Honors Program

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Stuck

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Artist’s Statement

Throughout my life, I’ve been an observer, which, although it has marked me as slightly creepy at times, has also led to an understanding and interest in people. I enjoy listening to people’s conversations, learning about their life histories, and watching them as they simply go about their days. When writing, I try to present characters that are realistic and try to create settings that echo the world in which we find ourselves every day. The world can be beautiful and exciting or horrifying and full of pain, but the lives I work to create for my characters do not hit either extreme. They are very much the lives of many contemporary Americans, caught between levels of relative comfort, but also facing (and sometimes failing to recognize), an equally present level of meaninglessness and routine. While I try not to make these themes overwhelmingly obvious in my work, these ideas are always present in my mind as I put my pieces together.

The type of character I most enjoy creating is no hero, no one seemingly worthy of praise or admiration. My characters are the type of people who are easily forgotten, the person behind you in the line at the grocery store or people you pass when you’re driving. They are the insignificant, but ever-present “extra” in everyone’s life. This is what draws me to them. People often view others as background characters in their own life story, but these characters have lives of their own, dreams and ideas and routines. Of course, these background characters can turn out to be fascinating and successful people, but more often than not, they are regular folks working nine to five and going about their business unnoticed. I like normal people. People who jump into burning buildings to save babies or people who spend their lives working to solve world hunger are infinitely admirable, but the life of the average Joe intrigues me in a way that these extraordinary people can’t. The fact is, most people lead quiet lives of routine, and many more
go without any kind of recognition in their lives. What that routine means, and how people react to it, are subjects of great interest for me.

The intricacies of work life, particularly when it pertains to offices, are also subjects I enjoy exploring. People are not themselves when they are at work, and almost seem to have to separate themselves from their own personalities in order to go about their jobs with relative ease. In my short story, “Flight,” my protagonist takes no joy in his job and is surrounded by people who are also caught in the system. The workplace warfare, the relationships between workers, and the general organized insanity of a building full of cubicles all offer some perspective on Americans as a whole and how work affects them. People working in close quarters separated by walls seem to have unique ideas about and relationships with the strangers that surround them. They have an opportunity to be close, but often they only know gossip about the people they’ve worked with for years.

In “Flight,” I tried to present a character who was likeable, if almost entirely oblivious to the world around him. Carl is a middle-aged office worker and is, by all accounts, a loser. His wife leaves him, he works at a place full of people who are entertained by his misery, and in the end, he is left with a feeling of hopelessness, even after his brief experience with a parrot that disrupts up his dull routine. I tried to present the parrot as a force that makes him to stop and look at his life, causing him to experience a rush of feeling that is new to him. Suddenly, instead of a drone who works all the time, Carl becomes a man who reveals that he wants meaning in his life. When he is presented with a confusing situation, instead of bringing the parrot to the humane society, he decides that he is meant for something greater than he previously anticipated. I feel many people are often struck by this belief. Everyone holds onto the hope that they are meant for something more, that they are special in a way that will be revealed eventually. This a
constant idea in life, as children dream of being royalty from a foreign land, being merely
adopted for the time being until their true identity and strengths are revealed. We love superhero
movies because we want to be superheroes ourselves. We are interested in power and uniqueness
and magic because we all hope to someday discover our true abilities, to be justified in our
feelings of individuality or strangeness, so we fantasize being whisked away from our lives,
finding our true place and meaning somewhere else. When the parrot appears to Carl, it is his
chance to redeem his life and try something new. As it flies out of the window at the end of the
story, he is left in the same place he began: alone and uninspired, left with only the image of the
bird flying over the city.

In the short story, “Haunting,” I tried to create a character who was trapped in a different
way, although similarly stuck in a rut. Instead of being ushered into the afterlife and
experiencing eternal bliss, the protagonist is trapped in a mundane place with regular people until
he fades away. I was inspired by Bill Henderson’s short story, “Phantoms,” which won a
Pushcart Prize in 2012. I liked the idea of blending real life with something mystical in order to
create greater effect and meaning, and I worked to stay as realistic as possible about my
character and his dilemma. It was difficult to create this character, and the story itself seemed to
get away from me at times. This was a piece I wanted to make beautiful, and I tried to write it
without using much dialogue, because that sometimes functions as a crutch for me. I wanted it to
be an internal journey for the character, without relying as much on other characters and dialogue
to speed things along. Still, as I was writing, I felt that the piece was falling flat without dialogue.
Halfway through, I think it’s easy to see my shift into my old patterns. Suddenly there is
dialogue and other characters, even though there seems like there shouldn’t be. Their presence
reads to me like an afterthought, which I hope isn’t too obvious for the readers.
“Haunting” also marks my journey into magical realism, which is a first. It was fun to work with a new style that allowed for greater possibilities. When a main character is a ghost, the possibilities are endless. I could decide how the afterlife worked, what it was like to be a ghost, and the character’s world became even easier for me to control. Instead of simply dropping a character in an office where there are established rules and ideas, I was working with a concept that almost allowed too much freedom. Trying to get everything to make sense and give the audience enough information so as not to leave them with too many questions about the state of affairs was difficult. In a way, this was fun and exciting, but I needed more time to improve my ideas. In the end, I feel like I focused too much on my ghost’s afterlife, and not enough on his life, which is more important to me.

“The Hole” is a story that really meant a lot to me as I was writing it. It is based, in part, on an experience during my own childhood, and I enjoyed trying to weave those realistic details together to form this story. While it might at first seem vastly different from the first two pieces in this collection, I feel that the characters have more in common than even I realized when I was writing them. The protagonist in “The Hole” is very young, and dealing with a loss that pushes her to try and break out of the routine of grief. The hole that the main characters dig together gives them something to keep their minds off of the present. It is a separate world, a task that allows them some form of escape. Focusing more on the natural world, this piece also leaves the confines of man-made structures and allows the characters to find a connection and solace in the outside world.

“Concessions” is one of the more recent stories I have written, and I tried to present the feeling of restlessness that accompanies youth in a small town. Growing up in a small town can make a young person feel very limited, and the need to escape is always present. The main
character, Jenna, is desperate to get out of a place that she feels she knows too well. While going to the city seems to alleviate her sense of being trapped, she must return to her hometown in the ending of the story, putting her back into the routine that stifles her. In this piece, I wanted to show that the sense of waiting and the overwhelming need to escape are not limited by age.

One of my goals is to create something beautiful and humorous at the same time. I try to work beautiful language into my work, but often end up scrapping it for a witty line or observation. I feel that I am often split between two voices, and always seem to end up going with the easier choice. Figuring out which way I want to go in a piece—poetic or humorous—often comes into play when I start writing a short story. In “Haunting,” I tried to find a balance between these two ideas. A constant goal is to create stories that are both beautifully written using humor, although I often find that it is difficult. Still, I don’t think that it is impossible. Two writers who I really admire for their ability to blend these two styles are Tobias Wolff in his short story, “Bullet in the Brain,” and Antonya Nelson in her novella, “Family Terrorists.” Both pieces of fiction showcase wit alongside moving, beautiful prose, and the effect is close to what I wish to accomplish. The stories, “Concessions” and “The Hole,” were my attempt at presenting something without merely relying on humor. While the characters in those pieces are much younger than the characters I typically create, I tried to show the listlessness and sense of waiting that can occur during different stages of life.

I also feel that sometimes my characters are too similar. Carl and the ghost are characters who are losers stuck in their own ways, either by a job, obliviousness or by eternal fate. They are both middle-aged and desperate without realizing it, struggling through their experience sloppily and without much insight. I often wonder if this is because there is something I want to say that I haven’t yet been able to. Perhaps these characters are just various incarnations of an idea that has
yet to be fully realized. Still, I hope that the characters are original and entertaining enough that the stories are worth reading and examining. I also try to create background characters that have different personalities or ideas, and hope that this helps keep the stories fresh and different.

In the first two pieces, I show the lives of two schmucks who can’t seem to “get it together.” I was compelled to write them because I feel like I’m in the same boat. What’s to stop any one of us from becoming someone who goes to work day after day, watching life go by without realizing that it’s passing? “The Hole” and “Concessions” show that even young people can experience this feeling, needing to escape from their own types of routines, desperate for some kind of change that will propel them into a future that can finally offer them different possibilities. These ideas are terrifying, but by writing, I feel like there is an escape from this dread. Writing breaks up my routine because there are always new characters to create, settings to describe, and details to bring a story to life. Also, these stories are simply fun to write. There’s nothing I like more than creating a story that is funny or moving and keeps people reading. When that happens, I can tell myself I’ve done a good job and feel satisfied.
Flight

When Carl told his coworkers he had to bathe his cat instead of meeting them for drinks, they knew it was just another of his poorly thought out excuses not to hang out with them. He had given many such excuses in the past. Once, caught almost entirely off guard when invited for Margarita and Movie night (a rather exclusive office event, to which he had, rather to his relief, never before been invited), he said that he had to be fitted with a new wig. This came as a shock to Sherie, especially considering that Carl had a full head of hair. Luckily for Carl, Sherie was used to his reclusive nature and ridiculous lies, and merely hummed a few chaotic notes before rushing off to extend her next invite.

Carl was not the type of coworker who would typically be invited to these gatherings. He could best be described as resembling a pear a week after the final day it could have been eaten, sadly plump and generally bearing the demeanor of someone who knew that he was no longer desirable. His conversations mainly consisted of complaints about the vending machine, particularly the B2 row, which had been broken for weeks and, on his last attempt, had caught his favorite bag of chips. The snack dangled just slightly off the metal hook and was perceived as a constant insult to Carl, who stared at it while suffering through the chips from the B5 row, which were not a worthy substitute.

His sudden rise in popularity was a direct result of Leslie, the woman from three cubicles down and one to the left, getting a divorce. Murmuring levels in the office, which consisted mainly of Type A, middle-aged women, suddenly reached new levels. As one of the few single men in the office, Carl suddenly became an object of interest. Of course, he didn’t notice, instead attributing the looks he was receiving to the silver-dollar sized mustard stain on the front of his
tie. Self-consciously, he flipped the tie around so that the front faced him and hoped no one else would notice.

Carl had been married before, in the days he would often describe as “ancient history” before chuckling at his own cliché and staring at his stapler, which never chuckled back. His wife, Debra, had carried on a relationship with the mailman for years without Carl noticing. He had just assumed she was enthusiastic about current events, and even took pride in the way his wife eagerly awaited her latest copy of some housekeeping magazine, assuming she was intent on learning the latest strategies for vacuuming area rugs or dusting those decorative African vases she insisted on buying to make the living room seem more exotic.

Of course, if Carl had been paying attention, he would have witnessed the way Debra treated the mailman, letting her hand rest a second too long on his hairy wrists, seductively brushing the post-office sanctioned finger protector enclosing his right thumb, the way she tenderly held the letters he handed her. He paid no attention to the excessive amount of junk mail their household received, unaware that Debra signed up for everything she could to guarantee a visit. Carl simply didn’t notice her fall in love, blocking his view of the world with a day-old newspaper. The day she finally left him he was standing in the kitchen wearing the apron his grandmother had left him, and he simply stammered, “But I’ve thawed a roast for dinner!” It was too late, however, and he watched as Debra climbed into the mail truck with the suitcases she’d used for their honeymoon. The last Carl heard, she was married to their mailman and living in another town. Apparently she’d always wanted to be a postmaster’s wife. She let Carl keep the dusty African vases.

When Carl got home from the office that night, his first order of business was to take off the tie that caused so many of his coworkers to stare at him throughout the day. He threw it in the
laundry basket and glared at it as it sat amid his similarly stained shirts and pants, vowing to be more careful when he ate his lunch tomorrow. He told himself he would also file a complaint at the cafeteria in his office, particularly citing the woman who crafted his usual bacon double cheeseburger for her overly enthusiastic use of condiments. That made him feel better, but for good measure, he also stomped around the house and slammed all of the doors, even though no one was around to hear it. He grinned savagely as he smashed the door closed on his least-favorite cabinet in the kitchen, rattling his wedding china. Plates coated in lasagna from three nights ago cowered in the sink, but, in a fit of mercy, Carl ignored those. Exhilarated by his abuse of the kitchen, Carl moved on to the rest of the house, feeling like a clean-shaven Genghis Khan.

That was how Carl found the parrot.

He had trudged down the narrow hallway and had just finished slamming the door to the guest bedroom with such meaningful force that the doorframe shook and, satisfied with his appropriately frustrated display, was ready to begin his post-work reclining when a voice called out to him.

“Hello?” it asked, coming from somewhere behind the shut door.

“Debra?” he said, opening it again and peering into the dark room. Instantly he hated himself for desperately hoping it was her. He knew it wasn’t Debra. Debra was somewhere sorting mail and drinking champagne with the damned postmaster. “Sharon?” he called instead. If, by some divine twist, his ex-wife was hiding in the back room, he wasn’t going to miss an opportunity to make her jealous.

“Sharon? Sharon? Pretty bird!”
“No, no, Debra, I didn’t mean it. You’re the only bird for me.” He flipped on the light switch. There, perched on the bed frame, was a bright red parrot. Carl quickly turned a similar shade. “You’re not Debra.”

“Debra! Debra! Pretty bird!”

Carl saw that the window was open and remembered back to the night before when a giant, spotted moth had followed him into the house after work. Terrified, he had spent fifteen minutes waving a plastic colander and spatula in the air, herding it to a room with a window. Once he finally cornered it in the guest bedroom, he opened the window and left, hoping nature would take its course. Now he cursed the open window and the moth for causing such trouble in the first place.

“What am I going to do with a parrot?” he asked.

The bird walked back and forth on the bed frame, but always kept one eye turned towards him. “Pretty bird! Pretty bird!” it said, and then used its beak to scratch its toes.

“And a vain bastard at that,” he said. He waved his hands in the air the way he saw the wildlife experts do on television. “Fly off now, Bird.”

The parrot responded by flying across the room and landing on a dresser drawer that was slightly open. Carl scolded himself for not reading the housekeeping magazines he still received in Debra’s name. Surely they would have had some article explaining what to do in a situation like this.

“Help!” the parrot called, using softer tones. “Please. Please help.”

Carl, caught off guard by the animal’s civility, vaguely remembered an article that claimed some birds were just as intelligent as human beings. And this bird was probably someone’s beloved pet. Someone had taken the time to teach this animal manners. It was refined.
It had even taken the initiative to seek help, choosing that particular open bedroom window out of all of the windows on the block to fly through. Perhaps the bird had chosen Carl for a reason. Maybe even though he was really bad at matching his socks and remembering to take the garbage can to the street on the right day, he was somehow particularly talented at helping the lost. Feeling slightly uneasy about the responsibility, Carl resolved to aid his unexpected guest.

"Um, hello there," he said, slowly stepping towards the dresser. "I'm a friend. I, uh, come in peace." He was overcome by his own diplomacy, but really just wanted to get to sitting in his chair. "What's your name, Bird?"

The parrot cocked its head to the side again, taking a moment to process the peace offering. "Bird!" it said after a long silence. It bit into the wood of the drawer and watched Carl as it tightened its grip.

Carl decided to ease into figuring out what the parrot's plans were. His guest probably just wanted to relax after what was undoubtedly a confusing night. "Well, Bird, I'm going to have my dinner. I'll leave you here in the guest room. The—well, the linens are clean. Or maybe you'd prefer I lay out some newspaper?"

To answer his question, the parrot opened its wings and flew across the room, landing nimbly on Carl's shoulder despite his panicked flailing. The green and blue tips of its right wing warmed the side of his cheek as it sat there, one eye peering into Carl's.

"If you like television," he said, taking a few cautious steps out of the guest bedroom, struggling once again to remember how the people on television handled birds in this situation, "you're welcome to join me." Certain it was signaling its approval, Carl sighed as the parrot bobbed its head.
In truth, pets were not Carl's strong suit. As a child, he had loved his family's white cat, Mittens. She was beautiful enough for mass-produced Christmas cards, and Carl reserved the honor of placing a bright red bow around the feline's neck in order to complete the family photograph that was sent out to relatives every year. His family never got over the fact that Carl forgot to let her back in after her usual Christmas Eve prowl one year, and when he heard her yowling over the sounds of the chestnuts he was munching for breakfast the next morning, he rushed to the door only to find her standing there, the tips of her pretty white ears frostbitten and down-turned. Carl cried when they fell off, leaving two jagged stubs to crown the top of her head, for he had assured everyone that they would return to normal and had taken it upon himself to monitor her progress. They kept her out of the photograph after that.

After his wife left him, Carl had tried his best to get over it. He answered the phone when his mother called and talked about the weather and his no-good Cousin Anthony's new tattoo and other things that mothers like to talk about, even listening as she listed the ways he could have prevented his wife from leaving him until losing his patience and setting the phone on the couch next to him until she was finished. He went to the park. He read magazines. He bought a fishing pole, swearing he would learn to fish, but eventually put it in the hall closet full of winter coats next to the vacuum cleaner that smoked when he used it.

Finally, desperate for another presence in his home, he'd purchased a Betta fish because it was the only one that looked even slightly alive in its little plastic cup and anyway it matched the color of the tablecloth in his kitchen. When Carl tried to put the fish into a new, roomier home, he missed the bowl and the fish flopped onto the plastic tablecloth, the blue of its fins unfurled on the table. Frantic, Carl swore loudly and tried to scoop his new friend up, but panic turned his hands to claws and when he finally did get the fish into the bowl its fins looked kind
of funny and one of its eyes had turned white. After that, he tried his best to avoid the kitchen table, feeding the fish when necessary, but really just trying not to cause another incident.

Carl couldn’t help but think of his track record with animals as he watched the parrot, wary as it walked back and forth on the arm of his chair. It stared at him instead of the television and Carl squirmed uncomfortably while eating a sandwich. Whenever he’d gotten a question wrong on Jeopardy, Debra had turned away from the screen to stare at him so he would know she was disappointed. Carl did notice that, but always turned a bright red and tried to pretend he wasn’t paying attention, struggling to answer the “Double Jeopardy” questions correctly in order to make up for the fact that he had no idea that the Volga is the longest river in Europe. But he never had the answers.

“I’m Carl, by the way,” he said, and gently raised a hand to stroke the bird’s wings, while offering it bits of crust. This seemed to appease the parrot, which ruffled its feathers and half-closed its eyes when the sandwich was gone. Carl followed the bird’s example, his full stomach and the excitement of the day taking its toll. “I’ll call in to work tomorrow, Bird, and try to get the day off.” Carefully, he reached out to stroke the bird’s wing, but stopped himself. “We’ll get you home,” Carl muttered, but the bird was already asleep and Carl soon followed.

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The bird was perched on his chest, pecking at a button on his shirt when Carl woke up that morning. For a moment he’d felt like it had all been a dream and let out a yelp when he saw the colorful creature peering up at him from his chest. It flew over the plaid sofa in the living room and swooped into the kitchen, landing on the table next to the fish bowl. It cackled at him in a mixture of parrot and English and ruffled its feathers in indignation. With a sigh, Carl
followed the parrot into the kitchen, wondering what it would be like to fly as he’d picked up the telephone and dialed into work.

After the usual amount of squabbling with the secretary, Carl was finally put through to Wendy, who sighed audibly before she greeted him. He tried to ignore that and explained the situation. When he told her about the parrot, Wendy was silent for so long that Carl wondered if she had set the receiver down and forgotten him. He rubbed the top of his head as he spoke, feeling uncomfortable in yesterday’s clothes. “I told you, Wendy, the parrot flew in through my guest room window last night. I can’t just leave it here and come into work.” He looked over at the bird, which watched the fish swimming crookedly in its bowl. “I really can’t come in today. I know I’m out of vacation days, but maybe just this once…” he trailed off. If he left the bird at his house, he was sure it was going to eat something or run into a window and meet a cruel end. He didn’t want to have to return a carcass to its owners. At least at his office he could watch it and make sure nothing horrible happened.

Wendy sighed. Carl could almost see her taking off her lopsided glasses and rubbing her eyes. “It’s one thing to tell lies to get out of parties, Carl. I get it. They’re not your thing. But lying in order to get out of work?”

“I’m not lying! I swear! I’m looking right at it.”

“Then, you know what, Carl? Why don’t you just bring the parrot to the office today? I’d love to meet it,” she said. “Maybe you can teach it how to file.”

Carl walked over to the bird and held out his hand. He didn’t know if parrots ate fish, but he owed it to the Betta to keep it from happening if that was the case. “I’m not sure an office is a very good place for a parrot. What if someone’s allergic?”

“We’ll chance it,” his boss replied. “I’ll see you in a few hours.” She hung up the phone.
Carl held the phone in his hand a few moments before putting it back on the receiver. The parrot nibbled at the chord and looked up at him expectantly. “I guess you’re coming to work with me, Bird,” Carl said.

Carl had long ago convinced himself that he liked his job, but typed and filed with neither passion nor relish. The cubicle he’d been assigned when he was hired had a postcard picturing the Grand Canyon tacked to the wall and Carl had left it up. He looked at it in between starting new paperwork and imagined himself there, riding a burro down the narrow ledges while taking in the majesty that surrounded him. Sometimes there was a beautiful woman seated behind him, pulling him closer for protection while complimenting his bravery. Sometimes not. While his coworkers’ walls were covered in pictures of family and drawings done by children, Carl had had only one picture of his wife at his office. She hated almost all of the pictures people took of her, always pointing out some flaw. A mole was too clearly evident. Her hair was out of place. You could see her pink bra strap. Carl finally just took one from a photo album, a picture of them at her great-uncle’s birthday party. In the picture, he was caught off-guard and looked like someone had made a joke at his expense. Debra was seated next to him but was partially turned away from the camera. Still, her hand gently gripped his forearm and he could see her wedding ring. When he was separated, he put that photo in the middle of some paperwork he no longer needed and placed it in the recycling bin on his way out of the office.

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Carl looked down at the cardboard box he was holding and tried to suppress a grimace. “Trust me, Bird, it’s easier this way,” he said. “I don’t want to look like a damn pirate walking in with you on my shoulder.”
The parrot scratched at the box, but Carl ignored it. On the drive to work, the parrot sat on Carl’s shoulder and chattered, turning around and sticking its tail in his face while letting out a series of impressed whistles. The bird genuinely seemed to be enjoying the car ride, or at the very least causing his host to be less than thrilled. When Carl finally got to the parking lot, it had taken nearly everything he had to get the bird into the cardboard box. Eventually he just tossed some mixed nuts he kept in the glove compartment into the bottom and the bird was distracted enough for Carl to close the top flaps.

“Ok,” he breathed. “I’m just a guy, walking into work with a cardboard box of...files or something,” he said, giving himself a pep-talk before stepping out of the elevator.

His office was filled with cubicles containing people trying their best to look like they were working. The air pulsed with the electric shiver caused by a number of computers working in an enclosed space and smelled like stale coffee and envelope glue. There was only one window on the side of the wall, and frustrated workers in need of a break often passed the time by looking out of it, even if half of the view was just the brick from the office next door. Keeping his head down, Carl walked past his coworkers to his desk, dodging people who were headed to the water cooler or the bathroom.

“Why, hello there, Carl,” a woman said as she darted around a corner, looking as if she’d emerged from behind a potted tree. It was Helen, the woman in the office best known for the Jell-o salad she brought to the community picnic every summer. Everyone hated it, but ate it anyway because her husband was fighting overseas and no one wanted to be viewed as unpatriotic. “TGIHD, right?” She laughed at Carl’s frown. “Thank God it’s hump day,” she said, “Get it? Wednesday?”
Carl tried to laugh in order to satisfy her enough to make her continue on her rounds, telling that nonsensical joke to everyone else in the office, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the bird in the cardboard box he was holding. “That’s a good one, Helen,” he said, even though he didn’t get it. He tried to go around her. “Wednesdays are pretty rough.”

Helen stepped in front of him again. “Did you hear about Leslie? Poor girl,” she said, trying to pique his interest. Helen’s ponytail was so tight it looked painful, but it gave her a look of authority, even though that authority was limited to controlling what toppings were on the pizzas they ordered for staff meetings.

“Ah, no, didn’t hear anything.” He wished he could just tell her to go away, but she was easily offended and could make his office life moderately uncomfortable using the connections she’d acquired as head gossip. Once, when a coworker failed to compliment her new shoes, Helen replaced the woman’s desk chair with one that had a broken wheel. It tilted slightly to the left for the rest of the time the person worked there. Carl didn’t want that kind of thing happening to him. He liked his desk chair.

Helen smiled, glad to have a fresh listener. Of course, even if Carl had heard the news, she would tell him again, just to feel the words escape her. “Poor Leslie is just a mess. She’s not taking her divorce well at all,” she said with a tone of mock-pity. “She had to go and cry in the bathroom twice before lunch yesterday.” She stood there, molding her face to appear the socially acceptable level of sad, but still open for the discussion of poor Leslie’s love life. When Carl didn’t follow up with a quick response about how awful it must be or how Leslie should invest in waterproof mascara if she was going to keep up that routine, Helen was disappointed. Suddenly her gaze shifted to the cardboard box in Carl’s hand. “What’s in the box?” she asked, needing to know.

Helen took a step forward and touched the flap on the top of it. “Why does it sound like there’s something moving in there?”

Before Carl could answer, the parrot shot out of the box, cackling with pride and excitement. “Carl!” it said as it smugly landed on its host’s shoulder.

Helen screamed. Carl put his hands over his eyes. This was the last thing he wanted. Causing a scene was unlike him. Half of the staff barely even knew his name. Now they peeked out of their cubicles to see what was going on.

“Quiet!” the parrot said, scolding Helen for her outburst. “Work! At work!” It lifted its wings and shook them out, glad to be out of the box.

Carl tried to stay calm. “I’m really sorry Helen,” he managed. “He’s quite friendly, I swear.” He reached up to the bird and stroked its chest. “He hasn’t even bitten me yet.”

Having regained her composure, Helen hissed, “Why would you bring that filthy creature into work?” Her ponytail looked tighter than ever.

“He’s actually quite clean. He’s always preening himself,” Carl replied. “I think he takes great pride in his appearance.” He was suddenly overcome with a need to protect his friend. After all, it was lost and in need of assistance. The bird didn’t need someone insulting him on top of that.

“What’s going on here?” their boss asked, suddenly appearing at Helen’s side. Wendy was the kind of woman who spoke in a way that sounded like she had seen everything and was terribly bored with the lot of it. Still, when she saw the parrot, her mouth dropped open and she only managed an “oh my” before shaking it off and remembering that she was the boss of
everyone. “You actually had a parrot, Carl?” She pushed her hair back in a way that reminded Carl of his ex-wife.

A number of workers had also stepped out of their cubicles and were now watching the scene unfold. Carl noticed Leslie, whose eyes were still red from what was probably her third trip to the bathroom that day to cry. Others at better vantage points simply swiveled their chairs around to watch Carl get fired. The last time something excited happened in the office, a piece of toast smoked so much in the break room that the fire alarms went off and everyone had to evacuate. Watching the downfall of a coworker would be much more exciting. And if the fire alarms went off for some reason and everyone had to evacuate again, it would probably be the most exciting thing that had ever happened in the office and would be talked about for years afterwards.

“Hello!” the bird said, greeting everyone. It whistled to show that it was impressed with the crowd that had formed. A woman with a large coffee stain on her pants giggled nervously.

Carl didn’t think it was helping. “You told me to,” he said to Wendy. “I told you I couldn’t leave it at home.”

Wendy raised her eyebrows. “Well you certainly can’t leave it here.”

“Why not? He’s not bothering anyone,” Carl said, but blushed a deep red when the parrot took the opportunity to show the extent of its musical abilities at the top of its lungs. Barry from accounting snorted with laughter.

Helen cleared her throat and stepped forward. “I don’t think you’ve thought through the consequences of bringing that creature here, Carl.” She turned to her co-workers. “It could easily attack one of us. Do you know how many germs are in a parrot’s talons?”

“Do you?” Carl asked, genuinely interested.
If the parrot picked up on the tension his host was experiencing, it didn’t show it.

“Germs,” it sang, happily. “Hello!”

Wendy sighed. “Just go put it in your car,” she said. “I don’t have time for this.” She pushed her hair back again and looked at her employees, frowning at no one in particular, but in a way that she hoped would inspire the greatest number of people to get to work.

“I can’t put him in my car, Wendy. This isn’t a dog.”

In response, the parrot barked like a dog, which Carl figured the bird must have picked up at its home. This was an awful time for it to start demonstrating tricks.

“Just let me go home,” Carl begged. “I’ll work twice as hard on Thursday.”

Helen scoffed and took a few steps towards Wendy. “You honestly don’t plan on rewarding this kind of behavior, do you?”

For a moment, their boss didn’t quite know what to do. She didn’t like being questioned, especially by the likes of Helen, who had started a rumor about her having to shave her mustache every morning. But she certainly couldn’t send Carl home. That was the kind of thing that made employees angry, and angry employees were difficult to deal with. Once, in an uncharacteristic display of mercy, she’d let one of her employees leave work early to catch the end of his kid’s baseball game, and the rest of the office nearly revolted, turning in papers late and with the staples making all of the pages crooked. She would not let something like that happen again. She rushed to a conclusion, knowing that she only had a few seconds before her authoritative silence would turn to indecisive silence and the whole effect would be ruined.

“Put it in your car, Carl,” Wendy said, “or I’m going to call animal control.”
Carl was stunned. He offered his left wrist to the bird, which obliged him and took a step onto it, squeezing his arm gently with its feet. The parrot looked up at him and made friendly clicking sounds with its beak.

“But I’m going to find its owners,” he said meekly and immediately regretted it when he heard Helen snicker.

“Animal control will find its owners for you,” Wendy answered, trying her best to sound soothing. “So go and sit at your desk and start working. I’ll take care of everything.” She glanced at the bird. “You can even let it stay with you until they get here. It shouldn’t be long.”

Unsure of what else he could do and knowing that he had lost, Carl shuffled to his desk. He hated himself for not being man enough to turn around and just walk out of the office, triumphantly carrying his friend to victory. But was it worth giving up his job? And, when he was searching for new employment, who would hire a guy who quit his last job for a parrot? Maybe letting people take the bird away was for the best. He threw himself down in his chair and the parrot hopped off of his wrist onto the desk. People from the dispersing crowd walked by, some slowing down enough so they could see Carl and maybe witness a bit of tear shed.

The looks they gave him reminded Carl of how his coworkers acted when he had first returned to work after Debra left him. Wendy had sent around a card on which a cat affirmed that everyone was thinking about him during his tough time. All of his coworkers signed it and spent the week peering into his cubicle, either offering sad smiles that said they were there for him between the hours of nine and five, or simply checking to make sure he hadn’t had some sort of breakdown, although some of them secretly hoped he had. Carl had tried not to pay attention to them and stared at his Grand Canyon postcard, imagining the burro and the cliffs again, only then Debra was the one holding him tightly.
Now he sat and looked at the parrot. The parrot looked back at him. Carl felt like he should say a few words, but figured anything he came up with would just come off as stilted and hollow. Mostly he just felt bad and fidgeted with his computer mouse.

“Hello! Pretty Bird!” the parrot called a bit too loudly. Leslie walked by and looked at it with sympathy.

“Hush now,” Carl said quietly. He decided to try and get some work done, but stopped eventually to wiggle his fingers at the bird, which lightly grabbed his thumb with its beak. They spent the next few minutes like that until Carl looked up and Wendy was standing over him with two men in tan jumpsuits on both sides.

The bigger man whistled. “Nice birdie yah got there,” he said.

“A macaw,” the other added, nodding his approval. His glasses sat crookedly on his nose.

Wendy placed a hand on Carl’s shoulder. “These nice men have told me that it won’t be easy to find the bird’s owner, but they’ll try.” She glanced back at them. “They’re experts.”

Carl hated them for taking away his chance to help his lost friend. He imagined them showing up at some old woman’s doorstep and returning the bird to her. She would praise them and explain that the parrot was her only consolation after her late husband passed away. A number of scenarios went through his head and all of them ended with him just being the weird guy who found a bird and took it to work. He was not the hero. He was just alone. Carl sighed and swiveled his chair around to face the other direction, signaling them to step into his cubicle but showing that he did not agree with the proceedings.

“Carl!” the bird squawked as the man with the glasses grabbed him.

The man’s worn gloves looked harsh against the colorful feathers. “Come here, Mr. Parrot,” he said, “You’re coming with us.”
The parrot flapped its wings, slapping the sides of the other man’s bearded face. It cried out and squirmed.

Carl turned around. “Well be gentle with him for God’s sake!”

The bearded man didn’t look at him when he said, “It’s fine. Why don’t you go back to your filing?”

Indignant, Carl tried to think of something clever and biting he could say in return, but only produced a noise that sounded like he was choking and turned bright red again. However, he did manage to stand up. He thought he should do something, but he just wasn’t sure what.

“How!” the parrot said. “Help! Help! Help!” It refused to hold still in the man’s hands, and its cries lured people out of their cubicles.

Carl took a few steps forward and put his hand out, perhaps in an attempt to take the bird back, but simply ended up distracting the Animal Control worker who was about to snap something about standing back. The parrot seized this second of distraction to bite down on the man’s thumb. He yelped and dropped the bird.

Shaking itself off, the parrot said “Carl!” one more time before opening its wings and taking flight, flapping madly as it cleared the top of the cubicle’s walls. It soared over the heads of Carl’s coworkers, swooping down at Helen and cackling madly. Whistling, it circled the whole office again and again as it tried to find a way out. People ducked and put papers over their heads as they ran for cover in their cubicles. Helen screamed. Leslie cried. Barry from accounting was nearly rolling on the floor.

Carl pointed at the only window in the office. Words failed him, but, as if Carl had commanded it, the bird instantly turned in that direction and landed on the window ledge. It spun
around and looked at everyone one last time before opening its wings and flying out of the small opening, into the haze of cigarette smoke and car exhaust.

It was over. Frazzled coworkers re-emerged from their hiding places and looked at each other with the sleepy expression people get after a big storm finally passes out of town. Carl walked over to the window, hoping to catch a final glimpse of the parrot as it flew away. His coworkers watched him and wondered what he was going to do next. They expected a wise speech, some kind of philosophizing, or maybe even for him to attack both Wendy and Helen. The phones rang and nobody answered them. The copier buzzed groggily in the corner. When Carl finally turned around, however, he offered them nothing, instead treading back to his own cubicle without so much as a sigh. With that, the show ended, and even Helen went to her own desk for once.

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As the day progressed, Carl finished his paperwork. He lined up his papers properly before he stapled them. He sent his emails. Checked his watch. Carl did not know what he felt, so he tried not to think about it. Working efficiently and without stopping to listen to gossip, he even finished early and allowed himself fifteen minutes to look at his Grand Canyon postcard and daydream. But for once, the thought of such great heights and twisting corners did not inspire him. He closed his eyes and spun around in the chair, dragging his feet on the ground when he started going too fast. Dizzy, he anchored himself and opened his eyes. There, in the back corner of his cubicle, was a single red feather tipped with green. He stared at it a long time. Slowly then, he stuck two silver tacks into his wall and laid the feather across them like a mounted samurai sword. Carl smiled sadly as he carried the empty cardboard box out of the office that day. One of the first ones out, he loved the way the elevator doors closed, hiding the
office from view, but his stomach lurched as it lowered him to the ground. Lulled by its hollow humming, Carl closed his eyes and imagined the parrot soaring over the city, a bolt of red in a cloudless sky.
Haunting

Walter n’ Sons Grocery was a lousy place to spend eternity, but Glen had ended up there and he was making the best of it. Of course, he had expected better: to be ushered into the afterlife by angels in soft, white robes who whispered compliments while they escorted him to the place where all the other dead people lived. He wasn’t sure what they would do then, but he assumed the powers-that-be had some board games or something provided to pass the time. He figured that there had just been some kind of mix-up at the ethereal level and that someone in charge of these kinds of things would find him eventually. In life, Glen had been the kind of person most people forgot anyways, so he tried not to grumble too loudly while haunting the small freezer section at the back of the store. He looked down at the blue bathrobe he was wearing. His grandmother’s one-eyed Pug had ripped two large holes near the bottom of it the last time he went to visit her, but he kept wearing it after that because he didn’t want to have to break in another one. He would have put on something more flattering if he’d had the chance, but as it happened, Glen was not expecting to die. Putting a diaphanous hand to his forehead, Glen groaned softly, causing the freezer door to shake only slightly.

Walter n’ Sons Grocery was a dingy little grocery store two blocks from Glen’s house. Originally, it had been Walter and Sons Grocery, but two of the letters fell off of the sign and instead of replacing them, Sam, the newest owner, decided to save money by buying an apostrophe. The shadows of the “a” and “d” could still be seen, but everybody pretended not to notice and spent their time thinking about more important things, like whether or not the cashier would notice that that their coupons were expired. Glen shopped there only when he was too lazy to make the trip to the larger grocery store across town, which had the ham salad he liked and didn’t have fruit flies swirling around the bananas. Sometimes the fluorescent lights flickered,
and Glen had never used a cart there with four fully functioning wheels, but the store was still rather cheery in a dilapidated way. During Halloween, Sally, one of the oldest women Glen had ever seen, threw flimsy cotton cobwebs over the apples in the produce department and hung plastic spiders from cans of creamed corn and kidney beans. Glen wished it was that time of year now. At least he would kind of fit in. Instead, he watched as sweaty customers pushed sweaty children through the door in their swerving carts, heading straight for the freezer department to scare the summer heat off of them.

It was a shock when he came into consciousness in the grocery store. One minute he was falling and the next minute he was there, shaking in his bathrobe with the lingering feel of his robe’s flaps swatting frantically at his thighs. At first, he didn’t remember what had happened and, confused, had tried to grab a grocery cart instead of simply standing in front of a display of off-brand sponge cake. When he placed his hand on the cart, however, he was overcome with nausea. He felt as if he had eaten a whole tub of his Aunt Cathy’s infamous potato salad, and let out a small groan. When he released the cart, he instantly felt better, albeit much more confused. A woman in a dress that was embroidered with watermelons stepped in front of him and grabbed his cart, walking away without so much as glancing at the crazy person pulling his robe tightly around himself.

It had taken a while to understand what had happened and to stop trying to go through different check-out lanes to buy the detergent that he needed at home. The realization that he was dead only occurred after a woman walked through him, a sensation that made him feel like he was dying all over again, like he was nothing and something at the same time. The woman who had violated him in this way, a young blonde who chomped on gum enthusiastically before
pulling it out of her mouth and examining it, didn’t even notice. Had Glen not been so
completely shocked, he would have been offended. She could have at least shuddered. He would
have even settled for a mild shiver.

He had died in his sleep of what he assumed was natural causes, which was nice for him,
he supposed, even though he was only a few years past middle aged. He comforted himself by
thinking that most people probably couldn’t ask for better, and he was glad he wasn’t one of
those people who died in embarrassing ways, like sticking his head out of the car window and
getting it lopped off by some low-hanging tree branch or something. Still, he always assumed he
would die in a way that would be monumental. He envisioned saving an armful of children from
a burning building, only to go back and meet his end, but not before sending two armfuls of
kittens to safety. Maybe he would take a bullet for a lady love or die tragically in war, but not in
his sleep, not after spending his one day off in two weeks in his bathrobe on the couch, watching
reruns of game shows from the sixties.

He stood in the pet food aisle while a little girl tried to fit a collar around her baby
brother’s neck as their mother compared prices on cat food. Glen sighed and reached out a hand
to knock a can of *Fancy Feast* off the shelf, biting his transparent lip as he waited for the
dizziness to pass. The can hit the floor and the mother turned, immediately snatching the spiked
collar from her daughter’s hand.

“Are you kidding me?” she asked, putting her hands on the child’s shoulders. “Your
brother isn’t an animal. He doesn’t wear collars.” She threw a bag of cat food into the cart and
pushed it out of the aisle, towing the whining child with her.
The nausea and dizziness bothered him longer each time Glen made physical contact with some object, so he tried not to do it when he could help it. Still, it seemed necessary now and again, especially when a child was going to be collared like a dog right in front of him. No one was ever surprised when he intervened, however, and this was a little disappointing to the flabby ghost. Most of the customers seemed to chalk it up to something like the shelves being crooked or air pressure or some nonsense. Although he knew it was irrational, Glen still wished someone would notice that he was behind it, not just cheap equipment or weather conditions.

The grocery store was crowded. It was Kid’s Day again, which meant that employees were forced to dress in costumes and work small stands featuring games like Plinko while smiling happily at screaming children. A few years before, the store even featured minnow races, but an employee left the live fish too long in a bucket in her car and they all died from the heat and lack of water circulation. Sam fired her immediately and she had to drive home in her clown costume, tears smearing the upturned smile that was painted over her lips. Sam took Kid’s Day very seriously.

Glen hated Kid’s Day. It happened once a month and he always failed to find a hiding spot that would keep him from being jostled and bothered. In a desperate attempt to escape last month, he had even tried to leave the store, but the light outside the windows was too much and each step closer made him feel like he was going to break into a million pieces, so he gave up and stood next to Sally at the counter where people could buy cigarettes and lottery tickets. She was dressed as a scarecrow, her makeup sinking deep into the lines on her face, making her look even older.

“This day is Hell,” Sally said to no one in particular.
For a moment, Glen thought she might be talking to him, but knew it wasn’t true. Sally made small comments to herself throughout the day, a habit which Glen assumed came with old age. Still, he sighed softly and replied, “Tell me about it.” He looked at her hands folded neatly on the counter. Her skin was so thin it was nearly translucent, and he could see the fragile bones leading to her fingers. Glen wondered what it would have been like to get old, whether he would have lived a life full of adventure before calmly accepting old age. He wanted to know what he would have looked like with white hair, posed carefully between two cousins in a family portrait. He wondered if it all would have been worth it, if he could have been happy. He sighed loudly. The small metal fan pointed at Sally sputtered for a moment before continuing to spit out a manufactured breeze.

On this Kid’s Day, Glen could not even find refuge with Sally because they’d moved her outside to monitor the barnyard exhibit, where kids were allowed to feed baby cows and piglets before their parents went into the grocery store and bought parts of their brethren for dinner that night. Glen moved around the store, dodging kids covered in face paint until he found Flora, a cashier who had just been hired, and who had been stuck with the face-painting booth, a job most people despised because it required touching the faces of children, which were often marked with peanut butter or other unidentifiable goo. She was dressed as a rabbit, which suited her. She had a quick way of looking at people when they said something, and her eyes darted back and forth among people as they spoke. Glen wondered if her heart beat as quickly as a rabbit’s, and resisted the urge to lean in closely, wanting to see if he could sense it.

“Step right up,” she said to the next child, a red-haired monster with buck-teeth. When he was seated, she asked, “What would you like to be?”

Without hesitating, the child replied, “A dragon!”
Flora sighed. She must have been used to this. “I’m not quite sure how I could make you into a dragon, but here,” she pointed to a piece of paper which was taped to her table, “you can choose one of these things and I can draw it.”

Wiping the snot from his nose, the boy looked over the paper. “I don’t like any of these. I want to be a dragon!”

Wanting to avoid another temper tantrum, Flora quickly said, “Ok, ok, fine. Come here.” She placed her hand gently under the child’s chin and pulled it up to catch the light. “One dragon comin’ up.”

Glen watched as she worked, dipping the foam tip of the brush into the face paint set. The child wriggled even as she tried to hold him steady, and instead of offering comforting words, she remained silent, intently painting a dragon on his cheek. The child started kicking the legs of his chair impatiently and the beginning of a whine was forming in his throat. Right when Glen thought the child couldn’t take anymore, she released his chin.

“There,” she said, satisfied, holding a mirror up so he could observe. “What do you think?”

“It looks like poop!” the kid wailed. He snatched the mirror out of her hand, moving it so he could get a better look.

Glen moved behind the kid so he could see Flora’s work. He kept his distance, but he could still see the brown and green markings on the kid’s face. Flora’s dragon looked more like a cow with four broken legs, and the ghost didn’t blame the child for being upset. He chuckled softly as the kid furiously rubbed his cheek to get it off, only making it appear worse.

Sam, hearing the cry as he walked by, walked over and stood in front of Flora with his arms folded across his chest. “What seems to be the problem here?”
“She messed up my face!” the kid cried, tears now mixing with the mess on his cheek. He pointed at her and Glen saw her eyes get glassy.

Sam leaned forward and inspected Flora’s work. “This is awful, Flora. Did you even try?”

“He wanted a dragon,” she stammered, taking off her bunny ears and twisting them in her hand. “It wasn’t on the list, but I tried to do it anyways.”

Sam reached out his hand to take her ears, and Glen waited for him to tell her that she was going to be let go. Without thinking, the ghost spun around and knocked into a pyramid of macaroni boxes full force. Dizziness swept over him and he would have thrown up if he were still capable of that. Everything went dark and he heard a loud buzzing and he was falling, falling again into nothing.

He didn’t have much of a family, which he hated to admit. His grandmother lived in a retirement village and spent most of her days out with her friends. She ignored Glen’s frequent phone calls. Glad that she seemed happy and busy, Glen tried to make a family with his co-workers, which was something of a disaster. He was a grill cook at a local restaurant and spent his days frying hamburgers and chopping onions. The waitresses ignored him and a few even hated him because he always managed to burn customer’s hamburger buns, which led to angry customers that never tipped them, despite the waitresses’ constant smiles. Once, Glen made friends with a small, chubby waiter that was equally disliked, but Glen botched the whole thing by inviting him over for an uninspired night of playing board games. The waiter left after the second game of *Yahtzee* when Glen left the room to bring in more potato chips.
When he died, Glen wondered which of them would come to his funeral. Or which of them would find him in his apartment, sprawled out on the couch like he was sleeping.

He was back in Walter n’ Sons Grocery suddenly, like when he used to daydream while driving until he would end up at home with no memory of how he got there. Shaking, he found himself in the canned soup aisle, standing next to Flora, who was facing cans while Sally talked to her. The old woman was dressed as a cow, and Glen smiled at seeing her.

“I’m just surprised he didn’t fire me,” Flora said, turning a can of tomato soup around so that the label faced her. “I’m sure he would have if he hadn’t been distracted.”

Sally laughed. “Yeah, I heard about the pyramid going down. Serves him right.” She adjusted a can of chicken noodle with a gnarled hand. “Kid’s Day has been a damned headache ever since he started it. ‘Bout time some kid makes a mess like that.”

Flora smiled shyly. She had replaced her bunny suit with street clothes and her Walter n’ Sons Grocery smock. “Facing cans after Kid’s Day is quite the punishment, though. And alone.” She sighed. “I didn’t know the store could be such a disaster after one day.”

“I can stay if you want. Jerry cooked chili again for dinner. It’s nice that he tries, but even emptying cans into a crock pot seems beyond him.”

Flora laughed and waved her away. “It’s no big deal. Sam would probably fire me for sure if he saw you helping me. I’m supposed to be humiliated, remember?” She put a hand on the old woman’s shoulder. “But thanks anyway. I’ll see you tomorrow, Sally.”

Sally nodded and pulled the straps of her purse back over her shoulder. Offering a wave, she left Flora alone in the aisle and walked to the doors, the tail of her costume swooshing with each step.
Glen watched Flora as she worked. It was nice to be in the store again, even if the whole place smelled like dirty diapers and old popcorn. He felt stable, and he didn’t even mind that the radio was playing the same songs over and over again and that he could hear the janitor’s heavy coughing from the cereal aisle. It was nice to feel part of something, even when he wasn’t. Reaching out his hand, he rotated some of the cans and endured the nausea, thinking that it felt better than doing nothing. As he turned a can of cream of celery soup, Flora stopped abruptly, glancing at the can a long moment as she tucked her hair behind her ears. Shaking her head slowly, she went back to facing her own soup cans, but stepped a few feet away from the spot where Glen stood. He smiled and stayed with her until she left the store long after closing.

In the days following, Glen was nowhere and somewhere, blinking in and out of reality like a broken Christmas light. One moment he would be standing in the freezer section, examining the new brands they were offering, and the next he would be gone. Sometimes it was only for a few moments, but the spans of nothingness were getting longer. He didn’t want to know what would happen when he didn’t come back.

He thought about his grandmother and coworkers. He thought about Sam and Flora and Sally. He thought about all of the customers that would come in, about the haggard mothers dragging their children and about the customers who seemed to sigh with relief when they looked at those families, happy to be alone for just one moment, even if that moment involved choosing a brand of toilet paper. He was jealous of all of them, and he hated himself for that jealousy.

Sally smiles at Flora and waves from her spot at the front counter. She laughs her raspy laugh and jokingly cat calls a cashier two lanes over. Sam tells everyone to get back to work.
The janitor sings a song that Glen can’t remember ever hearing. He lets his voice carry over the items in the aisle, using the stick of his mop as a make-shift microphone when he gets particularly passionate. Sam doesn’t even stop him when he walks by. Glen snaps his fingers to the beat.

A customer pushes his cart through the produce aisle, picks up a peach, holds it to his nose, and inhales.

The fluorescent light is flickering again and—

Glen stands in the freezer aisle, trying to write his name in the fog on the doors as he holds one open wide enough for him to get an arm through. It hurts to touch more than ever, but he winces and bears it long enough to write out a “G.” Flora walks by and he lets the door fall shut. As she walks by she stops and turns, and he is sure she sees his reflection in the door for a moment. He has not felt what it is like to be seen in so long and he is everything and nothing as he knows he is breaking apart and disappearing, floating away on the cold escaping from the freezer door.
The Hole

It was the summer we don’t talk about that we decided to dig the hole. I don’t know how it started or who mentioned it first. The boy’s last mission in the Anderson yard had ended in an embarrassing defeat when the tree they decided to build their house in refused to cooperate and forced them to give up their plan. Sheets of rotting plywood and tattered pieces of rope still hung in its branches, and the nails they pounded into its trunk rusted in defiance. At the base of the tree, shattered remains of a proposed window huddled in the black dirt, and a piece of glass sunk deep into my foot when I stepped too close. In front of my brother and Doug, the Anderson boy, I merely laughed with surprise and valiantly walked home on the tips of my toes, blood tracing the lines down the arch of my foot. I only cried later when my father clumsily pulled it out with a tweezers, and I howled and squirmed like an animal because I wanted everyone to know how badly everything ached. He told me not to go back to the Anderson’s backyard because it was full of broken things and leftover pieces that could hurt me. I had agreed, afraid of what was under the bandage on my heel, but in the morning another woman, sent by the church, dropped off a raw meatloaf we could make for dinner that night and I couldn’t bear it at home and ventured back, cutting through the one yard that separated us to get there.

Doug handed us shovels the next day and showed us where to dig in his yard. At fourteen, he was two years older than my twin brother and I, and had already tasted a beer, so we simply nodded and followed his lead. The tree cover was so thick in the Anderson’s backyard that all of the grass had given up and died, and the piles of leaves always made it smell like fall was ending, even in July. Doug took the shovel with the broken handle because I was a girl and he felt sorry for me or something. Deep down, I hated him because he looked at me like I was nearly an orphan, and seemed to hold his breath when I approached, fearing more bad news.
Still, unlike the others, he offered us silence rather than condolences, showing us the litter of short-legged puppies his dog just had or the toads his siblings kept in the shallow window-wells of his house. I returned the favor and never mentioned his older brother, who was in jail again for drugs and theft and because there was nothing better for him to do since he dropped out of high school and couldn’t find a job. Before we started digging, Doug offered each of us a cigarette he had stolen from the glove compartment in his dad’s old truck, but we were both too afraid to take it.

It felt good to bite into the dirt with the metal teeth of our shovels, to throw the soil behind us as far as we could. It was a slow process and the muscles in our necks and backs were tight, but sometimes we forgot ourselves and laughed and talked about our neighbors like old women, dirt filling our shoes until it was dark and the streetlight turned on and we knew that we had to go home. Our dad had an old air horn that he kept next to his tool box in the garage and would impatiently press the button twice each night if we were not already back in time to take showers and get ready for bed. We promised the Anderson boy we’d be back right away in the morning, as soon as we had finished our cereal, but he just shrugged. When I walked in our front door that night, I tried not to look at the flowers sitting on the kitchen table, and was thankful their green leaves hid the words on the cards signed by people I didn’t know. Later, as I lay on my bottom bunk, listening as the breeze carried in the half-hearted song from the broken wind chime in the oak tree outside of my window, I couldn’t help but wonder what it would feel like to have cold, black dirt falling in on me.

Eventually the other neighbor kids heard about what we were doing and showed up to watch us dig. They dangled their legs in the hole and we felt power in revealing the milky roots of trees and plants to them, showing infinite mercy in retrieving worms and night crawlers from
the hole and setting them off to the side. We dug down, down, down until our heads bobbed beneath the earth. There was no plan. Each of us dug with a passion that we couldn’t explain to each other. Blisters blossomed in the gardens between our thumbs and index fingers, and we compared them each day, taking a break to make a gallon of Kool-aid in their kitchen that always smelled like dirty dishes and dollar store potpourri. Doug’s parents got home and tried their best to ignore us, but occasionally looked at my brother and I like we were sparrows that had fallen out of our nest. They just wanted to let nature take its course, but they didn’t want to see it happen.

Doug dipped his hand into the pitcher each afternoon to gently stir in the flavor with his wrists until it was ready to drink. We said nothing when he handed us Dixie cups full of the colored liquid, ignoring the rosy tint of his hands as we sipped politely and played with the puppies, naming them according to their spots. Once his parents turned up the television to tell us they didn’t want kids around anymore, we always returned to the backyard and climbed back down beneath the earth.

Doug, still desperate for a fort, said that when we were finished, we could pull an extra piece of plywood over the top and sit in the bottom of the hole and play cards. My brother agreed, liking the idea of having a place to hang out where no one could see him, and willing to consent to anything Doug proposed because the older boy had given him a pocket knife for trimming thicker roots and later let him keep it. It was so rusted that only one of the blades would even stand up straight, but it could cut and Jason looked at it with wide eyes and held it like it was sacred.

Still we dug, burrowing into the earth until we needed to drag a foldable chair into our pit in order to climb back out. I braided exposed roots and hummed songs I remembered from the
radio, but always ended up with a shovel in my hand. Strangers who didn’t look at us came to pick puppies to take away. The animals would writhe and cry as they were carried out of the backyard, and we were sure they cried for us and wanted us and hated us for being kids too dumb to figure out what to do.

We sat in the bottom and took breaks, leaning against the cool sides and closing our eyes. It was an odd feeling, being so far below ground, like the Earth could decide at any moment that it was sick of us and swallow us up for good. We could whisper things to each other when we were there because we knew they would stay buried. Doug told us about when the police took his brother away and how he went downstairs and lit matches until he knew everyone was gone. We all nodded solemnly and didn’t comment. He just needed to feel the words escape him. When it was my turn, I told them how at church camp that year I decided I didn’t believe in God, and how dying was probably just sleeping without dreams, but stopped when my brother turned pale and dug his toes into the black dirt. I don’t remember what he said. I don’t think he told us anything. We all just rested our heads against the dirt wall until roots twisted into our hair and we envied the trees for standing so damn tall.

When it rained, it was over. Water filled the bottom and the sides started collapsing. For a while, Doug said we could leave it there. After all, it was the deepest hole any kid had ever dug in the history of the cul-de-sac. We very nearly cracked through the Earth and felt the moonlight from China. Still, pulled by habit, we came back together days later and grabbed our shovels, our hands rough but remembering and our nails still lined with dirt. Without saying anything, my brother dropped a red Hot Wheels car into the center, a mark to show that we had been there.

Then, a shovel at a time, we filled it in, leaving our words to the roots.
Concessions

In the heat, it's easy to feel like you're waiting for something. Time in the summer moved differently, like both clocks and old dogs were hesitant to stir too quickly in the hottest part of the day. I was restless, looking at clocks. My hair was finally long again, but I did not feel pretty in that heat as I tried to find something to keep my mind off of the impending sense of losing something before I had it. I didn't know how to say what I meant without people frowning at me, and I figured other people didn't know either because they all just chewed watermelon and argued about the weather, watching as the thermometer kept on climbing.

That summer, I learned everything there was to know about my home town. I knew that the town homeless man walked through the Dairy Queen drive-thru at night, collecting stray dimes before taking half-smoked cigarettes off the tray on the garbage can and stuffing them in his pockets. I knew that there was a woman who lived across from the nursing home who carried four plump cats outside one by one and put them in a wooden cage in her backyard each day. I knew that my hips were too wide to fit on three out of the four seats on the swings at the elementary school, and that it was Chris Poleman who spray-painted a bright green penis on the sign welcoming the few people unfortunate enough to visit our empty little town. I knew too much and by July I felt like even the shade under the trees was a kind of cruel trick.

When Kate asked me to work concessions down in the cities with her, I agreed, thinking that anything was better than what I was doing. I didn't like sporting events or crowds, but she promised me that it was worth the money. Kate made me nervous, but she didn't talk about the things other people talked about so I figured that it would be interesting, at least. The day I started, she showed me how to tie a polka dot bandana around my hair so my hair would stay out of my face while I worked, and I sat shotgun with her as we drove to the city. She had a bad
habit of forcing me to take the wheel as she lit cigarettes or when her hands got too sweaty from the plastic wheel or she simply got bored of holding her arms up, but I didn’t mind because she played music I hadn’t heard before and I felt like something different was finally going to happen.

I ended up cutting onions. Terry, the owner of the portable stand, didn’t want to start me with customers because he assumed I would be nervous. He worried about the feelings of his employees but was always one letter off on the correct pronunciation of their names. When we got there and Kate left me to help set up the giant grill, he put one hand on the sweaty part of my back and led me toward two five-gallon buckets.

“Let me see your hands, Jenny,” he said, but I didn’t correct him. Instead, I opened both of my hands and showed them to him, feeling suddenly embarrassed and dumb for feeling embarrassed at the same time.

“No calluses?” he asked, in a way that made it sound like a great crime.

“I don’t do much.” It was the wrong thing to say, and I could feel him trying to figure me out, so I stared at his bald spot, which was already turning pink in the sun.

He put a knife in my hand. It’s a strange feeling, being given a weapon by an adult and being trusted not to do something stupid with it. In school, they didn’t even give us plastic knives to cut our food at lunch. Instead, they made everything soft.

Terry pointed at a bag of onions and then at the two buckets. “One is for scraps and one is for slices. Chop all of them.” Then he walked away.

I wanted to ask questions, to figure out how I should slice them, but then I wondered if he would think I was also too nervous to cut the onions, so I kept quiet and sliced each one differently before I got bored and finally just diced them, dropping the white chunks into the
right bucket and the rest of it into the left. I enjoyed cutting the first bag. It was simple and I
didn’t have to think much. When I finished that bag, I thought I was done, but Terry brought two
more and smiled at me. I kept chopping until the knife stopped feeling right in my hand.

The day went on. I was sweating and the other workers were sweating and the customers
who lined up at the stand were sweating and the whole world smelled like onions. Every once in
a while, Terry would walk by and take one of my buckets and pass it to the boy on the grill, who
would pour them on and start frying them for hamburgers and bratwursts. I watched Kate flirt
with customers and walk back and forth between the grill and them, dodging the other workers
and carrying a little calculator to find totals. Terry kept bringing me onions. I cut my finger and
my blood smeared on the layers of one so I threw the whole thing into the left bucket and
covered it with the crispy brown skins and hoped Terry wouldn’t find it. I wrapped my finger in
my shirt and stood there and didn’t say anything until the bleeding stopped.

After a few hours with onions, Kate finally stopped by and told me we could take a break
and go sit on one of the stone benches that were around. She got us a bratwurst on a thick roll
and topped it with onions and mustard that had warmed in the sun.

“The fruits of our labor,” she said and laughed.

It was the best thing I had ever eaten. Between us, it was gone in moments, neither of us
minding the way our lips left dampness on the spots where we had taken our bites. When it was
gone, we talked about getting another one, but we both agreed that we were too tired to take the
short walk back to the stand. There was a breeze away from the concession stand, and it felt so
good and cool in that spot that I couldn’t help but laugh. I liked the way the buildings around us
felt as we sat there. I tried to describe the feeling to Kate, but then Terry walked over and we stopped talking. He dabbed his bald spot with a napkin, sighed, and said, “Sure is hot.”

When the sun got lower in the sky, people finally stopped lining up and the work got slower. Terry said there were enough onions for the night and I was relieved until he led me over to where he wanted me to wash the dishes. Again, he showed me buckets, but this time there were three of them. One was for soapy water, one was for plain water, and one was for sanitizer water. Soak, rinse, sanitize. As I washed the dishes, the water filled with onions and grease and tiny pieces of charred hamburger. One of the other workers helped me and he whistled “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” in a way that was slow and sad. I complimented him, but then he stopped and we worked in silence.

It kept getting darker, and the breeze came back and teased us as we closed up the stand. Dishes were finished and I watched as the men pushed the grill up the small plywood ramp and into the back of Terry’s truck. The cardboard they had placed underneath the grill to keep grease from staining the concrete was soaked, and Kate waved at me and then slid across it like a figure skater. The Whistler joined her and they both kept twirling and laughing until Kate came and grabbed my hand and made me try it too. Together we whirled as the buildings looked down and Terry looked away and the streetlights came on and in that hazy light I almost felt like it could have been a dream.

When we were finally done, Terry walked us to Kate’s car because he was afraid we were going to get mugged or something. I threw my bandana in a garbage can next to a fenced-in tree and tried to whistle a song, but only managed a few breathy notes before giving up and
listening to the cars pass us. When we got to her car, Terry shook my hand and waved at Kate and I got in and rested my head against the cool glass of the passenger window. Kate put her head on the steering wheel. We were greasy and we were quiet and we were filled with the empty feeling of being tired and being seventeen and being strangers in a city at night.

I turned to Kate. “Do you ever feel like you’re waiting for something to happen, but you don’t know what it is?”

She started the car. “All the goddamned time.”