ground, waited for a hopeful rat to approach it, and blew the thing into tiny rat bits. The soldier, who Goodey only knew by his nickname, caught him staring.

"Not, very smart are they", he laughed and shot another one. "You'd think they'd see what happens to the others n' back off". But indeed, that rats kept coming. One by one, they fell into his trap. One by one they became rat shreds.

Slightly horrified by the scene, Goodey turned his attention back to his shirt, which he was cutting with his pocketknife. The shirt was fraying quite badly where it had been cut and was causing him quite some trouble. The pocketknife had been a gift

from his father and was not as sharp as the army-issued ones, but Goodey used it anyway. He had never been close with his father; in fact, his father had always had a distinctive disliking for Goodey, thinking him to be lazy, and weak-willed, and corrupted by what his father had called the “rampant bohemianism” of Goodey’s generation. After high school, Goodey had been unsure of what to do with himself, and thus had joined the army and it wasn’t until this moment, twenty-one years into his life, that his father had ventured to show any sign of approval for him. “Son,” his father said while handing him a small package that Mrs. Goodey had carefully wrapped in newspaper. “Son...” he hesitated. Mrs. Goodey gave him a sharp look and he opened his mouth again. “Son, I’m proud...I’m proud... of this choice you’ve made. Good. Yes.” Goodey unwrapped the knife. It was shiny back then and the leather holster was still free from mud. Goodey turned it around a few times in his fingers, unsure how to respond. His father beat him to the punch and added shortly “try not to muck it up” and turned and left the room. It was this last line that Goodey thought of when he looked at the knife, and it had not given him the comfort he had hoped for. Now, it had failed him even at cutting fabric, and he cursed his decision not to leave it tucked under his mattress at home.

Goodey was startled by a particularly pathetic squeal from one of the rats, who may have realized that the Maconochie Canned Meat, was most likely made of its own rat brethren. Another man waddled over to see what the commotion was but quickly became more interested in what Goodey was creating. The new man was Jim A. Character, born James Arscott Character, and was coincidentally the only other soldier in the 133rd, other than Goodey, to take advantage of the Army’s prestigious gift.

Character's own shirt was being used as a research tool, for a project in which he had was greatly invested. Character was, above all else, a passionate microbiologist, a passion that he carried with him all the way to the Western Front. Before the war, Character had been studying the unique and wondrous properties of the Tardigrade, an almost microscopic animal, that can survive in even the most extreme circumstances. Character had been the top of his class back in the states and was considered a leading expert in all things Tardigrade, as well as quite promising academic for his age. But, expert or not, he was still expected to fight, and thus was shipped halfway around the world, and stuck in a warzone in which he was desperately trying to make his expertise useful.

Day in and day out the other soldiers were forced to listen to Character's lectures on what he referred to as the "The Mighty Tardigrade", so much so that the few who survived could have rightly headed back to the states, and taught Character's classes themselves. His incessant blabbering was viewed with mixed reactions: some viewed it as an unfortunate stress response, others a charming quirk, and a third group regularly threatened to shove Character's head into the camp latrine. Things went from bad to worse, when, during an unfortunate accident, Character got an accidental whiff of Mustard Gas, and though he survived, the brain-damage caused him to not only lecture on the Tardigrade but to go obsessively hunting for them in the trench walls.

"Well, that's a helluva problem you got there, bud." Character hiked up his pants and leaned in, far too close to Goodey, examining his shirt. "The fringe is all wrong ya see. You're gonna need a sharper knife." Goodey nodded but tried not to engage. While he wasn't exactly in the shove-his-head-into-the-latrine camp, when it

came to Character's ramblings, as at the very least did not want to give any sign of encouragement. Nevertheless, Character persisted. "You can borrow mine if you'd like. See what I got going here." Character held up his own shirt, unfortunately, close to Goodey's nose. Despite the horrendous smell wafting from the object, and Character himself, Goodey was impressed. Character had managed to fasten himself a sort of sieve, made from stick siding and using the shirt as mesh. On each side were two braided handles, made from the remaining fabric. The whole thing was covered in a thick layer of mud.

"What is that for?" Goodey asked, trying to keep the disgust from coming through in his voice.

"My research," said Character, and promptly turned and waddled back to the side of the trench he had previously been inspecting. Goodey stared at him, in awe and confusion. He had never known Character to miss an opportunity to talk about the Tardigrade before.

"He sure is a freak," said the gruff-looking soldier, kicking a rat carcass to the edge of the trench. Goodey nodded. Character, it appeared, was now frantically scraping bits from the trench wall with his knife, putting them on his sieve and holding it up to the sunlight. After the third time or so that he repeated this, the mud had grown thicker and a great drop of it fell on Character's glasses. He wiped it off, with the sleeve of his coat, undisturbed. Character waddled back, still holding the sieve over his head. In an almost perfect metamorphosis, Goodey watched Character: his splayed-out arms, and wisps of hair flying out of his helmet; and saw him transform his hair antenna, his glasses bulging eyes, and his wiry arms and legs like that of a bug, poking from an

armored exoskeleton. Goodey shuddered at the thought of him with a gas mask on, but for now, Character maintained the lighthearted disposition of a Dung Beetle, holding high above his head, his fecal prize.

"Here we go, boys!" The Beetle hopped over to the two soldiers. "Take a look! Somewhere in here, the Tardigrade is hiding." Using the edge of his knife, he smeared the mud back on forth on the sieve. A bit splattered on Goodey's boots. Oblivious to their obvious disinterest, he continued to lecture. "The Tardigrade, commonly known as the Water-Bear, are tiny microscopic creatures who cling to the fibers found in silt-like sandy mud – like the mud found all around us. Of course, they're found in other places as well. The Tardigrade can persist in practically every environment – they're nature's great survivors!" This thought amused him, and he chuckled a little.

"Why are you looking for them here?" Goodey asked.

"Well, dear friends, now that's where things get interesting..." He moved in close enough that they could almost taste his BO. Goodey wondered how his at the University students felt about having a dung beetle for a teacher. "As I said the great Tardigrade can survive even the most extreme environmental conditions. From this, I do not just mean the usual suspects but a host of extremity previously unheard of. They can live in the hottest and coldest temperatures on earth. They are found in the dry sands of the Sahara Desert, the deepest ocean trenches, even the arctic poles. In my own research alone I have smashed them, boiled them, froze them, and attempted to suffocate them. I have put them in the strongest acids and bases, left them to die in almost all circumstances and yet they persist." At the word *persist*, great orbs of spit expelled onto Goodey's face. The Beetle paused for a moment and then said wistfully, "they have

been here long before us and I suspect they will be here long after. Sometimes when I look into the great unknown sky, I wonder if there too, in the cosmos, the Tardigrade finds its home."

"Observe, observe!" he continued. "My hypothesis is, that the Tardigrade, in all its mightiness will be able to withstand even the Mustard Gas that plagues us so. Given that we have attacks regularly on the front and that French soil is a prime habitat for a Tardigrade home, we have around us the perfect laboratory conditions. If I am able to identify Tardigrades living in the soil, then! Well, then my hypothesis will be proven to be correct." He gave a decisive nod. Not sensing the reaction, he had hoped for from Goodey and the other soldier, he jumped back in. "Gentlemen. Gentleman! Consider the implications. A study like this may never have the opportunity to occur again. It's not like we can go around spraying Mustard Gas in the laboratory. This is a warzone! If the Tardigrade can survive here, then so can we. It certainly has secrets in its natural defenses that could be useful to our military science departments. I've been talking to the commanding officers and it seems that no one has considered this before I have. Perhaps it was a good thing I got selected after all. Perhaps. Perhaps." He muttered this a few more times, with a faraway look in his eye. No one said anything for a few minutes. Even the war seemed to fall quiet. The Beetle perked up once more.

"Ah!" he said. "Ah but forgive me, I've been so rude." He turned to Goodey. "You need to borrow a knife. Would you like mine?" He offered him the blade, covered in muddy Tardigrade habitat.

“You can use mine,” the gruff soldier said. Goodey accepted gratefully. The Beetle sat down, and stared intently at the screen, willing the Tardigrades to show themselves. Then, as if suddenly called, Character turned to the gruff-solider.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure.” Goodey was sure they had met before it was a small regiment. But the soldier didn’t seem to mind and introduced himself again.

“You can call me Matchbox,” he said and held out a hand, the Character ignored.

“What a curious epithet!” said The Beetle, “however did you earn it?”

“Well because I’m the only one with one of these,” said Matchbox, and pulled a small bullet casing out of his pocket. He flicked it, and a flame came out.

“Made it myself,” he said with pride and lit a cigarette.

“One day, on the way over here – see, it was raining on the boat. And it wouldn’t stop raining.” Goodey and The Beetle nodded. They both remembered the rain. “It rained and rained and rained and rained. And I need my morning smoke see, just to get on with things. And every morning when it rains, my damn matchbox would get wet and I wouldn’t be able to light the damned cigarette. So, one day I just lost it, threw the matches everywhere and stopped using them for good. One of my pals showed me how to make this here thing, once we got landside, but I’ve been Matchbox ever since.”

“How curious,” said The Beetle, in a voice that indicated he felt it was nothing of the sort.

Goodey felt rather uncomfortable. The trio sat with their thoughts for a while. Goodey worked on braiding the fasten for his nose cover. Matchbox continued his vendetta against the rats and smoked more cigarettes than Goodey had seen in his whole deployment. The Beetle continued his research.

“Well, let’s see it.” Matchbox was the first to break the silence. Goodey put the mask on. It was loose, but not overall bad considering. And it helped significantly with the smell.

Matchbox began to laugh. “You look like a nurse in that thing.”

“We should give him the nickname of his own.” Chimed in The Beetle with a grin.

“Right you are doctor!” said Matchbox, and then to Goodey “What’s the patient's status, Nurse Goodey?” Goodey didn’t like the name, but it didn’t much matter. It wouldn’t be his for long. “You got a point about the smell though,” said Matchbox, “I hear that even in the hospital, all us front guys still stink of trench. They even gotta have closed caskets for the ones who kick it, or the stink will ruin the funeral.”

Dinner for Goodey was Canned Maconochie Beef, the food of the rats, and a nice stale piece of bread. The meat was saltier than usual and parched their already dry throats. Matchbox drank rum. “I’m surprised you have any of that left,” said Goodey. “I can barely drink mine fast enough.”

“Here, take some of mine. Bunch o’ guys got blown up on my patrol last night. I got the extra.” said Matchbox and thrust a canteen into Goodey’s hands. “Go on, drink up. It’s gotta help get that food down.” Goodey drank. “Ya know, I heard abou’ a guy

once," said Matchbox, “who was ‘bout to be hung – wanted a can-a Maconochie fer his last meal. Can you believe it?”

“Nostalgia is a powerful tool,” The Beetle said. “I’d bet anything that if the prisoner wanted it as his last meal, he must’ve missed the war.” They all thought on that for a moment.

“Well, I hate the damn thing!” said Matchbox. “And I say, after we're done here, I say we raid the meat factory just to put an end to the whole miserable operation.” Goodey chuckled but hungrily took another bite.

Goodey drank the last of Matchbox’s rum and settled in to try and sleep. All around him soldiers on rest were vying for the least mucky spots to lay their head. Goodey rather aggressively claimed a plank to lay his head on, to keep the shit from getting, at the very least, in his hair. One had to do what one could in the circumstances. There was a little shade too, just enough to keep the afternoon sun off his eyes. Then, as happened every afternoon, everyone in the trenches began to pray.

Some prayed to God in the traditional way: muttering as much of the Lord’s prayer as they could remember. Others prayed in their own way. Some prayed to the letter from their girl, read and reread and kept in their breast pocket, imagining that when they fell asleep, they would wake up in her arms. Others prayed to their mothers and apologized for all their wrongs, promising if they returned alive, they would always help with the dishes, always mow the lawn. Others still prayed to their own gods – The Beetle prayed to the Tardigrade and Matchbox prayed to light bullet case lighter. One soldier prayed to the nudie drawing he bought in a brothel in Paris, simplistically done but curved in all the right places. Goodey however, could not think of anything to pray

to. He stared upwards instead and tried to find the stars, hidden somewhere behind the bombs and smoke, in the great blue sky.

It was nighttime in Goodey's dream, come too early, but he did not mind. He watched as body floated, flew upwards, above the trenches, the outposts, the people, the shells. When he looked down, he could see the whole war, people all turned into bugs, scoring the dirt for a tardigrade snack.

He moved away from the war, floated back into France and zoomed through the Parisian streets. Streetlights glowed in the darkened night, and families huddled around dinner tables. Soon he felt his body grow lighter, float higher; he tapped the tip of the Eiffel Tower on his way out, and hid from the incoming German planes, in a particularly puffy cloud.

Finally, he reached the dark night sky. The air was cold and crisp, and he breathed it in deeply. He did a backstroke through the milky ways, as all the stars transformed into a million Tardigrades, dancing, undisturbed by the endless vacuum of space. For the first time since the war, Goodey felt at peace. He thought he might just start praying to the Tardigrade as well.

"Places, places! Stand-to!" Goodey looked around in the mess. They hadn't even had tea yet. Soldiers were running everywhere, awakened from their dreams. Shells whooshed by overhead. The Sergeants yelled out commands. It was early, far too early. The sun was still blazing down, hot from above. But they had been trained for this, even in the bright of day. They were being attacked. The Germans must have been

desperate. Goodey knew what he was supposed to do. He headed, dazed, for his spot in the first line.

"Come! Come quick!" Goodey's sleeves were being tugged on by the Beetle. He had a frantic, panicked look in his eyes. The Beetle scuttled away from the action with Goodey at his heels, dodging soldiers carrying equipment, ducking out of the sight of the commanding officers. "Here! Come here, come here! "The Beetle beckoned him over. "We have to hide it! It's too important!" he pulled out the sieve from under his jacket. "Quick Nurse! Help me to dig a hole!" In a trance, Goodey followed.

At the mention of his nickname, his horribly absurd nickname, in this horribly absurd circumstance, Goodey snapped back into reality. He was not where he was supposed to be. He was supposed to be in the first line. The first one to charge. The first one to face the enemy head-on. ATTACK! ATTACK! ATTACK! – that was the motto of the 133rd. He whispered it to himself: attack, attack, attack. He grabbed onto The Beetle. "Come on! Come on! We have to go back! We have to go back!"

Character looked up at him with great big eyes. The bug was afraid, trembling. He did not have the armor of a Tardigrade. He did not want to die. "Come back with me or they'll shoot you!" Goodey yelled. The Beetle bought this logic. They both knew what happened to deserters.

"He's here, - We're here!" Goodey yelled. No one heard them. It was too late. The first line had already gone. The first line had already died. Soldiers charged unknowingly into the fray and were greeted with a volley of bullets and bayonets. They barely had time to think of their deaths. The second line was not so lucky.

“Attack! Attack! Attack!”, the Sergeant yelled, finally putting their slogan to good use. “Attack! Attack! Attack!” they had all cried a thousand times before. “Attack! Attack! Attack!” They had it written on banners above their bunks, marched to it in the cold midwestern rain, doodled in the margins of their letters home, wore it as a badge of honor. And now it was collecting on the charge.

Goodey watched as the next line of soldiers charged. Matchbox was among them, and Goodey just saw a glimpse of him disappear over the wall before his body flew back and fixed itself on the barbed wire. The rest of the second line met the same fate as the first. Bullets hit them so fast that there was barely any time for a squelching noise, and then fell right on top of the bodies of those who charged before them. Corpses left with nowhere else to go began falling back into the trench.

“Places! Places! Come on!”

They lined up. The third line. Goodey felt his boots trapped in the mud. He could not stop staring at the corpse of Matchbox – still draped over the top of the trench, bullet-ridden and permanently frozen with a terrifying grin, as if he was still laughing at Character, dropping mud on his glasses a lifetime ago. His lighter fell out of his pocket and made a thud in the mud. It was the thud that knocked Goodey’s boot free. He lined up in his assigned spot; where he should have been standing in the first line. But a man was already there. Between the man, Goodey, and Character it was a tight squeeze.

“Steady men...Steady...” The Sgt. yelled.

I am told that when you are about to die, time comes to a still. Most of us are told that actually; it is shown in the pictures, reflected on in novels and therefore taken to be true. The hero is about to die, so he takes a moment to reflect, to relive, to pray.

Time miraculously concedes to him. It is one of the nicer truths we have, that time will concede to us, just for a second, before it drags us under. But that's the job of us writers - to make nice truths from life's unpleasantries.

If you would like, I could tell you that time stopped for Goodey here too. I could tell you that he had a moment, right before the end, to remember the smell of his mom's apple pie, baked just especially for his seventh birthday. Or, if you prefer, I could tell that he saw a great big picture of the great big war, saw his place in it all, saw his life lost for the greater good and was filled with bravery and valor, and fought to the very end. I can tell you all sorts of things about death, and war, and Tardigrade superpowers. Or, if you'll allow it, I will simply end Goodey's story with this:

The Sgt.'s voice rang out across the front lines. "Attack! Attack! Attack!" he screamed, "Attack! Attack! Attack!" The five-cent pocket-knife felt heavy in Goodey's pocket. He said a quick prayer to the Tardigrade. He moved the mask away from his face and took a deep breath of the foul, rotten air. Matchbox was right, he thought, he would have to have a closed casket – the smell really was inescapable. But that was for his mother to worry about.

Riverbeds

We were walking by the river. I was six –maybe seven – I don't remember now. My father was quiet. I had hardly known him to be quiet before or since. It was an endlessly gray day - the sky stretched out in expanses - an oppressive blanket smothering the world. It was warmer than it should have been. There was a high bridge crossing the river covered in graffiti. The rocks were too big beneath my feet. My father picked one and skipped it. A tired tradition, this time lacking heart. It bounced twice, smacking the water.

He asked me about my cousin Jack. I do not remember the words now. He must have asked if I remembered meeting him. I did not. I wandered the shore, looking for the perfect stone to skip.

In words, I cannot remember he told me about Jack. He told me how our bloodlines crossed in a precarious family tree. He explained to me that Jack was sick, although I am sure he did not use that term. He told me he was kind and young and how he used to smile. He told me about his tenth birthday party and the way he brushed his hair and how they sat in the boathouse one time long ago. He told me he was someone I should care about. He told me that they found him at the bottom of a riverbed. I am sure he did not use that term.

I picked up my perfect rock and threw it at the water. It did not skip but clunked noisily beneath the water.

He told me Jack liked animals a lot. I am not sure of the rest, but I remember the bit about the animals.

Lemon Chicken

One morning, quite to your surprise, you awake to realize you have slowly started to disappear. It starts with your pinky toe. You go to open your window as you do each morning, to let in the hum of the city into your claustrophobic apartment, and, upon getting out of bed you stumble a little. Looking down you see the problem; On one foot five toes – on the other, only four. You are quite alarmed by this, but you are already late to work so you do not give it proper thought. Work is very hard, and no one listens to your ideas so by the end of the day you have forgotten about the problem entirely.

The next day the toes form your other foot start to disappear and you are forced to address the issue. In the elevator, you worry about this briefly but reassure yourself that one does not really need pinky toes and that as long as you wear socks no one is likely to notice. Like most difficult things, you do not like to think on this too long, so you buy yourself a soft pair of slippers, and let all the rest of your toes disappear in the same way.

A week later the tips of your ears start to go. You decide to grow your hair out to cover this, and the decision comes not a moment too soon as before both your ears are gone. The noises swing about on the subway chaotically and you are forced to buy a pair of large, over-ear headphones that never stay on properly.

Your legs begin to disappear next. At first, it is just the left one, so you get on fine for a while, although your pants fit funny and you keep bumping into people as you walk. Your body stumbles now from places to place, and you must hold yourself up like a ragdoll. This is quite an embarrassment and, dismayed by the increase in attention this

causes, you begin to work from home. Your boss doesn't mind. "Didn't you already work from home?" he asks, not looking up from his computer. "No, that was Janet from accounting," you quietly respond. "Huh?" he says. You leave the room in lieu of a response.

Once you are home it is impossible to leave. You are amazed at the number of things Amazon delivers. You buy many, and they stay unpacked in boxes by your doorstep. (Doing things while you disappear is very hard, you realize.) Cooking is difficult as well, so you eat a lot of take-out as well. Chinese mostly – your favorite. Given your condition, you afford yourself the luxury of Chinese food every night. The delivery boy does not recognize you, though he is at your apartment almost every evening. You try tipping him extra – 70% one time even (what is the point, you reason, of saving money at a time like this) but it is no good. He does not even flinch when your second leg goes, and you are forced to hobble to the door on the makeshift crutches you created from a barely used mop and broom. You tell yourself that it is not personal – this is just New York and people are just like that here.

Grapefruit

Grapefruit, red and juicy.

Petals, falling.

Grapefruit. sour. cold.

Just nouns.

(All that’s left are nouns.)

Grapefruit with sugar, sour and cold.

A river to swim in.

Cannot,

will not swim.

Cannotwillnotswim.

Thud thud thud. Squish and squelsh.

I always liked the worms you know.

Grapefruits, too many. Ate on a Tuesday.

I ate, but unwilling. Each pip, choking down.

Buttons.

Pink, like my shirt, like a grapefruit.

Sour. Always sour. Even with sugar on top.

Buttons, so tender.

Tender buttons of course.

Tender buttons undone,

By hands pink and sour.

Can’t won’t think there.

Cantwont.

River. flowers. Sinking. swim.

(cantwontswimcantwontswim)

Bridge. High.

Almost almost.

It is snowing.

Pure and white.

White and hands and sugar plain.

Cantgowontgo.

Focus. Grapefruit.

faster faster. Move past it now.

Breath and cold.

Bridge and you.

Apples for breakfast.

Promise?

Dormancy

It was the day after my husband died when the vines began to grow from my mattress. On that first morning they were small –barely a millimeter thick. I brushed them off my pajamas and I dressed. My bed was damp with tears and that is what I believe to have caused their sprouting. We got the mattress together, one of those fancy memory foam types – now a perfect soil. We laid on it together at the store. Let's take a nap here, I said. Ok, he replied, but you know you're on my side, right?

By three days in they began to resemble morning glories. Soft green tendrils sprang from the mattress and worked their way up our bedpost. A small, white flower bloomed next to where he used to brush my hair back to kiss me. I plucked it, careful to leave the stem long, and brought it to the funeral. As they lowered him into the ground, I twirled it impatiently between my fingers, *round* and *round* and *round*.

Later the evening, my sister brought me an unfortunate looking casserole. She saw the vines then and suggested that I cut them away. It's unhealthy, she said. They're dirty. But couldn't wait to lay back down again, surrounded by my own personal garden.

I woke up to find that the vines had grown overnight becoming as thick and strong as tree branches. They covered not only the bed but my body as well, pinning me into the mattress. They twisted around my legs with rough tendrils. They hugged my shoulder and pinned down my wrists. The branches reached up to the ceiling ripe with wisteria. I did not struggle but let them pin me in place, enjoying the pleasant smell

floating off the flowers. Every now and then a breeze would blow in from the still open window and the petals would scatter, covering the room in lavender snow.

Caught with in the comfort of the plants, my room began to collect dark spaces. Shadows filled in the corners of the walls and the room grew smaller. I let mold creep in on damp clothing, and fester in his undrunk cup of coffee. Our bright yellow painted walls began to grow black with spots. The safety of my garden became my blessing, and soon I could not tell my own body from the vines. One afternoon, when the light was long and golden, the vines gave me a present. A little golden apple sprouted from a branch near my shoulder. It was sweet when I ate it – as it had been waiting for me for a long while. The vines took care of me, as I took care of them.

He liked to sleep with the window open. Said it was too hot otherwise. In the mornings, he would wake up with the sunrise. On the day it was cloudy. I watch his soft breathing on the pillow. A breeze came in, cold and bright, and on it - a small seed fell onto his forehead. I picked it gently and buried it under the covers so it would be mine and mine alone.

Curtains

Truth: I used to watch my mother sew in the evenings.

She had to hem every single one of her pants, and I wondered why they would ever sell pants that were much too long. I copied her– lopsided pillows and toys from scraps of fabric. I can still feel the course thread between my fingertips, and the prick of the needle, sharp and cold.

Lie: I will never write a story that is true.

In and out the words weave. They fall, in uneven lines on each side of an empty page. Unbothered.

Truth: I started off as yellow.

A yellow top. Pretty blue jeans.

A black-eyed Susan, almost orange, bloomed in my front garden.

My bedroom walls, never cold.

Painted by a set of loving hands.

Lie: I can still smell the must.

That deep black mold that crept through the windows and into my lungs while I was sleeping.

Staying up too late, listening to the voices float down the hall.

Truth:

A sun and a moon reluctantly kissed on my ceiling, diving the room into night and day.

My books lived there, as many as I could find.

Pages dog-eared, read and re-read.

Earned from too-late nights hiding under my blanket with a flashlight.

(You'll ruin your eyes, my mother said, and on the living room light for me. She was right, of course, and now I wear thick-framed, glasses.)

Lie: Way up high in an only child's bunk, a pair of starry quilts curtains hung where my sister should have slept. Hand sewn by my mother, who had to stitch together scraps of fabrics collected from a thrift store and thrift store, joining together one by one by one.

She made me a dress once, from shiny purple fabric that I loved way too dearly. It fit all wrong and becomes another set, reflecting the sunlight on to my pillow.

Truth:

My mother cut her hand once, trying to strain pasta through a cheese grater. The next day I bought a strainer for a quarter and wore it home on my head like a crown.

Lie: I love the way black-eyed susans bloom in the springtime.

Expectations

The plastic will be an awful shade of teal. It will stick to your thighs and make a loud squelching sound when you stand up. Across from you sits a young woman, a tan sweater stretched over her much larger belly. You will wish you were her and not you, well past her first trimester, with young hips and an upturned nose. You will be embarrassed; first by the sound, second by the taste of your upcoming lunch, and third when the doctor asks why you are here.

Now - now is 20 years before. Now you are laying in the soft mud of the riverbank, waiting for newts to appear. The lights fall through the doilied fennel flowers, and wind blows their shadows across your face. To your right, your father is smoking. You watch him make great big clouds in the air and you name them as they float by. One looks like a fat cat, a dragon, a bed, a bottle.

In the future, Doctor Ponytail is watching you hurl into a pink plastic bin. She will ask you a bunch of questions you do not know how to answer. Your husband will give your foot a reassuring pat. You will swallow, and tell her about your feeling, how it sits in the pit of your stomach. You will tell her how this problem runs in the family. She will mutter little uh huhs under her breath and listen with dead eyes. You will watch her red hair swinging like a pendulum, back and forth, back and forth.

Your father lifts you and swings you to the ground. You put your hands out like a gymnast, in a triumphant finish. It is getting late he says, but you want to say longer. You insist on sticking your face in each flower, kissing it before you go. The Queen

Anne’s lace smells like your grandmother’s perfume. He cuts it for you with a pocketknife, so you can put it by your bedside at home.

The doctor will explain to you that she cannot treat just a feeling. She will tell you that it is common for expecting mothers to be nervous. She will list off her memorized med school facts and tell you not to worry. She will ask your husband if you are prone to anxiety. You will stop for strawberry milkshakes on your way home.

You see the wiggle rock just before you leave the riverbank. You grab his hand and run up to it pointing. Turn it over you tell him in an excited whisper. He does and a newt scurries out darting into the bushes. See? you say, I knew there was something there! I knew it! I knew it.

Eggs

We were going to have eggs but you dropped them: dropped the carton the dozen from the back of the car: our car your car except the one payment so I own a 17th of it I joke, the white car that we got dirty: dirty from those backroad drives trying to find you another carton of eggs that morning: morning in the forest there were no stores for miles slept in the passenger seat you snored made fun of my nightmares but held my hand just the same windows down mountains and trees and stars but no eggs for your breakfast, so we ate dirty apples, stole firewood from the stand, you made us put it back I will always love you for making us put it back even though we were cold that night: cold so cold, the tops of the trees watching us sleep–sleep I never could stay up with you fell asleep in your arms even before the moon came out but how far we went under stars tattooed on my ribcage you held my hand I left scars on your hand that you carried across the world with me to foreign beaches with foreign tongues and us sneaking in: into the beach our beach the rich resort beach with cheap grocery wine not too sweet, I cannot drink sweet wine with you, and you when it rained how you yelled, we both yelled shouted at all the stars on my ribcage and all those beyond biking home with wet wind in our hair, rushing passed sprayed painting paintings, but I rushed ahead, left–turned to go too quickly, and you behind, always to follow but what do I care when we have rosé and cold and rain and all dozen eggs laying smashed open with yellow yolks frying on the hot pavement.

The Boy King

We didn't expect to find it *there*. We didn't expect to find it at all, but if we did, then certainly not *there. There* was no place for a baby.

There was the dumpsters behind the 7/11 on 18th street, which were laid out in a semicircle, with a large space in the center-a place for us to laugh, and fight and eat shoplifted candy - our still short bodies hidden away from the busy street. We loved it *there. There* safely hidden away from the watchful eyes of the adult world. *There* was our secret, our temple, our sanctuary and on that afternoon, *there* was the place that we had all met to see the porn magazine one of us had swiped from his older brother. The ten of us crowded around anxiously; we had heard about the magazine for weeks and were anticipating its reveal when we heard the cry.

"Didya guys hear something?" the smallest and roundest of us asked and looked around nervously.

"Shuddupwouldya", we all thought, and one of us said, transfixed on what was going to be our first steps into the pubescent world. But then we heard it again, and let the magazine fall to the side, distracted by this new pressing mystery. We investigated where he was pointing, ears perked, one finger on his nose like Old Man Lumpkin's fat golden retriever, who wobbled a little with each step on that rare occasion when Lumpkin would take him out hunting. We tip-toed carefully, towards the far end of the rusty blue dumpster, holding our breath.

It sat fat and round in a scratched-up KING brand carrier, chewing on its fist, a drool dripping from its chin. A tattered purple blanket lay around its chubby legs. The

very tips of its tiny toes peeked out from the bottom. Its white onesie was stained a little, but the baby did not seem to mind. He stared out at us, as we stared at it, in stunned awe of each other, these two living worlds colliding; us and it in the most unlikely spaces of time and place, none of us knowing what to make of it, and it naturally, not knowing what to make of us, as in all our time between us neither of us had encountered a sight like the other–something so strange, so bizarre–that later our minds would race, thinking of all the ways we could tell the story; especially to redhead Suzie Smith, whom we all loved, but who did not love us, but would change her mind when we approached her on the first day, and oh so casually said, "you'll never guess what we found over the weekend," and surely she would love us after that; but for the time being, our brains could barely think of that glorious moment, so consumed we were by the baby in front of us, so we leaned in closer in awe of him like Jesus in the manger, never had we been so struck like this before, until this baby locked his glassy eyes upon ours, gazed into our very selves, and then, broke the profound silences with a fart, so loud it seemed to echo off the very earth below us, and make even the seagulls in the parking lot take a turn, which the baby then followed up with a toothless smile, and a bit of spit dribbling down his chin.

"I like him, "someone said, and we all muttered in agreement.

"What should we call him?" It was then that all our eyes locked onto the faded red KING lettering on top of the carrier, and no one needed to say it out loud because we all knew and made a pact right there that he would be called King from then on. With a name and a title we knew then he was ours, one of us, both our leader and our own. We circled around and crossed our hearts with X's, promising then and there that

he was our brother – never to be abandoned to the adult world that was at that time nothing but our cruelest, coldest enemy.

Once the sugar hit our brains and our legs grew impatient, we left the parking lot together carrying King along. We moved down the sidewalk in a great bulge, crawling and pulsing, so if you were to view of us from above we would appear to be one great creature, an amoeba in a microscope, at once both very large and at the same time infinitely aware of our smallness, so insignificant we were to the great cosmos of the street. We did not belong to the suburban fathers who glared at us from porches as we trod on the edge of their freshly cut lawns, pushing each other and vying for the chosen spots on the sidewalks. Nor did we belong to those makeuped mothers, whose fluttering eyelashes pitied us from rearview mirrors. No, we belonged to a different breed of children than theirs, those whose fathers' worked long hours at the mill or at the bottle; those whose mothers' faces were marked only by the bruised kisses of hungry lips, with front yards swimming in toys and cans and dried up grass, such was our belonging and as such we belonged to no one; held only accountable to each other and the wild pacts we made between us: to not hit below the belt, nor kiss each other's sisters, to share always our lunches, excepting dessert, and now too, to take this baby, and name him King.

As we reached the edge of town the streets faded from the bustling sterility of the suburbs into wild open countryside. The trimmed houses transformed, giving way to gleaming trailers, first double then single wide, and as the cracks in the sidewalk grew, the ground felt friendlier beneath our feet. The border between worlds was marked by the last square of broken sidewalk, whose edges crumbled into the brown footpaths we

had trudged ourselves, following the footsteps of years of wild boys who had made the journey before us. The line between sidewalk and dirt, between the adult and our own, was one that tradition dictated must be jumped across and we passed King carefully between us as we made the leap. The grass was tall, past our waists after almost a full summer of neglect so we held King's carrier high above our heads snaking through the golden fields, marching in tow, and singing our fathers' old army tunes that increased in volume with each step. The field carried on for eternity until it didn't, and we spread out in a long row facing the edge of the orchard, the one in the middle holding King's carrier above his head so the baby could see what lay before us; miles and miles of squat shaded filbert trees, planted in dizzying parallel lines.

Upon sight of the grove our wildness returned to us; everyone ran forward but the boy carrying the baby, who kept King's carrier high, his elbows quaking under the weight. We hollered, crying wild howls that carried through the trees and were lost into them, echoed back only by each other. We kicked and jumped, brayed and screamed, and yelped with joy; all the noises of boyhood freedom sweeping across the endless grove. Our feet ran too slow below us, lagging behind our lanking bodies that pushed forward in the thick air, willing ourselves into the squat shadows of the tree. We ran until we could push no further, and with heavy lungs and feet until, like rain in a summer's storm, our voices trickled off and one by one we watched them float away, dripping upward through the canopy of leaves, and out into the sky beyond.

Whether startled by the noise or the silence that followed, once our voices disappeared the baby let out a cry, a tremendous, screaming yell, higher and colder than our own communal howls. We placed the carrier in the nook of two sturdy branches and

we gathered around, our eyes wide. King cried on. One at a time we lined up trying to make the crying stop. One of us tried fixing his blanket, so he was snugly swaddled in a bundle of faded lavender cloth, one of us got close and made a face like a monkey, sticking out his tongue to try and make him laugh, and one of us just gave him a firm pat on the head. But it wasn't until the baby reached out a sticky hand at the last of our necks and grabbed tight to a seafoam pukka shell necklace that King was finally silenced. The necklace wearer tried to pull back—it took him a week of mowing lawns to earn the money to buy it at the mall—but the little hand gripped on tight, and eventually, he relented, taking it off so King could contently suck on each shell.

After that, we were inspired. Each of us wanted to present our own gifts to the boy King, so we shuffled around, searched pockets and found flowers and leaves and filberts from the ground. We stacked our offerings in his carrier, so many that they spilled out of the edge and onto the branches in which he was perched, King in the middle of it all, content in his throne.

"Let's give him the flag," someone suggested, and we all jumped and hooted at the thought. He pulled the flag from his backpack, a worn green bandana that we fought over each weekend and tied it to the handle of the carrier. King stared.

We broke in a familiar pattern, our great amoeba dividing into offensive and defensive ranks. After years of war, our commanding officers knew their places, a spot rightly earned by being the only two to own a pocketknife. We in the offense fanned out to the far edges of the battlefield, marked by a hand-drawn circle in the mud, the boundaries hard fought over the weeks now cemented permanently in our minds. Both

sides swept filberts from the ground in great armfuls and stuffed our pockets and socks with as many as we could carry.

We the defense climbed high into the treetops, and turned our shirts into pouches filled with nuts, preparing to bombard on the runners as they passed. Our commanders went to work with their knives, re-sharpening the ends of makeshift spears that were carefully curated, collected, and hidden within the hollowed trunk of our favorite tree. The rest of us painted ourselves in muddy camouflage, some with war stripes on our faces and arms, and one of us completely covered himself, head to toe, by diving face first into a mucky patch. Around King stood the guard, the tallest of us all, armed and ready to defend the flag. The round and tragically short one, who the rest of us had kindly let play the role of referee, let out a bird call–and the war began.

It was the best possible type of chaos. We the offense charged, and we the defense braced. Four of us on the offensive side charged screaming from the right of us defenders, pulling the enemy fire. We the defense were ready; first we bombarded them, emptying our t-shirt and great handfuls of filberts cascaded from the trees. The nuts bounced hard off the muddied hair of us attacking, and left our skin spotted with polka dots, growing ever redder by the second. We the offense whooped and cried as we ran, drummed our chests and darted between trees. We the defense were captivated. Once freed from our shirts of ammo, we jumped down like paratroopers, squatting as we fell, raising squinted eyes and pointed sticks for the attack. We the defense circled around them; speeding in swift circles and keeping our slim bodies just out of reach.

Eventually, the charade grew dull, and we pulled out spears of our own. We faced each other now, four on four, spears outstretched and prepared for a duel. No

longer soldiers, we now became our favorite pirates, and clashed our sticks, one on one, sending satisfying clanks that followed each other in a melody. We the offense, ever mindful, tip-toed backwards, drawing we on defense away from the flag. We the defense pushed further, our confidence growing with each clank. At once, we the offense shared a coy look, turned in perfect pirouettes, and set off sprinting into the darkness of the grove. The diversion was a success, and we the defense ran after, lured into a sense of our victory. Meanwhile, on the offensive left, the smallest, most quiet, most stealthy, most chosen one of us all, snuck around through the left side flank, creeping up behind the defensive guard, ready to steal the flag away. But the guard was sharp-eyed and noticed the approach. Both caught the flag at the same time and pulled on it, rocking King's carrier in the struggle. One of us pulled, and the other one pulled harder, back and forth until in a tremendous heave the flag shot out, and King's carrier flipped forward tipping from the false security of the tree trunk. Flowers and leaves and brightly colored shells flew up into the air and showered a waterfall around King, who half somersaulted from the carrier and fell, headfirst to the ground, his chubby legs sticking up into the air.

The silence that followed was the quietest we ever heard: softer than the harsh hush of the school librarian, stiller than our moonlight kitchen counters that trapped us in their tranquility when we went for a midnight glass of water, smaller even than the smallest of the great spherical zeros penciled in the corners of our school papers; we felt a deep drop in all of our stomachs; a dizzy buzz suspended in the air as we bristled under the coldness of the wind, noticed the shadows growing greater, and felt a deep longing for our mothers' kisses on our foreheads, for a plate of her worst meatloaf, and

the familiar reassurance of a grounding or a belt, anything to displace any blame for King's fall, no, we reassured in our minds the fall had not been our doing—could not have possibly been our fault, for it wasn't before then, nor even after, then and only then in that sordid silence that we felt wholly, horribly, and gratefully how young we were: we could not talk, we could not move until: a breath, a twitch, and little wiggle, and a cry. The baby wailed once again.

One of us rushed to pick him up, and we all helped shove him securely back in his upturned throne. Without a word, we grabbed the carrier, more carefully this time, and began the long trek back to town. As we moved through the field, the grass whipped in the wind and stung our knees. We lazily stepped over the sidewalk crack, and fell back into the adult world, each of us lost in our own thoughts, forcefully filling our battered minds with daydreams of naval warships, Suzie Smith's hot pink jumper, or the best way to display our growing bottle cap collection. We all thought too, the exact same thought, though none of us said it out loud, but when we reached the quiet comfort of the 7/11 dumpster hideout, each boy needed only to look at each other, nod in understanding, and then take his leave.

The last of us stayed as long as he could. But the sun was going down and we had all promised our mothers on our lives we would not stay out after dark. So, when it was finally time, I gave King one last salute, turned, and took off running into the painted horizon, my shoes making loud smacks on the concrete as I went.

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