

TO DANCE THE FOXTROT

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors Committee of
Texas State University
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for Graduation in the Honors College

By

Adam Pellerin

San Marcos, Texas

August 2014

TO DANCE THE FOXTROT

Thesis Supervisor:

John Hood, M.F.A.
Honors College

Approved:

Heather C. Galloway, Ph.D.
Dean, Honors College

COPYRIGHT

By Adam Pellerin

Texas State University

2014

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Gerry Takes Notice.....	1
Roy Wakes Up.....	6
Gerry Goes to Work.....	9
Anika Leaves College.....	12
Roy at the Window.....	16
Gerry at the Junkyard.....	20
<i>Probability</i>	22
Consequence.....	24
Anika Awakens.....	29
Roy Tries.....	32
Gerry's Plight.....	36
Anika Drives.....	39
Roy Visits the Farm.....	42
Gerry Goes Out.....	46
Anika Gets Home.....	48
Roy Visits the Super.....	50
Anika's Evaluation.....	55

<i>Causality</i>	57
Chances Are.....	58
Gerry Goes for a Drink.....	61
Roy Listens.....	65
Anika's Stuff.....	67
Roy and His Blanket.....	70
Gerry Returns.....	74
Anika Speaks.....	76
Roy Cleans.....	82
Gerry Leaves.....	86
<i>Dénouement</i>	89
Beginnings.....	90

Gerry Takes Notice

The frost has been settling in for some while now. I can feel it in the air... the sky is impartial. A year ago, almost exactly, the chill killed off my last lemon tree. It still looked to break from its black plastic pot, shriveled and gnarled. Can't bring myself to burn it. The front porch is small; my cooler is beside the husk of branches. I dragged it home after the nylon of my chair deteriorated in the sun. The porch doesn't get much light anymore.

When I woke this morning, I felt ice in my bones. It took a long time to get out of bed. I brought the blankets to the kitchen to make coffee. When I scooped the grounds, the cup scraped bottom. While the coffee brewed, I stood over the pot, quilt draped over my shoulders like a goddamned geriatric. Like any head in a grey crowd, the huddled masses.

With the pot topped off, I fill my mug. It's a big ugly thing, got it from the thrift shop, but it holds the drink. I take inventory of the morning. The kitchen opens into the living room, leads to the bedroom... on the far side of the living room, across from the couch, is my fireplace. I built it myself when I was younger. Heat-cracks run across it now. Fissures along the welds where the smoke funnels into the flue—my hands now, they couldn't hardly work a welder for shaking. I keep a small pile of wood beside the hearth. I move toward it and bend to sift for proper flammables. Set my mug on the brick mantle, arrange a few sticks across the andirons and wad some empty envelopes beneath them. Junk mail. Fire-starters. There's a knock at the door.

I strike a match. It goes out. The knock is heavier the second time. I don't expect anyone. Strike another match, and the sulphur flares. I tease the paper with the flame until the fire grows legs, starts dancing. Then I stand, drape the quilt over the back of the couch, and move toward the door. When I open it, the Sheriff has already turned away. He is walking toward the cruiser parked headlong in the dirt dead-end, and he turns at the sound of the hinges.

"Mr. Solon? Gerry?" He holds a manila envelope in both hands.

"Yep."

"Have you gotten any of the notices, sir?"

"Nope."

"Have you seen them posted? Two at the entrance, six and three month notices on the door."

"Figured it was a housing incentive, free firestarter."

"Well, Mr. Solon, did you ever take the time to read any of those notices?"

"Can't say that I did."

"It might have benefited you to read those notices, sir."

"What's your name, Officer?"

"I'm Sheriff Daniel Bingham, sir, and if you don't--"

"Bingham, you Jerold's boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Kid used to mow my lawn."

"Yessir, that's--"

"And I wasn't all that sorry to hear he'd passed." I stand in the doorway.

"Excuse me?"

"I should check up on my fire. You have a nice day now." I turn away and let the door swing shut. The flame crackles and the steel groans as the logs catch. A moment later I hear the tires crunch on pebbled dirt.

It's been a while since I stocked up. The fridge is near empty. Got some grapefruit, a few left in the hanging basket with the peppers and garlic... some potatoes and rice in the pantry, a few cans of corn. The egg tray is empty. Chickens haven't been laying. Seems they're eating more of my grain than I get eggs back, might should just eat the birds soon. There used to be six, then four, then three, and now two.

I patched the coop after each hit, stopped letting them out in the day. Buried the chicken wire six inches every side, still they disappear. The first two were simple enough, neighbors dog got out and threw up a squawking in the yard, didn't even eat the bodies. After that I think it was a fox, though I can't figure how. Every morning I check, half expecting another bird to be gone.... Waiting.

But it's been time since the last kill. Maybe the birds calmed down, started laying again. Could use the eggs. I turn from the fridge and put on my jacket, pick up the tin by the door. The seed inside shimmers, sifting—a thousand whispers. When the screen door slams behind me, the birds are scratching at the ground by the coop gate. They hear the seed whisper, it says to them 'food'. Simple language... I let them out and stoop under the low roof to check for eggs.

The roosts are empty, unused. They stopped using them after the third got et. Now they roost in the rafters. I shuffle around in the hay with my boot, then see. In the corner, not even in a scratch-den, an egg sits haphazard, brown with flecks of chocolate and charcoal. Breakfast. I throw some seed down to get the birds back inside and I walk away, egg in hand. It's a good sign.

On the porch, a piece of paper sits facedown on the ground. I hadn't noticed it before. I cradle the egg in my hand and my back creaks when I reach for it, flip it over.

Notice to Vacate the Premises

Addressed to one Gerry Solon, trailer 6, Virgil's Estates:

Mr. Solon, having given formal notice in writing multiple times over the last several months with no receipt of response, we (the owners of the property, undersigned) have been forced to file an eviction suit. This is your formal and legally binding notice to vacate the property by **Tuesday, March 6**, eleven days from the time of delivery. Mr. Solon, we hope to resolve this lack of communication amicably without incurring unnecessary court costs for either party, but *we are willing and prepared to follow up if necessary*. This is your decision to make. Either vacate by the date given or contact our lawyers.

Sincerely,

James Scotfeld

Scotfeld Property Management

There's an address and a phone number at the bottom, a stamp from a notary. I look out from my porch. People have been leaving the lot for a few years now. The only cars left are on rims. The trailers left aren't worth trucking out. I fold the notice into my shirt pocket.

I go back to my fire. Won't keep itself lit. I used to wonder where it all went, after logs turned to ash.... Now I know where it goes.

Creosote, smoke.

Roy Wakes Up

The chair is starting to get lumpy, I think, compressing in all the spots where the springs push up and turning them into hockey pucks surrounded by marshmallow fluff. Like muscles knotting after a long run, except that it happens in circles instead of lines. My legs hurt. It is quiet upstairs. Maybe the chair isn't getting lumpy, maybe it's me. Maybe I've been compressed into hockey pucks and fluff and now the chair is just trying to tell me, 'go easy, man, take a cool down,' but we both know I can't. There's no time to cool down, and no need to stand up....

When I woke a few hours ago, the moon was out and everything was still. I wasn't sure what to do. I had already written myself an excuse for school, forged her signature, and I told them that I would be gone all next week at an aunt's funeral in Minnesota. It seemed like a reasonable place, Minnesota, far enough to make them think we'd need travel time so that the desk lady with pointy eye makeup didn't raise a penciled-on eyebrow at me. That was the easy part, getting off of school. All it took was a note, written in her loopy handwriting like before it got shaky, with that pattern of swoops and curls that was her signature, no matter who wrote it. The rest was a little more difficult.

When I woke up and everything was still, I had forgotten where I was. I guess I fell asleep on the couch, in that apartment where I had lived, have lived, for all I remember. I didn't know what to do, didn't want to know what time it was. The first thing I did—I was still in clothes, even wearing shoes—the first thing I did was I slipped out the door and I ran. Somewhere along the way I think I fell back asleep because I woke up and the road was thunder beneath my feet, the moon was still

high and it made the shadows spooky, filtering through the leaves like cobwebs from the trees. I hadn't run since elementary school, when we logged our miles around the track until they added up to a marathon, and even then I was never the fast kid. It doesn't matter at night though, when there's no one out and everything else is stopped.

When nothing else is moving it feels like it all slips by, like you only even move your legs so that nobody knows that the road is just sliding past in a big arc, so that the night owls in their houses won't look out the window to see me floating above the sidewalk while it rolls away beneath my feet.... That's what it felt like, the run, and now it's a spreading warmth that makes my hairs stand on end like a million antennae that feel everything around me. I feel the air move, and it feels like I'm floating again, just for a second. Then I'm back. I want to sleep but the sun is already shining through the curtain. I haven't been into my room since Paolo came in and helped me arrange the burial and brought me food.

At the office, when I looked into the office lady's eyes and handed her the note, I tried not to let them see my hand shake. When she asked me where my Mom was I told her "she's at work," and they didn't ask many questions after that. "Sorry for your loss," they said, and my stomach turned but I kept my face straight. I walked out without telling them when I would be back.

My stomach rolls, and I taste copper. I think about what I've eaten over the last twelve hours and I can't remember anything. I'm not sure how long I've been sitting here—I keep drifting in and out. I haven't been into the bedrooms all week.

My tongue is acidic. Last week when Paolo came over after the funeral he brought eggs. My stomach groans at the thought of food.

The building is silent. The sun hasn't even warmed the rafters to creaking yet, not even the Hendersons' baby is awake. I go into the kitchen and look around. It looks sterile and unused in the soft light coming through the curtains. There is a week-old stack of dishes in the sink from the meal we had the night before I woke up in the cold. I run the water until it is hot and scrub the plates until they are shiny, then scrub them again until they stop glaring back at me, until they look ordinary like they should. The steam surrounds me and covers my ears until I hear my heart beat over the sound of running water.

Gerry Goes to Work

Another cold morning. Should be flowers out by now, at least the forsythia or witch-hazel; outside the window the ground is flat grey-green. Crabgrass growing through the road. After the notice, yesterday was dead. Not so much as a ripple. Can't have two of those, start to stagnate. It's time to get up.

The porch view is foreign, deserted. Different. There are weeds up to the wheel wells of my truck... the tires are low. The patch of weeds in front of the porch and the path to chicken coop are the only neat parts of the whole park right now. Used to did the whole thing 'til my back went out. Then I grabbed some pots from maintenance, started the porch growing. After that I got some more clay and a stock trough. Now there's soil in everything that'll hold. The first things I planted were herbs mostly, basil, rosemary, some cilantro that didn't take. They were my children. Now I've got generations sprouting from the cooler and the storage tub. I will not go without them.

I need to make the truck run. There used to be tools in the maintenance shed across the park.... Now it's surrounded by weeds, can't even see the path until you're looking right at it. My back strains as I put on my boots.

The door is shut by a gate latch with a combination lock shut tight on the loop. I give it a tug and the screws rip from the frame. It's half rotten, weathered grey plank siding. The door drags in the dirt, releases a wave of chemical smells. Used motor oil.

All the tools are still there, more or less. Rusted out. The back wall is lined with paint buckets, globs dried mid-drip across the sides.

I fill a burlap bag with a wrench set, vice grips, some screwdrivers, and a handful of Allen keys. There's an old bicycle pump in the corner resting against some broomsticks and ax handles. I tuck it under my arm and turn to leave—above the door an old crosscut saw is hanging on copper-colored nails. It has dowel rod handles on either end of its five-foot span, a lance tooth blade the dull color of the wood behind it.

Fifty, sixty years ago I used one like this to clear a plot for the house I built for Anna. It was on blocks dug into sandy soil, and I used the cut trees like pillars on the porch. It was small, two bedrooms with a little bathroom and a living room that opened into the kitchen. We spent all our time on the porch watching pines sway in the wind. There were plans to fill that second bedroom. She wanted a family. Didn't ever seem to be time, and then she got sick. Had to sell the house and the land to pay for the bills.

When she came back things were different. The trailer was small and there were no trees. She never was happy after that, and she went back to the infirmary after a few months here. That second trip did her no good. She lasted a couple weeks there before she passed. The doctor said she just gave up. That the medicine only works if you work with it.

The bike pump is rusty. It takes a long time to air up the truck's tires, and when I'm done I go inside for a drink. The tap runs slowly... stops.

Outside, I pop the hood. Nothing looks too bad. I run an extension cord and get the battery charging. Tweak some wires, work at the rust with WD-40 and steel wool. An hour later I try to start it and the engine won't catch. I give it gas. Nothing. The WD-40 is sitting in the passenger seat, and I think to a time when I worked cars with my brothers. Ronald, the older, drove a '54 Chieftan bought new when he got his job at the plants. George was younger, drove an old Ford pickup with no plates and a rattle on startup. I would help him with it on the times it wouldn't fire right. A little WD on the distributor would kick start the thing on rainy days, or whenever it had sat up a while.

I get to poking around under the hood of my truck, find the distributor and give it a shot of juice. Turn the key and it pops, flashes flame and turns over with a growl.... Now it just needs a destination. And some parts. Needs a new distributor cap to start again, maybe a new wiring harness. If memory serves, Rowley's junkyard down the road still does business. Might still let folks work in the lot to the side....

I let the hood slam shut, pull myself up into the driver's seat. The truck rumbles out of the divots of packed earth molded by leaking tires. New life.

Anika Leaves College

I packed the last box this morning, folding my sheets and the last of my clothes around the few breakables I owned. There was no sink in my dorm, so I rarely used the three glasses I had brought with me when I moved in; of my two wine glasses, only one was ever in use at a given moment. My roommate didn't drink, or go out, or watch movies—she didn't do much of anything, just video-chatted with her friends from home. She was happy to see me go, I could tell.

The most intimate interaction we shared in our six months living together was when she was helping me pack my things last night. It was also the happiest I'd ever seen her. She told me about her plans for the semester, how she was going to make the Dean's List and one of her friends was going to come down to visit next week and now that she had an extra bed... She caught herself and put a hand on my shoulder, softened her face and looked at me with pity. "It's really sad that they're kicking you out though, especially over such a silly thing," she said while she neatly stacked books in a liquor box. That 'silly thing' was money—I couldn't afford health insurance, financial aid didn't cover it, and it had become mandatory for all students with less than a year at the school. Her father was an indulgent sap, a real estate baron out of Houston. Every time her family came into town, she would stay in a hotel with them while they lavished her with shopping sprees and fine dining. The only way that her escapades made themselves known to me was through shopping bags and to-go boxes.

While they were out, I would study, only occasionally punctuated by sips of cheap wine and the occasional movie online. We were from different worlds. She didn't ask where I was going, and I don't know what I would have said if she did.

Looking at all the boxes in the backseat of my car, it feels like I have so little... But still so much *stuff*. It's like these boxes contain an entire stage of my life, the clothes and books and light furnishings that defined my (however brief) college career. Contained within the boxes are all the memories that I had and reminders of the unfulfilled promises to myself—with every beginning, a million promises are made and this time around they must be abandoned before having been given the chance to be neglected—and it feels like nothing, condensed into this sharp-edged state of corrugated cardboard and sharpie.

Still, the car is full. Too full. Rear visibility is a concern... my registration expired at the beginning of the month. The greater concern is the immediate destination: to be determined. That the contact list in my phone is filled with ex-lovers and estranged family members is no help, just a chronicle of burned bridges interspersed with the occasional unfulfilled connection. One catches my attention; a contact that was allowed to stagnate, a person who was left out of the last several years of my life, one of the few with whom the bridge is degrading but intact.

Barnaby. My uncle Jim, jettisoned from the family history after he got drunk at my aunt's wedding and made a toast to "love and hate and the stuff that's in between—they call it marriage¹." Jim Barnaby was an absentee uncle, a bachelor

¹ It went on a while longer until the groom's brother took the mic away, something like: 'Hey there, guy, now that's my little sister you chose to pork for forever and a day, so you keep your shit clean, wrap it up if you gotta go carousin about...'

(and not of the arts or sciences) with a philandering streak that was spoken of only after the third round of drinks and even then only in embarrassed whispers.

Throughout my childhood, he would make the occasional appearance at family events for free food and drink... but he had his redeeming qualities. Like an alcoholic Santa Claus, he would bring gifts sorted by gender for all of the birthdays and Christmases and graduations that he had missed, doling out toy trucks to high school graduates and necklaces to toddlers. His appearances were always greeted with a buzz of anxiety from the adults, which translated into excitement for the children as they crowded around him in anticipation of a crapshoot gift from the grab bag. Last I heard he was living in Fayetteville, just a tank of gas away. I tap his number and the phone begins to ring. The line clicks.

“Yeah?”

“Uncle Barnaby?”

“Who is this?”

“Anika. Jess’s Daughter.”

“Yeah, I remember you. How’d you get this number?”

“Look, Uncle Barnaby-“

“Jim. Just call me Jim.”

“Okay, Uncle Jim, I’m coming through Fayetteville in a day or two and I was wondering...”

“What?”

“Would you mind if I stayed with you for a few days?”

Ghost whispers of static come through the line for an impossibly long time before he exhales loudly into the receiver. "How old are you now?"

"Nineteen."

"Isn't that a little weird?"

"I won't stay long."

"My place isn't much to look at, there's not an extra bed or anything--"

"I can sleep on the couch."

"Alright, if you really don't mind," he exhales into the receiver, "and just a couple days..." He trails off and the line buzzes into my ear; I wait in silence.

He gives me the address and I promise to call before I leave, but I don't tell him where I'm coming from.

The school buildings look strange through the windshield; the minor differences have slipped away along with the promise of a future, and the architectural similitude that was once so enchanting now paints a barren picture of forced assimilation and intellectual governance. I am happy to be gone, but it is a spiteful happiness born from an unhealed wound. Within this little vehicle is everything I have, and it's on the move. My route is mapped, highways the whole way there. On the road, I only listen to music in languages I don't know.

Roy at the Window

When it's hot out, Barnaby sits on his chair out front by the tree in the parking lot. He hauls his chair, an old polyvinyl and aluminum thing with steel lugs, he hauls it down all three flights and then goes back up for the cooler. My Mom would always tell me not to watch, she'd say that he wasn't a good role model and tell me not to be like him, but then she would just go back to her computer and I would go back to my window.

He just sits there, all day long or until the cooler's full of empties, whichever comes first, just watching the cars go by. Sometimes I'll listen to a whole song, a beer for him, without seeing a car. He never seems to mind. By the third, he usually starts piling up little rocks and seeds with pebbles and parking lot trash.... between the third and the fifth, he'll start throwing them.

Sometimes the target is a leaf across the lot and the door dings are just collateral damage, but sometimes it's the Jesus fish on the back of the Expedition. The rocks just bounce off of the steel bumper, but one time the Hendersons caught him throwing rocks at their car and now he only does it when he thinks nobody's looking. When cars come down the hill he goes for them, if he sees them coming, but he hardly ever makes it to the street in time.

Once, an old F-150 caught him on the wind-up and the driver, she was a mean old lady who lived in a house down the street, she swerved and honked and ran over a cat. It was an old tabby that I saw sometimes when it would scrounge around for food. I liked to call it Pineapple because of its hair that was always sticking up, and she didn't even slow down like she didn't see it. Barnaby didn't

know what happened at first, not right away, because for a few minutes he kept throwing bottle caps at a Styrofoam cup between the old Mitsubishi and a CRV, but then he looked over and he stopped. He left the pile there, just shuffled it around with his foot, and didn't throw any more for the rest of the day.

Later that night, when all the ice was melted and the cans were empty, I saw him walk the chair up and then when he came down for the cooler he had an old grocery bag, and he scraped Pineapple up and then tied the top closed and poured out the water and the cans and put him in there, right in the cooler.

He left the cans in the lot that day, and they stayed there until the maintenance man came around and made a face that said "I ain't nobody's maid" but he cleaned it up anyway. Even after the maintenance man—I think his name is Mr. Abdullah? Jeff, he said to me once, call me Jeff—even after Jeff cleaned up the cans I could still see the stain on the side of the road. I went outside once and looked at it for a second, and it was lumpy up close, like a little topographic map of the life of Pineapple, complete with a few hairs poking out of the highest peak. It stayed cold for a while after that and I didn't see much of Barnaby for a few weeks, but I would still hear him tromping around upstairs, dropping things as the nights got later.

And then today, the weather is grey and slow, a station wagon pulls up in the parking lot. There are only eight or ten spots for our little building with as many rooms, so I know all the cars and I've never seen this one. I'm just listening to George Benson with half an eye out the window and the rest elsewhere, when there's this station wagon packed full of stuff, all the way up against the back

window, and at the wheel (the only person in the car, as far as I can tell) is a girl, or a woman, or something.

The only people in the building are me, Mrs. Langtree (the owner), Lester (Les) down the hall, Old Mr. Stanley, George and his second wife Stella, Stacy Childress (who is a graduate student and never talks to anybody else in the building), and the Hendersons, a big Mexican family that is almost certainly living under a pseudonym, my Mom told me, not in a racist way but in a factual way. And then there's Barnaby, in the attic space.

Mrs. Langtree paid one of the Hendersons to convert it into a seventh room a few years back, and a few more people came down for the job before she drew the line at four people in their apartment and she kicked out the *tios*. I'm pretty sure they still have five or six, but she's a pretty forgiving landlady and looks the other way on a lot of stuff. Anyway, this girl pulls up, and she walks right in the door and up the stairs, I hear her all the way to the top, and five minutes later Barnaby's helping her bring her stuff up, just two trips for everything.

He doesn't look happy that she's there, which makes me wonder why because Barnaby's pretty old and she's a lot better looking than him, and then I wonder what *she's* doing there. You'd think a guy like Barnaby would iron his pants and comb his hair or something, but there he is pouting in the parking lot as she unloads the last of her bags. It wasn't as much as it first looked, and now that it's all out I can see that the back of the wagon is halfway filled with junk, old tapes and books, and those boxes and bags all look frayed around the edges like they've been packed a few times.

When they take the last of the stuff and Barnaby kicks the door closed, I have a thought that I should help them, and maybe see what this girl is doing here. She seems nice enough, so far, except—I'm in no place for that right now. But I'd like to meet her. Except that I need to 'lay low' and not let anybody into the apartment, at least not until things get sorted out. Everything is weird right now. Everything... Their footsteps come up the hall, then pass by the door. Barnaby is saying something to her, and the only words I catch are "three days". I may only have three days before she's gone. I need to straighten out my head before I try to deal with people. Tomorrow I will go see Paolo; he will be able to help me. Tomorrow I will sort these things out.

Gerry at the Junkyard

Rowley's is still open, but it's a different Rowley behind the counter. Kid looked at me funny when I said I needed a distributor cap. Guess they went out of style with carburetors. He sent me out back to figure it out myself.

The yard is gone to the dogs. Used to be orderly, now it's a mess. The aisles are irregular, choppy... they zigzag around stacked cars and trash. When I finally find the right truck, the front is so wrecked in that I can't pop the hood. The cab is full of cheeseburger wrappers and roaches. There was some scrap rebar piled near the entrance—a few minutes later I'm working at prying the hood up. It's slow work, finding the burrs that catch it shut. The hood doesn't swing up until the shadows are long across the aisle. I open up my tool bag and get to work.

When I bring my parts to the counter it is deserted. The new Rowley's up and gone. Any more time spent waiting and the day will be gone... I walk to the lot where my truck sits. I try to crank it once, it doesn't turn over. I pop the hood and get to wrenching.

It is fully dark by the time everything gets put back together. Still no sign of the young Rowley. The locusts howl from the trees. My shadow is long on the bumpy dirt lot. I've been working in patches of light from the solitary streetlamp near the entrance. The only other car in the lot is a beat up commuter car in the corner. Could

be the Rowley boy's, could be another junker. If the truck starts I may not have to find out.

The night chill blows in on the wind. A dog barks from inside the yard. The window at the front office goes dark. The door opens and then swings shut, a silhouette passes through. I hear keys chime from the darkness. The Rowley boy walks into the light. He stands on the edge of the lot with his arms crossed.

"Hey, you never paid," he says.

"I wasn't given much of a chance."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Be a better business if you stick around for the part where the customer gives you money, is all I'm saying."

"Look old man, I don't know where you come from but I don't need disrespecting on my property. I could have you arrested for stealing."

"Take this one." I kick my old distributor cap on the ground. "I don't need it."

He stands uncertainly on the edge of the light.

"Just get gone, and don't expect help next time," he says. I torque down the last of the bolts.

"My mistake was expecting it in the first place." I throw the old parts in the bed of the truck and crank the starter. It turns over with a belligerent rumble. He watches me drive from the lot. When I check my rearview mirror, he's still standing by his car with his hands on his hips, insects swirling around him in the yellow light.

Probability

A single particle pops into existence,

Travels in a line

To a predestined point,

And disappears.

In its place there comes to be

Another piece of existence,

Distinctly different and apparently similar

But for its refracted trajectory,

And this second particle travels to its point B,

To point B',

As forecasted by the motion

Determined by the circumstances of its birth.

It exists in and of itself, that perceptual frame

Within which the universe rushes past

And over

And through

As it remains perfectly,

Absolutely,

Fixed in place.

And then ceases to exist.

Such is the life of Elaine Bueller,
Immaculately mobile from a station unmoving,
Forever in flux as every alteration
Simply brings to light a new shade of constancy,
An immutable volatility
Forever in repose at a breakneck speed
From A to B
From A' to B'
From A'' to B''
...

Consequence

Elaine Bueller strides across flush cobblestones in a downtown district. Her gaze is fixed ahead, on her passive brow an indiscernible affect. She cuts through the light foot traffic like a train through snow. When her path appears set for collision with an oncoming pedestrian, that parallel body is given to the inclination to step aside, yielding to the impassive gaze that looks forever through and forward. For all her apparent purpose, however, she is ultimately governed by base stimuli—a jellyfish in the sea of her own perception, she is bound by the moment's impulse, a strictly reactionary being. A sign catches her attention—Even Odds Billiards—and she pivots on her heel, walking toward the open door without breaking stride.

Inside, the pool hall is four tables deep with a long bar against the right wall. The bar is dimly lit, tables spotlighted from above. It is 6:20 and the happy hour crowd is there: Rogelio at the end of the bar talking to Troy, two seats away; Becky, Troy's ex-wife, at the opposite end flirting with Mike, who worked construction with Troy until the jobs slowed and he got dropped; two men play nine ball on the table in the back; Luce is behind the bar, idly listening in as Rogelio and Troy talk about the weather.

"But I'm just saying," says Troy, "Where does the wind come from? Everything comes from somewhere."

"Man, I'm tellin' you, it's the barometric pressure. Stuff gets pushed around, it's always moving." Rogelio is tired of the topic.

"But what pushes? It doesn't make sense, Ro, It don't feel right."

“You’re thinking about it wrong, man, it’s not like the wind over here is different from the wind over there, it’s all the same wind. Like, the Earth is a big circle, you know? It’s all the same wind moving up and down and left and right and over mountains and through streets and shit, you know? It’s all happening at once, man. You’re stuck in your own head.”

“Damn, that’s deep.” Troy scratches his neck and takes a slow pull from his mug.

“But what about lightning?”

Elaine powers into the bar with a purposeful stride and takes a stool in the space between Troy and Mike. She looks conspicuously to either side, catches Luce’s eye and raises her index finger in a prim gesture entirely out of place in the small bar. Luce takes a step toward her.

“Yeah?”

“I’ll have a whiskey, please.”

Luce nods and pours a well whiskey into a glass, serves it neat.

“You don’t look much like a whiskey type,” she says.

“Who’s to say that superficiality dictates desire?” Elaine returns.

“Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“So what type am I then?”

Luce considers this for only a moment before responding.

“Sazerac,” she says, “you’re the type that goes into a dive bar downtown and orders a sazerac. Bloody Mary if it’s before lunch.”

Elaine takes a sip of her whiskey while she considers this.

“Well, that may be the case. I might have ordered a sazerac if you had better advertised your expertise. In fact, I’ll have one after this.”

“How about a Cosmo.” Luce turns around and starts cleaning dishes with a bar rag. Troy has been listening in, and Rogelio is visibly relieved that they have abandoned the discussion of weather phenomena. Becky and Mike are speaking in undertones, leaned in close at the other end of the bar and oblivious of the thinly veiled hostility brewing beside them.

“What is that?” asks Troy. “A sazrack, I mean.”

“It’s a strong drink comprised of several liquors and garnished with an orange peel,” Elaine answers. Luce purses her lips, back still turned.

“Hey, that sounds alright... You really know how to make that kinda shit, Luce?”

Luce doesn’t turn around. “You ever try to order a goddamn sazerac in here and I’ll ban your ass.”

Troy laughs. Elaine is intently studying the wood grain of the bar top.

“Is anyone up for a game of billiards?” She asks, tracing a knot beneath the bar-top lacquer with her finger. Nobody bothers to respond, or even looks up from their drink.

“So Ro, we know electricity—but can you tell me why lightning looks like upside down trees?” Troy asks.

“What if we raised the stakes?” Elaine says, still speaking to the bar.

“What’re we talkin’ about here?” Rogelio is interested now; he leans forward in his stool, ignoring Troy’s question.

“The contents of my purse if you win, a handmade sazerac if I win.”

“What do you have in that bag?”

She cocks an eyebrow and she smiles out of the corner of her mouth.

Rogelio looks around. Luce shrugs and Troy nods at him. The two men at the back have stopped playing and are leaning on their cues, waiting for something to happen.

“What the hell, I’m in.” Rogelio nods at Elaine and they stand.

Elaine chalks up her cue while Luce pours Rogelio another drink. When he turns around, the rack is ready and the cue ball is set.

“Nine-ball is the game,” she says to him, “lag for break?”

“Sure.”

They each set a cue ball on either side and, at Elaine’s nod, bank it off of the foot. Elaine’s rolls to a finger’s width from the head cushion; Rogelio’s catches a lumpy bumper and is deflected off of the long side. He snatches the ball off the table and steps back.

“Tough luck,” Elaine wears an impish smile. She breaks, sinking the three and distributing the rest across the length of the table. What follows catches first Rogelio, then the drinkers, and then the two men at the back, by surprise. She sinks the one, then the two on a bank shot, and then the four on a long cross, and then the five down the line, and lines up the six to double the nine in with a kiss into the side pocket.

“Shit Ro, you got sharked!” Troy says from the bar. Elaine falters imperceptibly at the comment, then draws back and slowly, gracefully, sets the six in motion. It glances off of the nine and sends it rolling straight into the jaw. The ricochet sets the

nine centered on the edge of the side pocket, with the cue ball situated where a feather shot would pocket the nine. Rogelio sets up carefully. He checks his angles, leans down and bridges the cue, pulls up his pant leg and slowly draws, then doubles the six into the nine for a clean win.

“The rack is yours, good shot.” Elaine straightens her back and shakes his hand, handing him the purse with her free hand. He fumbles with the cue when he takes the purse. He grips it awkwardly with a stiff arm. Elaine sets her cue on the table and whirls away, making a beeline for the door.

“Hey, pay for your drink!” Luce yells after her. She does not respond. Ro throws the purse on the bar.

“Pay it from the purse,” Elaine says on the way out the door.

Luce opens the purse to find a long knife, a plastic grocery bag full of small stone figurines, some assorted silverware, and a department store women’s wallet. She opens it to find it empty but for a driver’s license belonging to one Sara Perejil of notably dark complexion.

“What did she say her name was?” Luce looks back and forth between Troy and Rogelio. Troy walks to the door and looks both directions down the street, turns back in and shrugs.

“She’s gone.”

Anika Awakens

A school bus glides across cracked pavement, every window plastered with palms and noses. The shoulder drops off into brambles on either side. It rocks from side to side as the road gets bumpier, then turns to gravel that grows into boulders. The bus is rocking violently now, scraping bottom but still moving and then the boulders fall away through nothingness and the bus tumbles in free fall without ever growing distant. I become aware that I am falling alongside the bus as I turn to look up to where the road was just in time to see a boulder flying toward me like a stone from a massive sling-shot.

My thoughts race through tunnels of neurons to catch up with themselves as the sunlight filters through my eyelids. There's a scratching noise behind me. A branch is scraping against a window. A watch beeping somewhere in the other room. I open my eyes.... I am on a long couch the color of burnt coffee. My sheet is wadded up at my feet. My pillow is clutched tightly to my chest. I am fully clothed.

Barnaby's. He let me stay here. Three days. I pivot to get my feet on the ground and grab my sheet. I fold it carefully, not letting the corners drop. The floor is filthy. Sunlight filters through a ragged towel hung over the window, casting the apartment in a bluish half-light. The whole place is just two rooms, refrigerator and stove against the far wall of the living room, which also serves as a foyer and dining room, although dining of any sort doesn't seem a regular occurrence here. The trashcan beside the fridge is overflowing with hamburger bags and Styrofoam cups. The trash overflows into beer boxes on the ground around it.

My boxes are stacked to the left of the door, my backpack open beside me. The bedroom door is cracked open. I have some leftover granola and trail mix that I picked up on the road, and I quietly sift through my backpack. I pull out my breakfast and my toothbrush. Sitting on the couch eating dried granola, I try to trace my steps to figure out how I got here. My head hurts. I tread lightly when I cross the living room to dig some aspirin out of the box marked 'bathroom'.

There's a noise on the other side of the door; Barnaby is awake. The floor creaks and the door swings open to reveal a disheveled and half-awake Barnaby in his underwear, yawning loudly with his eyes shut. He blindly walks to the refrigerator, opens it and grabs a beer without ever opening his eyes. I stand stock-still beside my boxes, uncomfortable and unsure of what to do. He looks into the fridge a moment longer, cracks the beer and turns around, letting the door swing shut. The moment the door closes, he opens his eyes and realizes that I am in the room. He slowly sets the beer down on the counter.

"I forgot you were here."

"Yeah," I falter. "Sorry."

He looks at the beer, looks at me, shrugs apologetically and takes it back to his room.

"Where is the bathroom?" I ask from my spot in the living room.

I hear him take a drink before answering.

"In here. Gimme a minute."

I hear the water run, groans, grunts, and belches from the other side of the door. I busy myself by flipping through old notebooks, adding to the doodles that line the margins. That was my favorite part of moving out, finding all of the

forgotten artifacts of those more enjoyable aspects of schooling. There was the yellow psychology notebook, lined with caricatures and visual puns; there was the blue math notebook with fractal patterns and attempts at the perfect circle; and the one that I thought had been lost forever, my anthropology notes concerning the evolution of thought. This one was packed full of morphological sketches and brain diagrams, doodles that were as useful as the text.

The brain-mind-thought relationship was sketched out in a series of concentric circles, and I absentmindedly add to these, radiating outward, when Barnaby appears in the living room fully clothed. He swings the door open and startles me into slashing a line across my drawing. He has combed his hair and put on clean slacks with a collared shirt but he still holds the beer and his face is haggard.

“All yours,” he gestures toward the bathroom.

I nod and walk through the doorway with my backpack clutched to my chest. His room consists of a futon mattress on a sagging frame, one slat apparently broken and another missing where some finishing nails stick out. There is a corresponding tear in the futon from the nails and tufts of white synthetic padding spill out like a waterfall in repose.

The bathroom is through a small door on the right; it is yellowed and claustrophobic, a small sink in front of the toilet and a boxy shower at the back. There are small dark hairs everywhere. I try not to think about it. In the mirror, my reflection watches me brush my teeth and I look back at the peeling wallpaper behind her.

When I come back to the living room, Barnaby is listening to talk radio and eating scrambled eggs from a bowl. It is a conservative program, and they're currently talking about the economic danger of social welfare programs.

"So I thought you were in college or something?" He says to me.

"It didn't work out."

"You got a job now?"

"I meant to talk to you about that. Do you know anywhere that's hiring?"

He wipes eggs from his chin and laughs before answering.

"Hell, you think I'd be here if I did?" The radio squawks about the entitled class.

"What have you been doing?"

"For money? Anything. Landlady lets me fix stuff, paint walls or whatever, to get a cut off of rent on slow months."

"So you don't have a job?"

He narrows his eyelids at me over his bowl as he shovels the last of the eggs into his mouth. The radio voice is babbling about immigration.

"The market's been rough." Egg bits cascade with every hard consonant. The radio has hit a feverish tempo. I need some air.

"I'm going to see what there is to find. I'll be back later." I shoulder my backpack and turn toward the door.

"Hey, let me know if there's anything looks good for me too."

"Yeah."

I let the door swing shut behind me and he's still sitting on that couch, eggs mashing around in his open mouth, breakfast beer on the coffee table in front of

him. The air in the hallway feels light and fresh. Deep breath. And another. I need to find a job.

Roy Tries

I slept on the couch again last night. After the girl showed up, I started thinking too much about everything that had happened and everything started to look dirty so I cleaned the apartment. When everything was in its place, I decided that they needed new places. Everything reminded me too much of everything else, so I took the candles and put them in the kitchen and put the picture frames in the closet and mixed up the paintings—but it all still looked the same.

The mirrors came down and the lamps went on the floor. I mixed up the furniture, put everything in the middle of the room and then shuffled it so that the couch was against the wall and the coffee table was in front of the window. When I woke up this morning the sun was in my face. I dreamt something about whales singing about how they weren't in the water anymore and they missed it, and then it all went away when the sun came up.

Today I will see Paolo, I will ask him what I should do, and then I will try to meet the new girl. The apartment is a very clean mess right now. Nothing is quite right but it will do for now.

For breakfast I fry an egg. I let it cook slowly while I stand over the stove and the heat warms my face. At the first flip, I hear a footstep overhead. Barnaby's never up this early, and it's too light—it has to be her. So she stayed there overnight. I listen to the noise upstairs while my egg cooks, making stories out of the creaking floorboards. I chew slowly, pausing whenever I hear movement. I feel like David Attenborough narrating a nature special, observing from afar through sound binoculars and trying to learn the habits of a new creature in the wild.

Here, we see that she gets up early. She is quiet. That dropping sound is indicative of a common practice among her people in which they fumble with their earrings when they first wake up.

Those close-together footsteps—is it dancing, or is she making the bed? That sliding sound is clearly her moving Barnaby’s passed out body out of the way so she can make breakfast: bacon, eggs, and toast with strawberry preserves. No, probably a bowl of cereal and some grapefruit. Or a waffle.

The floor groans, then a shuffling thump makes its way over from the other side of the ceiling. Barnaby woke up. The sounds are muddy now, but I don’t think she’s moving. A moment passes. My eggs get cold.

Another sliding noise, and then I hear the upstairs door open. I scramble, set down my plate, grab my shoes, set them down, and a million thoughts pound through my head before her footsteps pass by outside the door.

My appetite is gone and the last few bites of breakfast go into the trash. What’s going on? It’s not like I even know this person and I’m freaking out about nothing. I still haven’t figured out if or when I’m going back to school, or paying rent, or living here anymore. The furniture is in the way. The back bedroom hasn’t been touched in a week. I need to get it together, go see Paolo. Ducks in a row. Ducks in a row. I take my shoes from the bookshelf in the middle of the room and lace them tightly. It’s a long walk to Paolo’s.

Gerry's Plight

There's a dark-stain filing cabinet in the corner of the bedroom. Holds all the bank statements and receipts. They tried to stop mailing them, only keep 'em on the internet, made pains to guilt me away from paper. Eventually they just stopped sending them.... I started going by hand and checking in person.

The cabinet is ordered by date, not categorized. Time to sift. Looking for real estate, Virgil's, bank statements, see where I stand. The piles get sloppy and surround me. There's a method, there's order. It's finding itself.

Monthly expenses:

Rent- 30 (signed contract with Virgil, dated Apr. 1 1972)

Food- ~20 (Used to be Samantha helped, doesn't come by so much any more)

Chicken Feed- 8

Electricity- 12

Water- 10

Park Fees- Waived for help with the upkeep

Gas/Transportation- Not sure (truck sat up a while, tags are out)

Monthly income:

eggs?

Estimated Account Balance:

\$1408.xx

Might could use some income, but I've got by all right this far. The truck might pull some cash. Could stretch the budget, sell the hens if I can't take them. If I have a place to go.

One of the trailers down the way has a stack of papers in front. One of the last to move out, must've forgot to cancel their subscription. I been watching them get delivered each morning. Boy doesn't bother asking, throws it on the pile. Nobody would miss one off the top. The sun is past its peak... the sky is clear. It will be a hot summer.

The walk was longer than it looked. I stop on the porch to catch my breath and the paper is wet in my hand. My eyes sting with sweat. There's a breeze, almost cool, on the porch. I take a seat and unroll the paper, find the classifieds.

Apartments/Housing. Fine print, left my reading glasses on top of the filing cabinet inside. I open the window for the breeze and sit in the armchair beside my bed.

Apartments

Small efficiency, 1br 1bth 550/mo. Good neighborhood, no pets, no smoking. Call or text 476-829-5454

2 br 1.5 bath near campus, \$875.

Email aptfind76@gmail

3 bedroom townhouse, downtown, great
view. Walk in closet. Balcony. 1200,
month to month with good credit.

They're all the same. Expensive, not for me. I can't see myself walking through an empty apartment, signing a lease. Never had a credit card. No employment in eight or ten years. There's nowhere would take me. Except a home, maybe. Used to visit my aunt Susan in a home. Place smelled like asparagus. The halls were filled with the demented. I never could stay long.

I set the paper down and let my head drop back. The breeze from the window smells like spring. My plants will die without me. I need to sell the birds.

Anika Drives

The sun is out and I drive with my windows down, no strict direction other than the task at hand—find a job. Financial security. A way out. It seems more difficult the more I mull it over. I never used to struggle finding jobs, it just happened; I knew people around town, storeowners would recognize me. Here I am invisible. Nobody knows me or has any reason to look twice. Just another college kid passing through in a beat-up old station wagon.

My fuel gauge shows a quarter tank... I should park. There are empty spots all along the main roads, but no apparent focal point to work outward from. The businesses are scattered with amorphous districting, barbershops beside art studios and government buildings.

The college bar strip is dirty in the daylight, rundown and unappealing. All the bars are closed anyway, and I'd rather work at a restaurant. Tips afford cash in hand at the end of the night and turnover's usually high enough that they won't burn you if you don't stick around. A sign at the end of the road looks promising- Suzee's Grill, lit by bulbs around the perimeter and typecast in rope. My pace quickens and I straighten my hair in a window's reflection.

I push through the swinging doors to an empty bar that smells of stale smoke. There is no host, and the only customers are a table with four older women playing cards and a few people at the bar. The bartender, a woman with as many wrinkles as there are bottles behind her, is the only employee I can see. Putting on my best plastic smile, I set my shoulders back and walk up to her. She sees me

coming and meets me at the close end of the bar.

"What'll it be?" She croaks.

"I was actually wondering if you were hiring right now, I'm new in town and it looked-"

"Was there a sign in the window?"

"Well, I didn't see any sign..." I turn and look toward the window.

"There's your answer." A murmur of quiet laughter ripples through the drunks at the bar.

"I'm sorry, I don't follow."

"If I needed help, I'd put a sign in the window. There's no sign. Now, you want a drink? I can help you with *that*." Now their chuckling is more audible.

"No thank you, I don't drink in the morning." I cast a reproachful look back at the people at the bar and turn to leave.

"Hey, I hear the Foxtrot's hiring!" One of the men jeers as I walk toward the doors. They all laugh and I push through the doors with my chin held high and my lip quivering. When I get outside the street is blurry, and I walk through a muddled existence until the cigarette stench is behind me.

A red flash of a fire hydrant stops me on the sidewalk and I think about where I am and why. Get a job. Push through it. So that's not the place for me, there has to be something better. There always is.

For the rest of the day I walk around, applying everywhere from pizza joints to a movie theater. Only three places even bothered to give me an application, and the manager of a live music venue took my number down (although I question his

motives). Of the three, the only one that looked promising was an arts and crafts supply store called Art's Crafts. When I asked, the teenage boy behind the register said that his grandfather's name was Arthur and his mother was a fan of stupid puns. I told him that I enjoyed a pun as much as the next girl and he was not amused. Now, feet sore and spirit failing, my plight seems unlikely to resolve itself in a timely manner. It all rides on those three applications. The car is farther away than I remembered.

By the time my key turns in the ignition, the streetlights glow along the avenue. The drive back to Barnaby's is slow; I'm in no hurry. Every light seems to be red, so I start making right turns just to keep moving. By the time the sun slips all the way below the horizon I am on the edge of town.

I hit the highway loop and hang a left onto the frontage road to get back to the right side of town. On the access ramp, a sign catches my eye—The Foxtrot, with a neon sign of a sultry looking fox on its back, winking slowly in choppy three-frame animation. Below the fox, the marquis board reads 'now hiring -- no experience -- ca\$h pay'. I mash the gas to merge ahead of an eighteen-wheeler and put the lights behind me. The neon fades away in my rearview mirror as the last of the day's grey streaks lets darkness take the sky.

Roy Visits the Farm

The shoulder drops away a half mile before Paolo's farm, so I have to run through the grass and the stickers get knotted in my leg hair and at the bottom of my shorts. I finally decide to just walk in the road and move over when cars come. It's on the very edge of town, probably the longest I've run, or walked, ever. I have sweat in my eyes and my feet hurt. My hair slaps my forehead and sprays salt across my face every time I start to run again. There aren't a lot of cars on this road. It's just two lanes and there's crunchy gravel along the side so I can always hear them coming. Only two have passed so far.

The farm is between a big overgrown property that's been for sale as long as I've known it and a little soil and feed lot that usually looks closed. Paolo only has ten acres and he once told me that it splits the difference between a farm and a garden, but he sells eggs and veggies at farmers' markets so I think it's a real farm. It doesn't come into view until I make it around the bushes on the edge of the empty lot, then the little house pops up like it was there forever.

The whole place is like that, like it's been there all along and you just have to look for it to find it again. The house is pale yellow with dark green shutters and it's entirely made out of wood and bricks. There's a dog run in the middle between the living part and the working part where he keeps all the tools and bags of nutrients and seeds and chicken wire. I walk through the middle and knock on the wall as I go. My mom used to say that the backyard is where he really lives. A scratching noise is coming from the back porch.

“Paolo?” I ask and swing around the corner. It’s just a chicken scratching away at pebbles on the concrete slab. The porch has a wooden table with sections of tree stumps for chairs and a long bench against the wall.

“Roy?” Paolo walks around the back of the work side. He is short, shorter than me, and very tan. He’s wearing an old Hawaiian shirt with sweat stains and frayed edges. He leans on his shovel and gives me a long look. “How have you been?” He asks me and my mouth goes dry.

“I’ve been okay.”

“How did you get here? Did you walk?”

“I jogged most of the way, but I walked some of it.”

“Have you been running?”

“Sometimes. A little bit.”

“That’s good. Have you been going to school?”

I shake my head no. “Can I get some water?”

“Of course.” He sets his shovel against the wall and walks inside. I follow a few steps behind with my head down. The inside of the house is small and cluttered with books and everything that he’s thought he could reuse: there are wine bottles, broken hat racks, cracked vases, a few old pool cues and golf clubs in the corner, and a very large table in the middle of the room covered with stuff that most people would call junk. He slides a glass of water toward me on the countertop that separates the kitchen from the clutter. “Would you like to visit your mom?”

I take the glass, sip slowly, and nod.

A short walk later, we're at the back of the property in front of a big rock, perfectly smooth with no cracks and no markings. We pulled it from a creek down the road last week. It was what she wanted. The soil around the rock was fresh, but a few buds poked through.

"I planted wildflowers around it," he said, pointing at the little leaves that had made their way to the light.

"That's nice." It really is. It's peaceful out here.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. This is really how she would have—" I choke on my words. It really does feel right, like it should feel good, but it doesn't. Something doesn't feel right at all. It's me.

"I'll give you a moment." Paolo pats me on the shoulder, awkwardly and deliberately gentle with calloused worker's hands, and walks back toward the gardens.

The sun is shining through the trees onto the smooth rock on the freshly turned dirt. The flowers are just beginning to find their own legs. I hope he planted perennials—I'll ask later. She really *would* have liked it out here, probably even would have liked the idea that she's feeding these flowers, or more likely the trees, even in death.

But I'm really selfish enough to be upset by where and when she left me. A year away from being able to live on my own, right at the beginning of spring, when things are supposed to be good.... And she had to go ahead and stop taking her medicine. Now what do I do? Now what?

My face feels raw and I taste salt and realize that everything has slipped out of focus. My mouth is moving, but it takes a moment to figure out what I'm trying to say.

"Why-" birds chirp in the trees above us. They sound far away.

I sit there beside the stone for another twenty or thirty minutes before walking back to the house, where Paolo is waiting with a mug of tea and a pot of pasta on the stove. I'm not hungry. We sit in silence on the back porch, looking out toward the tree line until our mugs are empty. He asks me if I'm ready to go and I nod. He offers a ride and I nod. He packs vegetables and eggs into a cardboard box while I sit outside and watch the sun drop toward the tops of the trees. Twice I catch myself taking ghost sips from my empty mug.

He drops me off with a week's worth of groceries and an offer of conversation whenever I want or need it. Welcome anytime, he says, you're welcome any time. I nod and carry the box up the stairs.

My neck is stiff from looking straight ahead for so long. When I get into the apartment, the groceries put themselves away and I watch myself take off my shoes and crawl onto the couch that is on the wrong side of the room and from across the room I watch myself drift away into nothing.

Gerry Goes Out

My records are scattered across the bed. The piles got mixed at the edges, still separate though. There's nothing to wait for, no plan to be made. Might as well wait in good company.... Or whatever kind of company is out there.

Haven't been out to town in a while. Since before the truck stopped running. Long before. Since the VFW closed down, uninhabitable, they said. Hasn't been much of a reason to go out wasting money like that. Figure if this isn't excuse enough for a drink then not much is.

I've had the truck on a trickle charger. It starts first try. There was a pool hall down toward town, used to have cheap drinks. See if it's still there. No reason not to.

The place is as much a dive as ever. I park on the street in front of the door and check my watch. 6 PM. Tuesday. Should be a few drunkards at the bar, table or two open. Woman with her hair in a bun walks out. The place has changed. A moment later a man looks after her. She already turned the corner. I pop the latch and my door swings open. The street is nearly empty. It takes a moment to remind me why I'm there. A moment where nothing happens. I slam the door shut and walk into Even Odds.

The inside's all the same. Tables are missing a little more felt, maybe. A little darker, more wear warps in the lacquer. Same beers on draught. I rest against a stool and

the bargirl takes my order. A beer. Any Beer? She asks me. Not some piss-water. She says you gotta go down the street for that shit and gets me something with a tint to it.

There are four more people at the bar. Keep to themselves, mostly. Seems they've been awhile. The couple reads news, the two at the other end talk quiet. Scratch notes on a bar tab every now and then. I'm on my third and haven't spoken since the first. It hasn't changed much.

Didn't stay long. It's barely dark. The truck started again. I took the long way home. The roads have changed.

Anika Gets Home

It is dark by the time I get back to Barnaby's and I almost don't see him in the parking lot. He's sitting on a folding chair under the tree with a cooler next to him and a beer in his hand. The streetlight flickers across the street and it feels colder already. I park in the spot closest to the street and roll my windows up; I just want to go inside and get some rest. As soon as I open the door I know that Barnaby will say something, and I know he's drunk... I can only linger in the car for so long.

The moment I open the door he yells from his chair.

"Hey little Anika, you find us jobs?"

"It's been a long day."

"Oh yeah, long day. Yeah."

"I'm going in."

"You mind grabbing me another six while you're up there?"

There are already eight or ten cans on the ground around him and his words are loose, his face is slack and glossy. I stand with my back against my car.

"I think you've had enough."

"Oh, you think what you want but you don't fucking tell me what to do. You're staying in my apartment you get me a fucking beer when I tell you."

I reel at his outburst. I've never seen this side of him, and he's not done.

"You're worse than your goddamned mother, self-righteous family all think they know everything about whatever, keep it to your damn selves, can't even follow

simplest instructions. I say get a beer you say 'no Barnaby I know what's best' like I don't have a fucking head on my own shoulders, I say 'get a beer' you get me a beer!"

My arms are crossed and my lip is trembling. I'm scared. Yessir, I say, and he says damn right, and I walk past him to the apartment. I keep my neck straight and my back is tense; I don't look back after I get inside. The stairs look dark and hopeless. I move silently up toward the light switch on the second floor landing and turn it on. Nothing happens. I keep moving up the stairs to Barnaby's loft.

The only light on when I walk in is a lamp with a heavy shade in the corner. It casts a sepia tone onto the walls and casts deep shadows on my boxes by the door. I collapse on the couch and bury my face in the pillow. It smells like sweat and beer.

Roy and the Super

Paolo gave me a ride home after my visit, and on the way we talked about how I was going to 'handle the situation.' He told me I should do the legal thing and report the death and risk going into foster care, but he also said it wasn't really his business and that the only person whose choice it was is me. I decided not to take the risk.

Today I will visit Mrs. Langtree. She lives at the first door of the first floor and mostly stays inside now, but she used to always be outside making things look nice and saying hello to people. She's a nice lady.... I don't know what I'm going to say.

She answers on the first knock. She has grey hair, a braided ficus tree by the door, and two or three cats. If it's three (and I think it is) then two of them look the exact same. My mom got along with her all right but never came down here to just talk or anything because she said that Langtree would talk your ear right through your skull if you gave her the chance.

"Hello Roy, how are you?" She is holding a coffee mug with both hands in front of her.

"Hi Mrs. Langtree, can I come in?"

"Certainly, can I help you with something?"

"I think so. I'd rather talk about it in private."

She steps aside and one of the white cats darts toward the door. With lightning hands she grabs it by the scruff of the neck and folds it into her arms without spilling her coffee. She must see me watching because she says with her

back turned, stepping into the apartment, that the cats are always making bids for freedom but they're really quite happy in the apartment.

"They just bumble about aimlessly any time I do let them out, then bring me half-alive critters. The sentiment is really very nice, but I'd prefer to keep them where I can see them. So, Roy, what brings you here today?"

I shuffle my feet and scratch my neck before looking up at her. She looks back at me with surprisingly bright eyes and a cat in her arms.

"I have an unusual favor to ask. I'm in a tricky situation."

"Yes?"

"My mom—" I clear my throat— "my mom just passed away."

"Oh you poor thing, I'm so sorry! I didn't even... was she ill?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. For a while. But it just happened, last week."

"Where are my manners, please, take a seat— I'll put on some tea. Or coffee, do you drink coffee? Are you hungry?"

"No, no thank you." My stomach growls.

"Nonsense, I'll whip something up."

She whirls off toward the kitchen and pots and pans clink together. The living room has prints of flowers on the walls and the couch is colored like a Monet painting. The black cat walks in from the other room and jumps onto the windowsill without looking my way.

"Do you like spaghetti?" She calls from the kitchen.

"Yeah. Yes, Ma'am."

The white cat (or the other white cat) walks toward me from the kitchen. Its tail is high and it never looks directly where it's going. I run my fingers along the coffee table and its ears swivel toward the noise. By the time Mrs. Langtree walks back in the room the cat has claimed me for its own and stretches out on my lap, curling its tail in my face and just barely clawing at my jeans.

"It should be ready in twenty or thirty minutes. I brought some refreshments for the wait." She sets down a tray of cheese and crackers and a glass of water and sits on the lumpy armchair across from me. "Please," she continues, "ask of me this favor."

Over the next twenty minutes I told her everything that had happened, how my mother stopped taking her medicine and how the doctors warned her and then when she didn't wake up one morning. I could tell she was dead before I touched her face. It looked like something was missing—the cold was visible. Then me and Paolo wrapped her up in the sheets and brought her down to his truck at night and buried her the next day at the back of his property. She never wrote a will but she would talk about it. She always told me that she wanted to be buried wrapped in cotton in the shade, and Paolo was her only friend that I knew of. She bought food from him for years and eventually they got to know each other. They were the same kind of people... they would drink tea and talk about everything on the back porch while I played with rocks and sticks and wrestled with Paolo's dog that died when I was ten. They talked about philosophy and art and flowers and food and trees and water and politics and other stuff that they would get quiet about when I came around. I told her about how I went into the office and gave them the note, and how they didn't ask many questions but I haven't been to school in a few days now and nobody seems to

mind. I told her how I might need to get a job but I can still pay rent, and how there is a shoebox full of wadded up bills in my mom's closet so I'll be all right for a little while even if nobody hires me right away. She listens closely with a cat in her lap and every now and then takes sips from her coffee mug. When I finish she sets her mug down and looks at me like she's worried.

"First things first, you need to go back to school."

"So you won't tell?"

"I didn't say that, but I won't do anything that would put you in jeopardy."

"What does that mean?"

"I won't let anybody take you away until you are willing, and your rent can be waived. Under no circumstances are you to take a full-time job, not until you finish high school."

"But what about rent?"

"You can help out around the building, there's always work to be done. Save your money for essentials and emergencies. This is too much for a boy your age to handle. I need you to promise me that you will continue your education and, most importantly, let me know any time you need anything."

"Okay, thank you. I will do that."

"Anything. You promise?"

"Promise."

She looks me in the eye for a moment and I look back at her, then she goes into the kitchen. The air smells like marinara. A few minutes later she brings me a plate of hot spaghetti with a chunky tomato sauce. I eat fast. It's the best food I've

had in days. She eats carefully across from me and still has most of hers left when I finish. I play with the cat and snack on cheese and crackers while she finishes eating. She asks if I want any more, but I'm all right. Just snacking. When she sets down her fork she leaves half of the portion uneaten.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" She asks after wiping the corners of her mouth with a napkin.

"You've helped a lot already. Really, more than enough." I stand and she does the same.

"Roy, you're a good kid, and I want you to know that I'm very sorry that this has happened to you. Now it's the kitties' dinner time, I'm sure you understand." She strokes the white cat in her arms and goes to the kitchen. The black cat follows her.

"Goodbye Roy, come by if you need anything else."

Cans clink in the kitchen and another white cat runs toward the noise from the other room.

"Goodbye Mrs. Langtree. Thanks for everything."

I knew there were three.

Anika's Evaluation

I must have fallen asleep like that, with my face in the pillow and the pillow in my hands, because Barnaby's words are muffled and it takes me a second to figure out what's happening. He has knocked over my boxes and is ranting madly, pacing the living room and waving his arms about. All of the lights are on and the radio blares from his bedroom.

"—I'm kind enough to extend my *apartment* to you with no notice and you just come by and judge me for who I am, who the hell do you think you are? Why are you here? What are you doing here? You don't have a job, you don't have any money, you're a freeloader! You're trying to catch a free ride! How many people have you played like this? I bet you're a serial fucking couch surfer, mooching off of family, draining us dry and taking, taking, taking, and not even getting me a sixer! That's the *least*—"

"Uncle Barnaby, please calm down—"

"I *am* calm, you think I'm not calm? This is my happy face, doesn't get more fucking calm than this," he stops pacing to face me, still sitting on the couch, clutching this sweat-and-beer scented pillow as tightly as I can, wishing I were anywhere else in the world.

"Where did you come from?" He asks, eyes dancing in their sockets as he wildly searches my face for answers. My mouth is slightly agape and my cheeks feel heavy.

"I was—"

“Nowhere. You came from nowhere. And you had nowhere to go. That’s the only reason you’re here, only reason you would come here, is ‘cause you had nowhere else to go.”

“Please, I won’t—“

“Why are you here? Tell me, why are you here? Surely not for a visit with old Uncle Bernie, that crotchety old codger, the family’s punching bag, no, you’re here for a free ride but let me tell you there’s no such thing.”

“I’m sorry that I came here.”

“Damn right you are.” He kicks the boxes again. “All this shit, I don’t like it, it needs to be gone tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

He points the boxes and looks at me.

“Tomorrow.”

I nod and stand up.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

“To get a job.”

The night air is cold now, and I drive with the windows up. The radio is off. I retrace my path down the highway until I see the neon lights. Cash pay. A part of me burns with the thought of what I am about to do. I bundle it up, tightly, and bury it. I’ve waited tables, I’ve served drinks, I can do this. Just like any other job. Put on a face, work hard, stay sharp. Plastic smile.

Causality

A cog whirrs in an oil bath

Flecked with flakes

Metal shavings.

Driven by a scaled-up mate,

The transfer is indirect

Through chromoly steel

To a sliding system

Sprockets in ascending order.

The oil churns in thick drops

Flecked with stars

They dance in exponential accelerando

Oil boiling to frenetic discord

Gears meshing, mashing, straining,

Torsion threatening the joint

And it is released.

The vibrations slow,

The spitting oil eases to a roll,

The grouped gears disengage,

Slide,

And shift.

And the crescendo begins again.

Chances Are...

In a room without windows a double-basin utility sink drips erratically. There are doors on either end of the small room, one free-swinging and one with a handle. Both are still. Bags of flour and unlabeled three-to-five-gallon tubs line the high shelves across from the sink. A poorly tuned radio emits rapid-fire Spanish vocals on the other side of the swinging door. The air is heavy and humid; the room is poorly ventilated. A woman bursts through the door, followed closely by a man wearing a stained apron and a Vulcain timepiece on his wrist. He whirls around and confronts her in a furious whisper.

Goddammit Elaine we can't do this again.

I don't mean to, it just-

I'm trying to stay straight, we're too old-

Steve I'm trying too it's just harder when-

Bullshit it's harder, you have a choice, you know what you're doing, we've been through this before-

Never like this though, I'm really trying this time.

Are you? Elaine, I can only explain so much away. People ask questions.

I can answer them. I can speak for myself.

Apparently not. We've jumped four cities in the last six months. It can only go on for so long, we can only land so many dead-end jobs before we lose it and the streak drops out from under us or somebody catches on, this needs to go somewhere. We need to go somewhere.

Where? Where the hell is there for us to go?

I need to go somewhere, and you can come if you want to.

What are you saying?

I'm taking the van to Seattle. Not getting tied up in your small-game shit anymore.

I'll go with you.

Will you?

I'll keep it on the easy, nothing stupid, nothing impulsive. We'll talk, plan. That's all we need, baby, is communication. We're great together. They can't catch us, can't come close.

And what if they do?

They won't.

Entertain the notion. If.

If they catch us, then I'll take the fall. You see this smile? Juries love me.

Be real for a second. I can't take the risk. We're getting old, Elaine.

Speak for yourself.

I put in my two weeks' notice. Last Sunday. This is happening.

You didn't tell me?

I tried, you never gave me the chance. I'm leaving on Wednesday. Got some family there, might try to settle down.

You know I can't do that.

I'm telling you this so you can figure something out for yourself.

I had it figured and this wasn't it.

I have to go back to work.

Can we talk about this later?

We just talked about it. That's it.

Steve walks out of the room and Elaine stands facing the shelves of raw ingredients.

After a quick glance toward the door, she pulls the watch out of her pocket and fiddles with the dials, reveling in her perceived victory. When the watch loses its appeal, she stands on a bucket to pull down a bag from the top shelf. On top of the bag is a small box. She places the watch in the box alongside a pair of emerald earrings, a gilded billfold, and a woman's wallet emptied of all identification. Then she sets the box on top of the sack of flour and slides them both to the back of the top shelf before moving the bucket under the sink. She fixes her hair, brushes flour from her hands, and pushes through the swinging doors.

Gerry Goes for a Drink

The night is only half there. The city lights won't let it go. I sit in my truck. Ahead of me the horizon is bright and there are no stars. The Milky Way spreads across the rearview mirror.

My head swims. I am halfway home, pulled over to the side of the road to jimmy the headlight's wiring when one side went out. The engine is still running and the radio is on. An advertisement airs with an increase in volume. Fifty cent drinks, women, cheap steak. The foxtrot. I went once to a place like that.

Forty some-odd years ago... A coworker found out it was my 35th birthday. Name was Ronnie, drank too much, missing a front tooth. He got a few of the plant guys together and dragged me to the place— It was a dive. Filthy, smelled off. Nothing much to see. They got theirs and I got mine, I left early. But fifty cents, price is right. Could go for one more.

I've seen the place by the highway, all lit up and flashy, just a few miles east of here. The gravel crunches when I pull onto the two-lane highway.

The parking lot is colorful, looks bright until you're in it. Under neon lights the ground looks soft.... Bumps get smoothed out. The bouncer saw me park, gives a look but pulls the rope aside. Lets me in. The inside is nicer than expected. Red

lighting everywhere, soft yellow on the tables. Red upholstery, polyvinyl booths.
Wet bar at the back with a short order cook.

Seems there were more cars in the lot than people in the club. Nobody acknowledges me. Perfect. Not a single head turns when I walk to the bar. The bartender is the first person to look at me. He's a young man, looks near thirty, thin hair.

"Hey there sir, getcha a drink?"

"What'll fifty cents get me?"

"Domestic on draft or a vodka well."

"The former."

"Any preference?"

"Full flavor."

"My man, my man, good taste. Make those quarters count."

He pulls a Budweiser into a plastic cup. When he hands it to me it is small. Eight or ten ounces, maybe. I pay with a dollar and tip the change.

"Enjoy," he says. I find a booth and sit. On stage a woman twirls for the few on the edge. She works them one by one. They eat it up. She teases them, they pay, she drops clothes until the song ends in the nick of time. A girl walks over with a tray of drinks.

"Good evening, sir, can I get you anything? A drink, or a menu if you're hungry?"

She looks tense, uncomfortable.

"No thankee, I've got a drink right here."

“Okay. If you need anything, I’ll be your server this evening, just flag me down.”

I nod and she turns away.

“You don’t look like the rest of them,” I say to her back. She turns around.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You don’t like it here.”

“I don’t think anyone does.”

“Like it, maybe not. Used to it though.”

“I hope not to be here that long.” She smiles. Her face is tired.

“You’re new?”

She nods, “and I’m not sure how much longer I can last, to be honest.”

“What brought you here?”

“Oh God, desperation, I don’t know. Nowhere else to go.”

“There’s always somewhere else.”

“I have no options. Nothing left. Or else I wouldn’t be here.”

“Everywhere you’ve never been. That’s somewhere else.”

She gets a look in her eye like the walls turned clear. Like she’s looking at the stars. I finish my beer. The bottom of the cup is imprinted. 8 OZ. Should’ve expected the gyp.

“Would you like another?” She asks. I shake my head.

“I should leave now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I stand slowly. My back is tight. She offers her arm.

“I didn’t catch your name,” she says.

“Gerry.”

“You have a good night, Gerry.”

“Yes’m, thank you. And you, your name?” She pauses, hesitates before answering.

“Anika,” she says.

Roy Listens

The only footsteps upstairs have been Barnaby's. They are heavy and clumsy and it sounds like every time he moves he knocks something over. Half an hour ago I put on a record. George Benson's *Beyond the Blue Horizon*. It was my mother's favorite, one of the good ones that you can just put on and listen through without feeling the time pass.

It's on side B and there's a scratch that pops on every rotation. I didn't know it wasn't supposed to be there until I heard the CD version and it sounded like there was something missing. It's weird how the closer it gets to the middle of the record, the more the pop stands out. It feels longer. Like a slow build, almost, just the scratch doing its own thing while the music plays in the background. Like the scratch is the music and the rest is just filler. Something falls and rolls across the floor upstairs. The music is low and the air in the room is warm and heavy.

Something thumps on the ceiling more loudly than before and my head pops up. The record is skipping at the end of side B. A light is buzzing in the hallway and the footsteps upstairs are faster and heavier now, more irregular. Barnaby is drunk. Another hard hit upstairs and the lights flicker. It doesn't sound like moving furniture, it sounds like stuff is breaking. Now that my music stopped I can hear the radio going up there, tinny, can barely hear it through the walls. It's either sloppy music or fast radio talk, and the words all blend together into a shapeless sound like mud dripping from the ceiling. There's another thump upstairs and then something glass falls and breaks. Barnaby yells but it sounds like he's alone.

For the next two hours I drift in and out of sleep, the waves of sound from upstairs pulling me under and then the bumps bringing me back. The noise has kept up, escalating and then backing off until I hear footsteps walk past my door and up the stairs to the loft. Then, a beat of silence before the cloud breaks. It's like hail on a tin roof, like a piñata burst upstairs and a dozen little feet are fighting to get one of a hundred little thumps all making their way to me in vibrations through the floorboards. And then it is quiet again, and my head drops back down—

Anika's Stuff

I left before midnight and still made more money than I'd ever made in a week. It was exhilarating, exhausting, simultaneously demeaning and rewarding. It was a gilded Hell, a cesspool of temptation covered in a layer of deceit beneath colored lights. The patrons were unconvincing liars, the disparaged. It was filthy.²

There was one person who seemed as out of place there as I was, though, an older man who came alone and left after one drink. He said something that made me think about why I was there, that still has me thinking, wondering what brought me here, driving through the late night into the early morning on the way back to the place I'd rather not be.

I can't live like this, sleeping on Barnaby's couch and subjecting myself to a dozen drunken men's derision for a pocket full of cash every night. I am going fifty-five on the highway, in no hurry to get where I'm going. There are no other cars on the road and the moon is almost full, making the spaces between the streetlights shimmer before they are broken by the headlights' glare.

I pull into the lot quietly, turning the lights off before the car is stopped. The building is dark save for slanted light through the blinds upstairs and a dull glow in the window beneath. The night air is cool and my skin feels greasy, slick. I wipe my face on my sleeve and move up towards the loft. Just one more night, this will be the last night; I need to find something new. I need a home.

² Morally, socially, ethically, say what you will, but what got me was the hygiene... or lack thereof. The crusty film across everything, the smell of sweat and perfume, it was all too much for me. An unjustifiable cost.

The energy is palpable from outside the door. Barnaby is drunk. I can't tell what he's doing but he's moving around, dropping things; the radio plays in the background. The lock isn't fully engaged and a sliver of light peeks around the jamb. I knock before pushing the door open.

Barnaby is wearing stained slacks and a wife-beater, doing full justice to the pejorative name with a beer gut spilling out and malice in his bloodshot eyes. The room is a mess. His eyes stumble up to mine as he slowly becomes aware of my presence.

"Hey, you. You don't live here."

"This is my last night, Uncle Barnaby, I just really need a shower and—"

"You, you need... Stuff. The needs."

"I just need a place to sleep."

"The stuff, your stuff, it is trash." He kicks the boxes.

"It will all be gone by tomorrow."

"You think because of the stuff that you are something but no, this is nothing." He kicks the boxes again and one falls off the top with a crunch. Barnaby's eyebrows spike in interest. He pushes another one off of the top and laughs. "The stuff now, the stuff now is falling!" He looks me in the eye with a wicked smile and his gaze wanders across my unaffected face.

"Please don't—"

He pushes another box to the ground. It falls with a thud and I find myself indifferent.

“I really don’t care about any of that. You’re right. It’s just stuff. I’m not worried about it. I’m taking a shower.”

“Oh, you don’t say?” He pushes another box down.

“Please, Barnaby, cut it out. Why are you doing this.”

“Who the fuck are you, you question, my house, and you think-“ he kicks one of the boxes “-you think you just put all your shit in my living room, and act like some entitled snot nosed kid-“ he knocks the last box off the top “-lookin for somebody to take care of you. Not me, kid, no uh-uh.” He kicks the last box and my wine glass breaks inside, the sound muffled by the clothes it was wrapped in. “Grow the fuck up,” he says as he ambles toward the bedroom, “and get the fuck out of my house.”

I pack my backpack through tears and take a few unbroken essentials out of the boxes. My clothes smell like perfume and beer and sweat and my backpack is heavy. The rest of the stuff in the boxes is trash, for all I care. I have no place for it and no need for it; he can do with it what he wants. The stairs feel longer than usual and the light seems to be flickering at a slower frequency than before. At the second floor landing I lean back and slide down the wall; with my spine resting against the backpack and my arms crossed over my knees, I close my eyes.

Roy and his Blanket

It is dark and it takes a moment before I realize that my eyes are open. My focus shifts to the vaguely defined patterns on the ceiling. The last thing I heard before I fell asleep was the loud noise upstairs, right after the new girl got home. Now everything is still again except for the hum of the air conditioning. I lay my head back down on the pillow and wait for sleep and then—my ears perk up and my eyelids open all the way—there’s a sound outside the door. It’s too soft to make out with my head buried in the couch. I creep toward it, barefoot on the oak plank floor, legs pumped and arms out. The door feels cool against my hand and I wait there, listening, before I check the peephole. An empty hallway. I start to turn away and then, almost hidden beneath the apartment’s electrical hum, a noise. High pitched and sad, like a whimper almost too quiet to hear. I turn the knob and the door swings open to the yellowed wallpaper of the hallway.

On the first glance it looks empty, but with a step out I see the girl, sitting against the wall ten or twelve feet down from the open door. She has a backpack on and her hair fans out over the top. Her head is between her knees and her arms are crossed, almost like she’s a forgotten student who fell asleep during a tornado drill. She’s shivering a little bit and her knuckles are white where she clutches her arms together. It’s drafty in the hallways here. I’m not sure what to do.

I go back inside the apartment and leave the door open. The hall closet is packed full of odds and ends, rarely used cleaning supplies and heavy jackets, random knick-knacks and wall ornaments from around the house, and at the back are a few blankets. I pull the first one out and it’s a brass-band cartoon blanket from

when I was little. The next one is a thick flannel blanket with a red plaid pattern—
It's a little musty but it'll do.

When I walk back outside she's moved slightly, resting more on the backpack now, leaning sideways like she's in the slow process of laying down on the floor. I try to unfold the blanket and put it over her but she mumbles something when my shadow falls across her face and I freeze. I fold the blanket and set it beside her on the floor. It will be there if she needs it.

When I turn back toward the door I hear movement. She has pushed herself back to sitting upright and her eyes are almost open.... Her hand finds the blanket and she blinks slowly. I turn back to the door, then face into the hallway, and settle halfway behind the door with my hand on the knob, watching her wake up.

"What.." she says.

I stand behind the door, silent, uncertain. She looks up at me.

"Did you bring me a blanket?"

I nod.

"I don't need it."

"You looked pretty cold."

"I appreciate the gesture, but I'll be fine."

"Okay." I stand like that for a long moment before saying anything. "Would you like some coffee?" It was something my mother would do, always offer coffee, no matter the time or the circumstances or anything.

"It's the middle of the night."

"I know."

“Who are you?” She asks.

“Roy. I’m Roy. What’s your name?”

She looks down the hallway toward the steps leading up. “I could go for a cup of coffee.”

Inside the apartment she sits down on the couch where I have been sleeping. Playing with the corner of the blanket, she asks if I live alone. It takes me a minute to answer; I busy my hands with the coffee grounds.

“I guess so.”

“What does that mean?”

“I live alone now, but it’s only temporary.”

She nods.

“Do you need a place to stay?” I ask, still fumbling with the coffee-maker.

“Would you mind? It’s only for the night and then I’ll move on.”

“Sure, you can take the bedroom.”

“Where will you sleep?”

I nod toward the couch. The coffee drips through the filter. “It’s more comfortable than it looks.”

She puts her hands down and bounces on the cushions, pulls the blanket over her lap. “Five-star deluxe.” She smiles.

“What kind of music do you listen to?”

“Anything.”

I put on BB King and she watches the record spin. I sit on the opposite end of the couch with my hands folded in my lap. “You never told me your name.”

“Anika,” she says.

The record spins and the coffee drips and the A/C hums and it feels like the whole world is vibrating on the other side of the wall, like the shadows drive the movement and the slow blues fights through them like tar pitch. We are asleep before the coffee stops dripping.

Gerry Returns

I spent the morning remembering why I quit drinking. Old blood can't take it, liver doesn't filter quite right. Rotgut did me in. Five cups of coffee and a fried egg couldn't take the edge off. Didn't even get drunk like I used to. Hardly worth it. Except for one thing—that girl, the waitress, seemed nice. Really talked, and really listened. She won't last there.

The trailer is boxed up. Almost everything in crates and bins and buckets. Doesn't look like so much any more. Plenty of stuff not worth taking... Some old kitchenware, appliances... The tables and chairs, most of 'em falling apart. The fireplace is too bulky to take, the couch is staying. Nothing worth selling. Then there's the chickens and the plants. The day has already slipped by.

The herbs are hardy enough for transplant. The vegetables are not. Neither will survive long in the back of the truck. They need to be fostered. I do not know where I am going. Plants need stability, roots in solid ground. Sun and good air, soil.

I load the truck, saving the plants for last. The chickens need a home. The only person I can think of is the waitress. She needed help. The birds need help. Might help her. I crate the chickens in the back of the truck.

The drive down the highway is different with a full truck. Picture frames rattle, remind me of what I left behind. The birds raise a ruckus in the back. When the neon

comes into view it doesn't feel right. I park beneath the sign glowing in the dusk. The doorman doesn't recognize me.

The inside is unsavory, more so than I recall. A woman in a bikini asks if I'd like a dance—the girl is not here. My face burns. I turn away to go and see her at the door. She shakes her head, no, she says to the bouncer, I'm done. Tell Rico for me, I'm not going in. She turns and walks away. I sit in a booth until they tell me to buy something or get out. I leave at my own pace.

There is glass on the ground beside my truck. The window is smashed. The boxes are open but nothing looks gone. Nothing worth taking. There is a silence above the freeway noise. The birds are gone. That one took care of itself.

Anika Speaks

When I pull into the parking lot the neighbor boy, Roy, is sitting on the stoop. I'm not ready to get out but he sees me, the windows are down, I can't just wait it out. I try to anyway. I can see his motion in the secondary reflection on my rearview mirror. When he realizes that I'm not leaving the car, he resumes his rock throwing. There is a pile next to him, and he throws them at the ground in the parking lot. They hit with a tetchy rasp and skitter away. After a dozen or more of these rocks chase their echoes across the asphalt, I open the door. The rocks stop and I see him look up, this time in the side mirror; he sees me looking. When I stand out of the car he looks sharply into the ground as if to sort his rock pile, to kick the lopsided pebbles to the side and focus on the shapely sort that make a nice pitter-patter when thrown. Like he's sorting out the ugly arrhythmic balls of gravel held together with pitch. I walk past him without slowing. Halfway up the stairs I realize where I'm headed. Outside Barnaby's door, I stop and listen. There's no noise coming from inside; I check the handle. He never locks the door. I walk in, grab an armful of beers from the half-emptied case in the refrigerator, and retrace my steps down to Roy. He turns his head when I open the door. His arm is cocked back with a rock in hand, and he looks startled, almost guilty. I say hello and sit beside him.

"Hi," he says.

I ask him what he's doing.

"Throwing rocks."

'At what?'

“Just throwing them.” He blushes.

We sit in silence for a moment. I’m still holding all of the beers and the condensation is soaking through my sleeves. I set them down and ask if he wants one.

“I’m not old enough.”

‘Neither am I.’ I open a beer and let the foam pour over my hand, cool and carbonated. He looks at me from the corner of his eye with an expression like I am offering up a wooden horse.

‘I’m not a cop.’

He takes a beer and cracks it open, still watching me. I take a long swig; it tastes like morning breath.

‘Thanks for the blanket’

“You looked cold.”

I nod and we sit in silence. A car passes by going too fast around the corner. He exhales deeply and picks at the label on his beer.

‘We’ve both had better days, huh?’

“Yeah, I guess so.” He takes a sip and his face twists into a grimace.

‘You’ll get used to it,’ I say, and he set his jaw and takes another sip, longer.

“What are you doing here?” He asks me.

‘What do you mean?’

“Like, why did you move here?”

‘I didn’t *move* here, I’m just...’

“But you live with Barnaby, right?”

'I suppose I'm staying... Just for... Do you live alone?'

"I used to live with my Mom." He gets a look on his face like he misses her.

'Drink your beer, it'll help,' I tell him. He looks at me like I'm crazy, but then he takes a sip. He regains his composure.

'I'm here because they kicked me out of college. This is a waypoint; I'm only stopping by. I'm going to drive west and get a job and an apartment.'

"Where?"

'West,' I tell him for a second time. I don't know where this is coming from, but it sounds good. 'I'm going to go to California, to work on a pot farm.' Now this is news even to me, but for the time it *is* the only plan I have. 'I am going to get back with some people I went to high school with. We lost touch when I went to college but I'm sure I can find them again.'

"Is that why they kicked you out?"

'What?'

"Because of pot?"

This makes me pause. Roy, this kid, he is not that much younger than me but it's like a chasm of experience has fallen between us. He takes another sip and I look around, feeling guilty all of a sudden. Can a minor get in trouble for giving beer to another minor³? 'No,' I tell him, and force a laugh. 'I got kicked out because I couldn't afford health insurance, and they cut my financial aid.'

"Is that how you paid for it? For the college?"

³ Do these things work on a sliding scale or does the law operate in binary? Can a person be only *kind of* underage, or less underage than another? Not that it matters in the absence of enforcement.

'Yes. I was a leech and the teat ran dry.'

"That seems wrong." He took another swallow, this time with less apparent disgust.

'I told you you'd get used to it.'

I skip a rock across the parking lot. It feels good, an oddly detached act of catharsis.

He skips one after me. They disappear for a moment between the porch light and the streetlight, skittering out of view beneath the shadow of that lonely tree in the parking lot before reemerging on the other side. A truck is coming down the hill, and Roy winds up with a rock in hand—then he looks sidelong at me and throws it at the tree. It thuds against the trunk as the truck powers around the curve, well over the speed limit.

"I shouldn't do that."

"Throw rocks at cars?"

"Hurt trees."

'Trees don't feel.'

"Yeah they do, everything feels. They just don't talk in the same way that we do.

People have done research, trees communicate, we just don't hear it."

I throw a rock at the tree.

"Don't do that," he tells me.

I throw another.

"I'm serious," he says. I have a rock in my hand.

"There's lots of stuff that people don't see or hear but that doesn't mean it's not there."

I swap the rock for my beer and finish it in one long swig. He looks at me for a moment, and then takes another sip.

'Is anybody going to get me in trouble for giving you that?' I ask. He frowns.

"No."

"Where's your family?"

"I don't have a family anymore."

'Why's that?'

"It just is."

'A person doesn't just wake up one morning without a family.'

He looks down into his beer.

'What happened?'

"I woke up and then I didn't have a family anymore."

I open another beer. His head snaps up at the noise.

"Last Thursday," he says.

'You mean, like, five days ago last Thursday?'

He nods. I take a swig of my beer, and it tastes a little better than the last one.

'I'm sorry.' I don't know what to say. He finishes his beer and I offer him another. He looks at it, then looks me in the eye.

"So why are you here?"

'I didn't have anywhere else to go.'

"Is that why you're going to California?"

'I don't know where I'm going. Where did you learn so much about trees?'

He grins. “Paolo taught me. He lives on a ranch outside of town, he says that when I graduate from school I can work there with him.”

‘Paolo,’ I roll my tongue over the sound. It tastes like cheap beer.

“Do you know what kind of tree that is?” He points at the only tree.

‘The parking lot tree?’ I guess.

“It’s a Chinese Tallow tree. They’re invasive, but I like it. It’s the only tree we’ve got.”

‘Chinese Tallow.’

He nods. I sit back and take another long swig. I am invasive. The town doesn’t fit me, it is too tight, it hurts to breathe the air⁴.

‘I haven’t seen the ocean since I was five,’ I tell him, ‘and I want to feel small again.’

He opens his second beer. We sit like that until there is nothing left to drink and the rock pile remains untouched. We sit there until the streetlight flickers and goes out, and Roy tells me that it does that, that eventually it will come back on, that it’s just something with the wires but they’ll fix it one of these days. One of these days, I say, one of these days.

⁴ Morality is a myth—everything is foreign in the absence of context.

Roy Cleans

Last night could have been a dream except for the morning's headache. It felt good though, warm and full like everything was feeling at once. Like after a run. Except instead of sore legs the reminder is sticky teeth and a thick tongue. A busy head and slow veins. A night's worth of conversation to sift through.

She was nice and fun and she had her own stuff going on. Everybody does, probably even Barnaby and Miss Langtree. The thought makes me laugh. Maybe she worries about having enough cat food or keeping the parking lot clean. Maybe she has medicine that she needs to take every night and then again in the morning, and maybe sometimes she forgets because the water's boiling on the stove or the litter box needs to be changed... and maybe sometimes she remembers but she forgets to fill their bowls in the morning, sees them empty and isn't sure if they already came and went with full stomachs or not. Even though she loves those cats more than anything else in the world, probably more than most people. It's easy to forget things sometimes. I think Anika just forgot how to get started again, and Paolo forgot what it's like to need people.

But it's not hard to remember, not when you try. I remember last night, most of it. I remember throwing rocks and feeling angry and then happy and fuzzy and how the light went off and Anika moved a little bit closer, and I remember things that wouldn't have been said if she hadn't remembered me enough to come back downstairs. I remember when she pulled into the parking lot and she looked a lot different then even though it was just a few days ago. I remember when the pointy-makeup lady at the school took the note and didn't even look twice, just typed

something and skewered it on the long needle sticking up by her keyboard. Nobody seemed to mind my absence. They probably didn't even notice, most of them. I remember when Paolo helped me move my mom out, wrapped up in her sheets. It was exciting, it felt like a heist, made the blood pound in my ears until I couldn't even hear the locusts and the owls in the trees, couldn't even hear how sad I should have been.

The burial in the moonlight felt like some secret initiation where he talked in his serious voice and I should have changed or something but I wasn't sure how. I'm still not sure. He asked if I wanted to say a few words and I didn't know what to say so I made something up like what people are supposed to say at funerals but it didn't feel right. He just nodded and started filling the hole back up with dirt. After a minute I picked up the shovel that was leaning against the big oak tree and helped him, and then we both pushed and grunted and rolled the big rock on top of the dirt. We just stood there for a while looking at it....

There was a big mark where it rolled over the fresh dirt and I remember thinking that it must hurt, with all that pressure, but I realized how silly that was and I almost laughed. Maybe I did, just a little bit, because Paolo put his hand on my shoulder and kind of laughed like something was stuck in his throat. Then we walked back to the house and he drove me home and gave me eggs and kale and tomatoes and some bread, told me he'd be there if I needed anything. When the excitement wore off I felt so guilty that I cried, and then I cried because I realized that I was crying for myself instead of her. I woke up the next morning with fast-motion memories and salt on my lips.

I remember she would make breakfast sometimes and flip eggs without breaking the yolk. And tell stories about my dad and how he'd be here if he could, and how he's missing me wherever he is. We both knew those stories were lies and when I was twelve I got mad at her and she stopped telling them.... I remember the time I scratched her favorite record because I didn't know how to set the needle, it was Roy Orbison, and she told me it was okay but that I'd better be careful or else I'd scratch myself. And I remember when I got it. Goodnight, *m'ijo*, she'd say, even though neither of us knew any Spanish. The nights when I would get up for a glass of water and she would still be on the couch, looking out the window, sometimes a glass of wine in her hand and sometimes a coffee mug, and she would say 'what are you doing up so late?' always before I could ask the same of her. I would say I was thirsty, or I had to pee, and she would get me water or turn on the lamp by the bathroom for me and then tuck me back into bed. That stopped happening as much the last few years. I would get up sometimes, and she would be there, but she would look surprised, say, 'oh, hello,' like I had walked in through a door that was supposed to be locked. I would get what I needed and go back to bed. It felt shameful, like I was too old to get up in the night, so I started keeping a bottle of water in my room and learned to wait for the morning light. The sun never rose so late.

Less than a week with the apartment to myself and all I've had are the nights. I have destroyed it, mangled the stuff of memories. Empty outlines hang on the walls where the pictures were and indentations in the thin carpet remind me where the couch should be, the bookshelf, the coffee table. Is because it was enough reason for

it to be again? No. For lots of reasons. Everything changes. But it's sometimes nice for some things to stay the same.

I stand in the middle of the room where nothing is right and nothing is wrong.... The couch goes there, by the window. One end at a time, I walk it around the bookshelf that stands like a pillar in the middle of the room. The coffee table—no, it goes where it is. It can stay there. Those four dots in the carpet need to breathe. The bookshelf slides against the wall.... Not where it was, but where it will be now. The photographs escape the closet to fill their spaces on the walls. They belong there. The mirrors leave the kitchen to find new space—first in a pattern that bounces light all around forever and then some go into the closet, some go on the walls, and one sits looking up at the ceiling from beneath the record player.

I open the door to my room. It smells musty. The hamper is full. I strip the sheets and throw them on top of the dirty laundry, throw everything else on the bare mattress and vacuum the floor. The noise helps me focus, the clean air feels good to breathe again. I step back in to the living room.

Tires crunch in the parking lot outside. The station wagon is pulling out—I watch her leave.

Tomorrow I will go to the Laundromat and on Monday I will go back to school. The coffee table is by the kitchen and the couch is by the window. A song plays from the stereo, something about driving and night and love. Everything is wrong, and everything is right, and everything will change. And that's okay.

Gerry Leaves

Without the chickens there is plenty of room in the back. Don't care to fill it up. The filing cabinet stays. The mattress, sheets. A quilt and a pillow tucked into a box in the backseat. For sleeping in the truck. The light is long, shadows stretch toward town.... Bugs fly slow in residual heat.

There is a lot of land unspoken for in the troughs between the peaks. They surround me. I see them now, like they only just reappeared. Everything sharp rounded off. Weathered, old. Orange in the light. In the shadows, deep blue. Trees stand like stubble on the ridges. Farther on the slopes are smooth.

The plants go against the cab, pushed close. The topmost leaves rub the rear window. I weave them, tuck them into each other. Pack the soil with my hands. Pat it down. Catch the slipstream. The big tubs, the feed trough, the cooler, are too heavy to slide. The greens will have to stay, and the tubers. The beans, too, twisted into the front porch rails. Bugs will eat them, and birds the bugs. No loss. Never is.

My pop-pop, my father's father, was a farmer. I remember we would visit him and eat five different kinds of corn for dinner. The women quilted and made cornhusk dolls.... He would play a guitar on nights we were there and he only knew three songs, but he could play each of them a dozen different ways.

We would listen on the porch, those three songs would last all night while we beat the planking with our heels and tapped our legs in time. They burned rags with tar-pitch to keep the bugs at bay. It was a war for him, the bugs... by the end he rarely broke even on seed and fuel, and when the pesticides came out he poured them onto the plants. Another expense.

By the time he passed the land was no good and it was sold for pennies to pay off debts. He always said that bugs were waste, but mornings there I would watch the birds. When he started pouring poisons there were fewer and fewer until there were none at all. Rooster crowed alone at sunrise. Fields felt empty, even full with plants— and then they stopped growing.

The truck is full enough. The rest can rot. A shoebox of letters and a dusty bottle of bourbon sit shotgun. The quilt in the backseat with a few photographs, a kettle, some kitchenware. Plants in the back. It starts first try.

The road out of town is empty—it is dusk. I pull the knob for the lights when the roadside shops stop popping up. The shoulder ends and the lots are overgrown. Commercial lot, For Sale, abandoned. The plants whip against the glass behind me. It hurts to hear. I need to stop but there is nowhere. Then the brush falls away to a lawn. A small house, gardens. Dirt driveway. I swing wide and park, wheelbase straddling the track. The plants rock back and forth. It is almost night.

When I stand on the beat-dirt driveway a door slams shut. Footsteps move toward me. I walk toward the bed of the truck and lean against it to catch my breath.

Hello, can I help you? It is a man, dark skinned, an accent.

Need plants?

I have plenty already, odd hour for sales, huh?

Not selling, giving. They need care.

He looks at them, rubs a tomato leaf. Why not you?

I rub at the pulp around a sprig of rosemary broken by the wind.

You don't want them? He says.

I have nowhere for them.

Where are you from?

Here. Nowhere. I look at the sun fading behind the mountains.

Care for some coffee? He says. Warm up?

Headlights move through the dark. A wood-paneled station wagon passes headed out of town toward the last of the light.

Yes, please. Sounds fine. I move to unload the first of the clay pots.

No, no, we'll worry about that later. Unless you are in a rush? To be somewhere?

No hurry. You drink? I reach in the cab and grab the bottle of bourbon by the neck.

He nods.

Come, he says, walks toward the house. I am Paolo.

Gerry, I say. Much obliged.

Dénouement

Particles whizz through the buoyant medium

En route for continual collisions

Valence shifts, electrons are expelled

Into the ever-growing crowd

The cluster

The charge builds to a critical point—

In the upper atmosphere,

A burst of radiation meets gaseous resistance

A million-mirror diffusion

A tendril of radiation finds a pocket

And follows a path, clearing the route

The charge is catalyzed

The bolt strikes

Thunder fires

A tree asunder

Smoke curls from the cleft

Builds, sheltered from the rain,

Fresh wood ignites,

Flames dance on the leaves,

The rain falls

Oh so slowly.

Beginnings

It was a wooden playground with flies in the air and termites in the planks. The slide was a sheet of steel with gusseted joints that would sear skin by midday recess. The sand was blended with pebble-flecked dirt, trash peeking through the surface at regular intervals. The trees were stripped of their bark on the lower three feet of the trunks. Bees hummed overhead. A wasps' nest hung beneath the lookout point of the play-scape. It is all gone now.

The bell rings; a shrill, warbling screech. Children run from the double doors of the adjacent building. Their chatter overwhelms the placid buzz of the yard. A boy, a frontrunner, looks back to insure that his hole-shot holding in this imaginary race; a fifty foot tour, cutthroat with nothing on the line, purposeless and wholly justifiable competition between bigheaded competitors just beyond the infantile. With his face turned over his shoulder and his torso twisted, he trips over his light-up shoes and falls to the ground with his left arm reaching for the sand. Tears come to his eyes. His companions run past unperturbed as he lifts his strawberry chin and begins to wail. A single frazzled supervisor, an ill-equipped and unsupported teacher, hangs at the back of the pack with a small group of the less competitive pupils. Drifting indecisively between the two factions is a small girl with a pointed face and sandy-brown hair. She saw the boy fall. Her pace falters as she nears him, and at his side she squats with her elbows on her knees. Are you hurt? She asks him. He nods, thick tears clumping with sand in the crease of his nose. The rest of the class passes around them, the teacher already absorbed in another conflict. The girl grabs his right arm below the shoulder and tries to pull him up but he cries out and

resists. He buries his head in the sand, a cool oasis in the heat, his own private beach. The sun finds a path through the leaves overhead. Another class is lining up inside the building, their teacher austere with a face eternally reproachful. Get up, the girl says, there are more people coming. The boy burrows his face in the sand and kicks at the ground with his toes.

“Elaine, let him be! I’m sure he’s fine,” her Teacher calls from across the yard, “he’ll join us when he’s ready.”

The teacher just inside is lecturing her class on appropriate conduct, the insufficiency of the modern upbringing, and the importance of civility at all times—especially in those times when it is not most formally mandated. It has been a long day. The most outspoken among the students and the reason for the lethargy of the second hand, a precocious ginger boy of four years and two months, throws his hand above his head. The teacher tucks her clipboard into her armpit and sighs before acknowledging him.

“Yes, Jackson?” The teacher nods toward him. Can we go play now? He asks, and the air around the class stirs with nervous energy. She holds her left index finger up in an authoritative gesture and brings a silver whistle to her lips. The subsequent blast pierces the energy in the air and she drops her hand to her side. They break like water from floodgates and pour out across the yard, streaming around the two still in conference on the path.

“Elaine,” says the austere woman with hawk eyes on the scattering students, “run along and play, he’s only fallen. I’ll deal with him in a moment.” The woman doesn’t break stride. Elaine remains beside the boy. Ricky get up, teacher said you’re

okay, Elaine says with her elbows on her knees. Ricky has stopped sobbing and now merely whimpers in the afterglow of pain. The whistle resounds, scattering birds overhead and raining leaves on the prostrate child and his friend. The teacher points at Elaine, then at the bench beside her. The meaning is apparent. Don't worry Ricky, you're okay, just stand up, says Elaine. The whistle blasts again and the gesture is repeated with greater enthusiasm, crisp and aggressive. Elaine stands slowly and drags her feet with her eyes fixed on the boy whose eyes are filled with salty sand. Parallel trenches follow her through the mottled sand all the way to the bench beside the teacher. Her Teacher is attempting to resolve a dispute by the swingset and the second looks on unconcerned.

“You need to listen to adults. We should not need to speak twice to children.”

The teacher says without turning her head.

Miss! Miss! Shouts a boy in the yard, I think Ricky's really hurt! The speaker is a dark-skinned boy of almost five with shaggy black hair.

“Alex, what is my name?”

Miss, uh, Miss Learney, look!

Ricky is sitting up and his face is splotched with sand. He cradles his left arm in his right and looks intently down at it through crusted eyelashes. Miss Learney sets her clipboard on the bench and walks in measured paces until she stands over him. He does not look up.

“Jennifer,” she calls over her shoulder without looking away, “Jennifer!” The other teacher looks up from across the playground. “You'd better take a look at this.”

Elaine silently observes all of this from her spot on the bench. Beside her, a flashing light periodically catches her attention from the corner of her eye. She looks down. The whistle is swinging from its lanyard, clipped by its end on top of the pages of rosters and lesson plans and protocols and parental consent forms with conspicuous blanks and bolded clauses. Both teachers now stand over Ricky, who has started crying again. He has still not looked up. Elaine grabs the whistle and rubs the shiny surface with her thumb, back and forth, back and forth. She unclips it to bring it closer, holds it in her lap as the teachers confer in harried whispers. She rolls it in her hands as the Teacher walks briskly toward the red phone beneath Plexiglas on the wall beside the double doors. She feels the metal bead roll and drop, roll and drop, clicking across the slot. With a passing pang of guilt, she looks up but no one is looking, no one cares. Her teacher pushes away the children who gather round the boy on the ground. She twists the lanyard around the whistle as the air grows heavy, slides it into her pocket as the Teacher hangs up the phone. She clutches it in a tightly closed fist in her patterned jumper pocket. Her knuckles are tight, teachers on edge across the yard. Her classmates whisper, the birds rustle leaves overhead. Ricky slowly raises his head at the other end of her shoe-tip trenches. He looks at Elaine and sees her with her hand in her pocket and she sees him see her and she is not ashamed. His eyes drop back to the sand.

She holds it ever more as sirens fill the air.