

WRITINGS BY JIMMY CHEN

STILL LIFE IN ORANGE

It would be great if tomorrow were like this, it would be perfect. She woke up and said this, that's one of the first things she said. It was late in the afternoon. The sky was faded and low, rolling through the motions of a long weekend. I'd just gotten back from my jog, sweaty before a shower and making noises to wake her up.

"Why'd you wake me up?"

I kneeled down on the bed and kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry."

"What time is it?" Squinting at the remaining light coming through the windows.

"Four." I guessed.

I left a note on my side of the bed, in case she woke up before I came back. I went jogging, it said. When I got back, before I woke her up, I removed the note and ripped it in pieces, so as not to confuse her.

"I'm hopping in the shower." I was already naked.

She didn't even look, still she said, "It's only four."

"I know. I'm tired."

When I got out of the shower, I tried to dry off on a damp towel, careful not to breathe in as I passed it over my face. All the towels were either blue or light blue, as if one day we were supposed to quilt a sky. She was sitting up in bed, arranging four pieces of paper together in various ways.

"I found your note," she said.

"I went jogging," I said without looking.

Raising one of her knees, a soft white melon. "When did you go jogging?"

"Before I woke you."

This had happened before. We would have these kinds of discussions where we kept repeating things to each other in different ways. Most of the time I would stick to the facts, sure that in the end they would make sense, especially if told together. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked.

"You were sleeping."

It started to rain and she said now she can't go out. I told her she was still in bed so it didn't matter. The cat jumped into bed and the three of us stayed close because everywhere around us seemed far.

"You're getting the bed wet."

"The towel doesn't work," I said, sticking to the facts.

"Neither does the bed."

It was like we were always figure skating, our brisk moods weaving, falling, and depending on each other. I never knew when to hold her, when to throw her up in the air, when to catch her. Sometimes I felt like I was always coming in third, next to her feelings and everyone else's.

A dense cloud passed under the sun and for a moment it became very dark, the darkest a day can get and still be day. The walls sunk into a murky umber and corners disappeared. All I could see were her eyes, floating in the glaze of a Spanish painting.

She told me once that she felt guilty whenever she stopped moving. I asked her why and she said because her mind starts asking unanswerable questions. I told her everyone feels that way and the trick is to know when to stop thinking. She said all I did was sit around or go jogging. I said laziness was okay, as long as you get some exercise.

After a while it stopped raining and the sun came back, making its last orange note in the sky, valiant and embracing, strewn across the broad horizon. Horizons are cruel, because once you get there, there's more. Suddenly, she got up and started getting ready to go out. She made the closet make noise the way only a woman can. I heard her shoes coming at me. They stopped.

"It would be great if tomorrow were like this, it would be perfect."

"Isn't this perfect?" I asked, palms open.

She went back to the closet and I heard coat hangers changing their places. Then she paused for a second, and another second.

"Let's go out tomorrow," she came out of the closet, now holding her shoes. "Today's almost over and we still have to sleep."

THE SEARCH FOR NAMABLE THINGS

For a guy who had never touched Jennifer's buttocks, I was rather touched by them. Her buttocks were of the tone and contour that evoked the natural response in high school boys. My science lab partner was Steve. I did his homework in exchange for not having my face rammed into the desk. When I was inspired, I wrote love poems for him to give to her. A reoccurring motif was the moon. At night, I imagined Jennifer's face looking at me in the dark: her golden blond hair a soft nest on my pillow. Night light is my favorite kind of light. As one is not aided with a full spectrum, the tonal variants which glide the eye over the terrain of a lovely face are celebrated in quiet. At this point, Mr. Hardy asked me to point out the gallbladder of the unfortunate frog flayed open at my table. The word, or question, with which I replied was not exclusive to this class: What?

Steve went on a few dates with Jennifer. Word spread that he had even had sex with her. He knew my feelings for her and expressed camaraderie by not slamming my face anymore. I'd see them hanging out by the bleachers, holding hands, walking to class together. I was incomplete without them, so I watched. I once tried to sabotage their courtship with a poem in which the narrator (Steve) cannot find his way to the cave. Along the way, he loses his sword. Jennifer, not the most gifted reader, didn't catch the symbolism. Instead she fellated him in the parking lot of Baskin Robbins. As it turns out, the gallbladder is located underneath the liver. It produces bile, which aids in digestion. The frog's eyes are still open, frozen in

the moment it met its death.

There's this theory I heard that God invented suffering to make sure people would always need him. It's like happiness is distracting and misery keeps people focused. All big things can be condensed, packed into small ideas. For example, the moon is the sorrow God feels for us. He doesn't want us ever to be completely in the dark, so he put this huge stone in the sky to act as a mirror during our darkest hour—only this mirror is opaque and takes some of the light for itself, a commission of sorts. God places the moon very close to us so it appears the same size as the sun. Everything in the sky is a trick. We are not that bright.

Mr. Hardy was in the Korean War, where he screwed up his hip and pinky finger during two separate incidents, both which involved unplanned explosions. He ended up teaching high school biology, a graying crew cut the only mark of his time as a hero. His pinky finger was severely crooked, and for some inexplicable reason he used it to point. Chapter Seven in the textbook Human Reproduction really got him going. I remember only one thing he said in class all year, in reference to vaginal intercourse—something about the cervix taking a good beating. His eyes lit up as he said this, a vein the size of a rat's tail popping out of his temple. I felt sorry for him; a man in a man's world is a sad thing. Mr. Hardy hated this one girl, I can't remember her name. All I know, all anybody knew, was that she was a vegetarian. She had a nose ring, dyed purple hair, and big leather boots. Whenever we got out the frogs to dissect, she would make comments about how wrong it was. Mr. Hardy asked her if she ate meat, and she proudly said she didn't. He thought for a long while, his face red with fury. The next day he told her that her boots were made from animals so she should shut the fuck up. Everyone laughed and the next day she was gone.

Mr. Hardy let everyone pick his or her final seating arrangement on the first day of school. There was a line of guys behind Jennifer, all geared to sit in the most optimal seats relative to her. I got the golden seat—directly across-behind. The across arrangement provided the best view of her buttocks, with occasional prospects of her face, while being behind her let one do it secretly.

I suffered from hay fever those years and had a sniffing tick. During study session, I sniffed and sniffed until one fateful day when Jennifer got up and handed me a tissue. This was the only time she looked at me. Everyone laughed and the next day I was still there.

When my dad isn't at the office, he's at home fixing things. Last year we tore up all the carpet in the house to put in wooden floors. It took us two weeks. I got accidentally caulked a few times. He makes fun of my hands, says they aren't man's hands, too soft. He shows me his hands, callused and full of blisters. Last time I held a nail for my dad, he hit my fingers with the hammer. Two of my fingers turned blue.

"Now you are a man," he said.

I have the sweater she left in class one day. I put it in my backpack, waiting all day to take it home. It's really soft, like her hair continuing over her body. Light blue, a calm afternoon sky. To throw it up in the air would be to lose it forever. Birds would mistake it for a soft patch of sky, catch it in their beaks and fly away. I sleep with it under my pillow. One day the sweater fairy will come and arrest me for theft and chronic masturbation.

I'm driving with my dad back from Home Depot at night. We bought a new toilet. The ceramic thing glistens in the back seat, propped up with seat cushions my dad had taken from the couch. It sleeps quietly as a cradled newborn. Reflections from the traffic lights above trace the contours, sweeping over the pristine and perfectly

rounded bowl. It exists inviolate, until the moment I see it. The human gaze is corrupt, it turns objects into ideals. Every time I look at Jennifer, I want what I am not. I look out the window.

It's looking right at me.

What: when a blade of light comes through the curtains, it lights up all the air molecules and you realize air is thick, and each breath is a massive act. There's a tiny car carrying a man, his son, and a toilet down a road. From inside the car, the son looks out the window. The stars fidget with each mile, stubbornly grasping onto the universe. Car takes father son and toilet to the main street, at the light by Baskin Robbins. The son sees his friend's car parked by a stone wall under the broken lamp. A girl's head comes into view now and then. She massages the testicles with her hand, moving them around and around. In this world, the son wants tell her, no two things are the same. "No two things are the same," he mutters at the car window. "I hope one day you find the moon."

ALL THE BEAUTIFUL FLOWERS

To close your hands tightly is to be aware of them for once in your life. I made a fist like a dry heart. I was soaking wet.

They got on the train. They were also soaking wet. It was the end of the day, and we were going home to people we were closer to. We would gather around words and fill in patches.

It rained very hard. Our palms got wet, so we made fists. We squished fish brains and carried abalone in our pockets. We kicked sea foam into the air and dodged the spray like a dumb pantomime. We were soaking wet.

I stood there like the opposite of a hug. Everyone passed and left drops of rain on me. I was a vertical mural with biblical scenes made out of drops. The scenes eventually dried and I kept track of each vanishing figure.

The umbrellas were black. With each torrent they collapsed and folded and opened again. They covered the heads of their owners and moved urgently. They were held onto tightly, pulling against the wind, being pulled.

THE UNREALISTIC PHILOSOPHER

Because of Heidegger, he didn't have time to floss. He didn't have time to buy toilet paper or Palmolive dish detergent, so he let his wife do those things. He didn't have time to take out the garbage, pay the electric bill, and all other 'ephemeral' things. He would read and read about being and time; being and sense; sense and semblance; what *what* was; what *is* is; etc. Such ontological questions and their incongruity with touchable matter plagued him. Still, he would read and read, until the air around him hurt, until it felt like he was scraping the inside of his scalp with a spoon, the way one might eat half a cantaloupe.

His gums bled in the morning, the result of grinding his teeth at night. Consequently, he had a receding gum line. His dentist gave him a mouth guard to wear at night. The mouth guard smelled like ass, according to him -during a very brief phone call he had with the one friend he had -so he refused to wear it. His wife upon their marriage, initially attracted to his intensity and earnest existential inquiries, quickly got used to attending dinner parties alone because he just couldn't deal, he told her, with the asinine conversations so commonly overheard at social gatherings. Slowly, she resigned to having regular dinners at home alone as well. He needed time to read, time to think. When asked what she felt about Heidegger, she replied "asshole," not exactly sure who she was referring to.

His one friend would worry about him because he, who read Heidegger, also had a flare for exaggeration. His friend would be at work, and he who read Heidegger would call him on the phone and say "Meet me at the bridge in forty-five minutes." His one friend understood this meant that he who read Heidegger was proposing that

the two of them jump off the bridge, in order to commit suicide. The reason he who read Heidegger felt comfortable saying such things to his one friend was because their friendship, since college, was built upon a sort of amateurish philosophical discourse, in which both parties would ponder —for entire evenings in the dorm lounge while others were getting laid or enjoying a drug's effect on one's perception —difficult abstractions, especially concerning the 'absolute.' Their inability to define and settle once and for all exactly what the 'absolute' was, led to the smashing of lamps, and tearing down of curtains.

He who read Heidegger, in his quest to resolve the 'absolute,' joined a religion. He was adamant that this religion was not like any other religion. The other religions failed where this particular religion succeeded, because this religion asserted that it was the consolidation of all religions, and thus the only true vehicle in which the 'absolute' could be rendered and manifested. His one friend told him he respected that, but didn't want to join this religion, which he who read Heidegger encouraged him to join. The latter continuously broached upon this matter until his one friend's patience was so strained that he could not help but cite possible incongruencies between Heidegger's existential implications and said faith; he may have even used the word 'hypocrisy.' An argument broke out, a very bad and drawn-out argument which only ended because both parties' throats were so coarse from arguing that they had to stop. In the silence, they looked at each other with confusion.

His receding gum line had receded so much that his teeth wobbled in his mouth. He claimed to his one friend that any pressure from his tongue, even by the pronunciation of a hard consonant, would displace his teeth. By this time his one friend had curtailed emotional investment into the friendship because, frankly, he was a little hurt and put-off by he who read Heidegger's continuous judgments about his character —veiled as concern for his spiritual fate —and could only afford cliché placations over the phone such as "that sucks man," or "damn bro." He who read Heidegger was emotionally intuitive and could sense the nonchalance. This resulted in another running argument: that his only friend didn't have the spiritual capacity to be interested in he who read Heidegger's life because he, the non-spiritual friend, wasn't a member of said religion. The arguments became blurry, interchangeable, and so exhausting for his only friend, that he began screening his calls in order not to converse with he who read Heidegger.

He who read Heidegger, suspicious that his one friend might be screening his calls, grew so indignant that he would violently beat his pillow, imagining it was his one friend's face. This was often accompanied by the listening of loud and abrasive industrial music. He asked his wife to call his one friend as a means to test whether or not he would pick up. His wife, by this time resentful about things in general, told him to leave her out of his ingrown neurosis, to which he replied that any woman who owns the amount of shoes and handbags that she does must be too shallow to empathize with a man whose one noble task in life is to resolve the 'absolute.' He then threw a tangerine at the wall. The splatter marks looked like fractals, though she would not understand. His one friend and his wife often supported each other by conveying the details of any particular incident in which one of them was either hurt, annoyed, or offended by the latest thing he who read Heidegger said or did.

He, who was not able to finish Heidegger because of a nervous breakdown, prayed a lot — especially near the end. There are no transcripts for such prayers, but one may assume that they would contain many exclamation points and passages typed out in caps lock. Feeling a little guilty, his one friend bought him a new book, which non-incidentally, was beckoned by Heidegger. He, who just started Sartre, is now being taken care of in a hospital. A special request was put for a single room, because the ranted prayers, while mitigated with tranquilizers, are still incessant, mumbled through a mouthful of loose teeth and yogurt. If one were to visit he who started Sartre, one would not need to bring flowers, due to their lack of phenomenological description and one's inability to deconstruct them on a

hermeneutical level.

STEEL HORSE

Every kid has two arms, I have one. Every kid is a boy, now I'm a girl. Every kid has a mom, I had one.

She would lock herself in the bathroom for safety, her crying so urgent, those gasps replaced her breathing. I would sit by the door for hours, trying to talk her down. I only had one line.

There there, your son is here.

Once I asked her to let me in, but she was afraid my father would sneak over and break in. I could see movements through the crack of the door, she a fuzzy mound of darkness, shaking. Please let me in, I said. At the sound of the lock releasing, my father stormed up the stairs in three wide gallops, threw open the door, and split her jaw. She made some faint muted sound and fell to the floor.

I laid in bed, wishing the ceiling lamp would fall on me. The glass would break and cut me into a million pieces. The draft would blow me through the fireplace and into the clouds.

She left my dad many times but always came back for me. By then her red eyes were sores, frozen hives blocking any way inside.

Then one day she left and never came back.

There are no brothers and sisters in this story, just me and him. That's three arms if you're counting.

Holidays were invented by people who enjoy doing things like picnicking and water skiing. For the rest of us, it simply means that everything is closed and you can't go anywhere.

No school plus no work equals my father and I sitting at the kitchen table eating frozen food.

He takes out his dentures, the chewing more like a French kiss. Chews and chews. I imagine his throat muscles clenching, the food going down into his stomach, changing form until finally exiting in one long pungent brown note.

He notices me looking at his mouth, says something stupid I can't remember and I say something back.

Thud thud.

Two punches in face and I'm on the floor.

My father has thick veins that go down his forearm and hand blisters the size of dimes. I look at his veins and want to bleed him to death. One quick slice I could bathe in his blood.

I have this reoccurring dream where I'm cooking his face in a pan as if it were two eggs. His eyes are the yolks, which I poke open. They ooze out and sizzle in the crackling oil.

Blood is leaking from my nose. I can see each drop falling down, getting smaller and smaller until it splats onto the floor.

I get up, hop on my bike and leave.

They say every town is another story, so I rode my bike to another story.

The dry air scrapes my ears. I don't know why I ended up at that particular school, and not my own junior high. Probably because it was further away.

My goal was to get lost. I took every turn I didn't know, sought every foreign horizon. I like being in places where I don't belong—to watch the trees or the sky or the ground—try to figure out exactly what made it different. Maybe the air smelled better, or was warmer.

But no matter how far I went, it was still me looking out of my eyes, still my heartbeat the most boring song of all time.

I wanted to be a different person, a girl.

Emily.

My parents would still be together and would buy me pretty clothes. My socks would be hemmed with lace. Mom would braid my hair while I asked her about boys. My favorite class would be history.

There was nothing to do. I tried to enter the classrooms but they were locked. I drank some water from the fountain which tasted like metal. I crushed coke cans. I threw a fold-out chair at a door.

I sang Bon Jovi's "Wanted Dead or Alive" a cappella.

The sun was hard and the shadows were crisp, just like the video. I found a chewed up pencil and wrote I'm a cowboy, on a steel horse I ride all over the walls as I sang each word. I had to sing it really slow because I couldn't write that fast.

For a kid with one hand and nothing to do, masturbating was not an epiphany.

I went over to the tire swing and crawled underneath the planks. I got on my knees, pulled down my shorts and closed my eyes.

The sand gets darker, making some messy Japanese character. I don't know any Japanese but I know they got dead soldiers too. A bunch of soldiers and a couple of countries with some water in between—that's how to make a war.

There's sand stuck to my knees. I brush the sand off, it sprinkles on the wet spots. I look around to make sure no one saw anything. Just two pigeons, but they don't know the meaning of things.

Now and then I hear the faint noise of a car going by. One of the pigeons flies away, and the other one soon follows. You never see a pigeon way up in the sky because they are just like people, full of land and worry.

It occurs to me that I'm not a cowboy. I find the pencil, go over to the walls and cross out I'm a cowboy each place it is written.

The sky is bruising darker and darker purple and getting colder. A ragged line made by trees and rooftops cuts across the horizon as the sky enters black. I have no idea where I am, or how I'll get home.

I know this sounds stupid but I start to miss him. I hop on my bike and ride back home.

My father is passed out on the couch. One sock is dangling from his foot.

The light from the television taps on his body. It's just the two of us and the news anchor on the TV talking about Memorial Day.

The news footage showed people crying. Their faces were the butts of fruit, all rippled and bunched up from sobbing. Tears have many paths to choose from, just one ground to land on.

Flags got folded into smaller and smaller triangles and people cried. They wore black even though this country is red white and blue.

Nobody's flag is black, except for pirates and Martians, but their stories don't happen in real life.

In real life, a mother disappears and all is left is the shape of her face in the mind of a child who traces the contours like a blind person.

In real life, school is tomorrow and it's a long bike ride there.

My father once told me history is written by the winners, so I guess we're doing okay. Since Emily's favorite class was going to be history, I decided I would start studying harder and not cheat on my tests anymore.

Last year I had to memorize all the states and their capital cities. I drew an upside-down map of America on my chest and wore a large buttoned shirt, keeping some of the buttons undone so I could peek in.

The trouble was guiding the light in through the shirt. I carefully moved around until a ray of light hazed in, an unnoticed sunrise.

I couldn't memorize all the states and their capital cities. They all look the same—a bunch of messed up squares. If our founding fathers didn't argue so much, and there weren't all those mountains or rivers in the way, we could live in perfect tiny boxes, but instead America is one giant jigsaw.

My grandfather was poisoned in the ear at the barber shop. Nobody knows the reason why, but people think it was because of unpaid debts.

Soon he became half-blind and delirious and asked to see his daughter on his death bed.

They brought in another girl to stand in for my mom, because they knew an actual encounter would be too traumatic for her.

They even cut the girl's hair the shape of my mother's. When they brought the girl in, he took her small hands, said "please tell my daughter to be strong", and closed his eyes.

After he died, my mother's relationship with her mother disintegrated into awkward glances at the dinner table and soundless evenings, each one tucked in their own part of the house.

My mother ran away, kept walking until she found a lake to drown herself in.

She was standing on a large rock, pondering the concentric circles made by a frog's occasional surfacing when an old man went approached.

He had been at the lake all afternoon trying to catch some fish, he said. Every single day that summer. Then he saw a beautiful little girl standing on a rock. The girl filled the lake with ache.

He decided to go over and tell her that this world isn't bad, and that whatever is happening to her is smaller than the universe.

You should stay around, he said. So she did. The old man never caught any fish.

The windows are so dark they are half-mirrors with worlds on the other side. I see myself floating in the backyard, the leafless branches poking through my ears.

If you ever look at your face for a long time, it becomes abstracted, like a word you suddenly can't spell

Mom.

You look it up in the dictionary to prove you're right, but it doesn't look that way. You have to let it go, forget about it, until it looks right again.

I touch my father's face, startling him awake. I make a fist above his head. He

looks at me with searing clarity.

The glow from the TV makes my fist look like some wild animal on the wall, flickering the way a predator runs in slow motion in the mind of its prey.

THERE ARE NO HILLS IN THIS TOWN

From a car stopped at red, Jill looks small for a human. This is an optical illusion created by the large building she stands in front of. Jill waits for the bus trying to read her book, but the wind keeps turning the pages for her. A strong gust blows her into the next chapter. Take a human, place it in front of a large building: this human will resemble prey. Imagine pink flesh underneath clothing, how inviolate and penetrable flesh is. Imagine a dinosaur coming down, snatching the human up, and the small drops of blood that fall diagonal in the wind, spotting the pavement like atonal notes. From a car accelerating at green, Jill will get smaller, smaller as the car drives away. The driver will turn his head to sustain his gaze, soon precluded by the sheer physical constraints of his neck. Seen from a rearview mirror, Jill will lose her place in the enfolding blur of cars, trees, people, and other things.

From a car stopped at red, Jack looks at a woman standing in front of a large building. She waits for the bus trying to read her book while the wind blows through her hair. The book is thick, and it looks like she's near the end. Jack wonders what book she is reading; he wants to know the story. A large crow flies from one electrical wire to the next, its wings spread out like an improbable hug. It feels like he's been at the red light forever. He's fidgeting with the car keys when the light turns green. Jack eases into the accelerator pedal with the restraint and subtlety of a man who would rather stay there. The woman gets smaller, smaller as he drives away. Jack turns his head to look at her until his neck stops him. He contemplates shifting into second gear but realizes there are no hills ahead. His right hand feels confused about where to go, laments the space it occupies, and sadly finds his lap. Jack wonders what the book is about. Seen from his rearview mirror, the small woman standing in front of a large building becomes eclipsed by an aggregate of other things.

MAKER'S MARK

In the blackness of your mind she is already on the ground, her warmth piercing the earth's mantle. Her face grows bigger and bigger as you descend towards her, landing in a spasm that rolls your body next to her.

You can smell her shampoo, or lotion, or whatever it is that makes her smell that way. She looks up at the stars. Her profile is a horizon: eyelashes as distant forests, lips as a sudden creek, nostrils sending smoke signals into the chilly air.

The night sky is salted with stars, as if to season a tasteless universe. Beads of dew hang from pine needles as diamonds without rings. You gave her a ring once, half of infinity. She was nice about it. "Baby," you say.

The fall splits your lip. A trail of blood eases out of your mouth like the red wax on the bottle you hold. You do this every night: get wasted and black out on the football field behind your old high school to embalm that time when she was yours.

Every time you reopen your eyes the black sky is the first thing you see. To compare, you close your eyes again, to induce a black that is really a billion tiny darkened orange dots formed by your eyelids.

Slow motion chronic blinking: opening and closing your eyes again and again, trying to open them up to the right scene; but the scene never changes, except for the length of grass. You look around and realize you are in field-goal range. "Baby," you say.

In the blackness of your mind she is always on the ground, and the mark of stars are always etched into the sky by a careful maker who always says baby back.

BOOKMARK

There are two types of people in this world: people who wake up to find themselves as a giant insect, and people who wake up with the book under their back.

After our son died, Melanie found a copy of *Metamorphosis* under his mattress. The boy was always a little off—putting literature in porn's most cherished hiding places. Melanie fanned through the book and a small piece of paper fell out, curling against the air in its descent like a dried leaf. I crouched down and picked it up. Some handwriting: *sea within us*.

"See within us," I said to Melanie.

"I don't understand," she said.

"Frank misspelled the word S-E-E," I said, pointing at *sea*. "He meant to write *see within us*."

Melanie sobbed. Ever since what happened, her nerves have been shot. Okay, bad choice of words. "What kind of thing is that to write? That doesn't even make sense!"

"That kid was always a little off," I said.

When a sperm penetrates somebody's egg, life begins. When a bullet goes through somebody's brain, it ends. The logistics in between—my son's life—is littered with minor details: a boy with a hernia; a boy coming back from school with bruises; a boy who covered the walls of his room with drawings of shoes; a boy who was never a man.

I made fun of him about his inferior prowess with girls, nicknaming him 'little pickle' after I caught him masturbating one night, his back facing the crack of the door, panting girlishly. I always encouraged Frank to acclimate to women as earliest as possible. There was a dance once in 7th grade. I dropped him off in the school parking lot. "Just go over and talk to them," I said. He looked at me sullenly with borderline wet eyes. "Thanks Dad, I'll try."

"I'll try." That was his favorite line.

Melanie couldn't bring herself to go to the funeral. Everyone knew he blew his brains out with my shotgun. That's the thing with a hole in the wall and a closed casket, the truth blisters. When I got back, Melanie was standing there in the middle of the kitchen. "Was he trying to say that we should've seen within us, or him?"

"How long have you been standing here?" I asked.

"*See within us—but who is us?*"

"You're thinking too much about it. He was just being dramatic."

Melanie's eyes were bloodshot from crying. "Who is us?"

Seasons come and go, the leaves of trees in a fast forward loop from spring green to winter's invisible. Melanie is better now, though she does grasp in the middle of the night.

Our marriage counselor—or more accurately—her marriage counselor wants me to read this *Metamorphosis* book. I'm told I need accept my son and this would be symbolic. I 'get' the book, but I'm not impressed. Basically, Kafka is a loser. He's a bug, big deal. If he had a real job, he would have had real problems, with real people. There is no such thing as art, only assholes who try to make it. There are two types of people in this world: people with real problems, and people who make problems for themselves because they don't have any real problems.

I don't feel sorry for Frank. I never did.

I can only read a dozen pages or so at a time. Then I put the book down on the bed and fall asleep on it. Every morning I wake up with a red rectangle on my back. Last night Melanie says she can't keep the piece of paper anymore and hands it to me. I tell her that he probably used it as a bookmark.

It's so funny how sometimes we never see what's on the other side of things—like only half of the universe is known. This morning I turn the bookmark around. Some handwriting:

a book should be the axe for the frozen

MAY I BE FRANK?

To err is human, to need air is too. Accidents are by definition not intended. If the swimming pool is to be our metaphor, drowning was not rhetoric on Marianne's part.

Voyeurism, disassociated from amorous eyes, is an act that begs for its own meaning. I did not love Marianne entirely, only in spasms. She inside her home, putting on her bathing suit, as seen through a window, was merely a stranger in a box. They say television is chewing gum for the mind. Worry is a jaw-breaker. I worried for her.

It is a glorious moment when a child's ball rolls onto someone's lawn, or more notably, smashes through their window. A ball's vector is driven with hope, and so I forgave Lucas every single time. "Did you get your balls from your daddy?" I asked him once, but he was too young to understand.

When I'm accused of pessimism, I say I'm a realist. When others herald abstract art, I say I'm a realist. Realism has two meanings: pictorial mimesis, and the abnegation of self-delusions. Of the former, I painted each hair on Marianne's body with a fine sable brush, using Naples yellow to mark the tickle of light. And for the latter, I will only say this: The grass was never greener on the underside.

As compelling as a crotch is, it is more romantic to imagine a dog wandering the streets at night, sniffing away for an olfactory friend. Maxx, for that is what they called it, would come over to leave little pungent brown notes all over my lawn, a shit symphony of sorts.

Niceness is the opposite of intimate—a shielded diplomacy one employs with a strange neighbor. Marianne smiles at a distance, with the occasional feeding of Maxx, collecting of the mail, sorry for the broken windows, etc. "Don't trust your neighbors" I told her once, trying to make light talk, "they know where you live." She laughed, then winced.

A man goes on a jog. The neighborhood sweeps past him, the background hinged on a scroll, an unnoticed moving screen. The houses are all the same—two yellow jaundiced eyes upstairs and a garage mouth holding in the barf of cars. The sidewalk is a vein, bringing lifeless blue footsteps back to the heart of a man's home, or that of his neighbor's. When I got back, Marianne had just entered the pool. I could hear the gentle waves emitted by her body lapping against the concave cement hole. Her soft white skin was a chill blue under the dusk sky. I asked her a simple question, and she froze.

A 10 o'clock news sound-bite, the ones you hear after some meaningless violent act. It sounds commonplace, and sadly, almost natural. There were cameras everywhere. The swirling red and blue light of a police car siren marked the foliage. Maxx was hanging from the elm. Lucas was covered in tar and Cheerios. Frank screeched to a halt, jumped out of the car and locked eyes with me. That man has a wide stride. First one blow, then another. I laughed and he cried. I will never forget his eyes.

They were not part of his face anymore.

THE PAINTED HAND

An open palm in the sky at high noon is also its shadow on the ground. A man with a hose is watering the lawn. A weekend is a delusion that there is still life to be lived. A sun that lets us see cannot be seen. *Daddy make a rainbow*, the daughter says. *Father who am I*, she will ask forty years later.

In forty years this man who is watering his lawn will not know what room he is in. He will see a face, its muscles contracting into slippery puddles of expression. *Father who am I*, she asks. *Do you recognize me? I am Lisa, your daughter*. His memory, uncoiled by a stroke, are torn ribbons in the wind outside. He sees a lost diagram of branches outside the window.

A man with a hose aims it upwards, tightening the nozzle into a fine mist. The daughter runs through the falling spray, waving her small arms and screaming in delight. She can see the faint outline of the color spectrum, and dashes through it hoping it will color her body. Ultraviolet, the invisible race.

Between the sun and a shadow of a plane is that plane. Lisa sits in the window seat looking down at the little cars moving so slow, so sure that all the roads will somehow connect. She tries not to think about all the missed emails at work. The ascending plane's shadow recedes towards its center, getting blurrier at the edges like the town itself.

There is an answer for everything: the trees that grow upwards to meet the rain; a child's hand at the end of an arm; a loyal sun that somehow always wakes before the world; a tongue that blocks the answer within. *You are my daughter, I made a rainbow for you*.

WILL YOU MAR ME?

A soldier comes home, only his face is no longer a face, but left over slabs that belong to flying shrapnel. Dressed in full uniform, his beady eyes looking out of the pink jagged smear of what's left of his face. His wife, a modest looking woman, looks away. I don't know their names, only that they were, as described by the *New York Times*, "a young couple from Illinois."

A young couple from Illinois. An old couple buried next to each other. Two kids fucking in a car. A prenuptial, a mortgage, a war. One plus one is two, of bodies. One plus one is one, in love. One plus one is three, with child.

This child is me. Another photograph is taken. My parents are at the park, a glimmering lake behind them. It's autumn and some dried up leaves are by their feet. My mother's dress is perfectly white on the outside, though there must have been grass stains on the bottom. I think about how the air might have smelled that day, or if there were any sounds in the sky--an airplane above maybe, or a bird's call. He stands next to her, jaw clenched tightly and looking away from the lens. In the photo her eyes are shiny with water and they catch the sun.

I was empty inside so I filled it, one leaky drop at a time. I lived in public libraries, running my fingers along books--their spines like silent piano keys. The world of words was dead, airless. I went to the recruiting office and signed the forms. Across the lot, I found you on the second floor balcony pushing your cart from room to room. "Housekeeping," I heard you say into each closed door before you knocked, a syncopated conversation with rectangles. You made a thousand beds you never slept in. You dreamed a thousand dreams you never lived. One day I asked you for dinner and you said yes.

Face the nation. Face the day. Face with no eyes, only two mucousy wounds squinting at the pale day. I wear my uniform to the photo-shoot. The kind lady keeps her gaze on the floor and gives us a discount. You look lovely in your wedding gown. My love, I am still who I am. Please believe. I still want to fall asleep to the sound of you flossing in the bathroom, plucking the strings of your mouth-banjo. I want

to wake up with my old face, the one God gave me before his associates took it away. I want get up and see your face in the mirror, without my reflection, without the silent chaos in my head.

Tomorrow let's go to Ruby Tuesday's for Brisket and Cake. We'll share a soda, slurping it down until it sounds annoying. I asked you to marry me and you said yes. I went off to war and came back fucked. A large and notable newspaper puts my face in a photo essay about disfigured soldiers. A man sees this picture--of you in your wedding dress after you said yes and before you changed it to no, and me holding your hands dressed in uniform--and writes a story which fragments into the first person. He wants to understand what happened with this world but cannot. He is a cheap liar. Here, more lies:

The universe is connected. The Brotherhood of Man. Love is blind.

The following never happened, but can be considered true: Before the waitress comes over and takes our order, two children laugh and stare. I lost my face in another country, lost my mind in mine. Tonight I will go to sleep and, with hope, not wake up. They say that's what God's kindness is.

CALENDER

I died on Tuesday and today is Saturday. Please cross out Tuesday through Saturday on my calendar, and do so in the same manner until you also die.

We named the pot roast Paul since that is good name. Paul used to be Saul (long story). We considered Paul our child as we ate it. My wife's subsequent "food coma" lasted two months, during which time I watered the mail.

The sandwiches at Chez Paul are expensive, and I cannot tell if the chairs are sculptures. Royalties are not being paid. The salad dressing reminds me of seagulls, as far as what they are capable of.

An unemployment line goes on for three blocks, at which point one will come across a hot dog vendor. Another three blocks, a dog. Another three million, a god.

Life is dust that got sprayed from a dark hole into a room. In this room, there are those who have dressed nicely, those who have dressed simply, and those who have not dressed. We call the latter apes.

My wife's "food coma" was really just disappointment. She moved to Tuscany, to find the same yellow grass she left, sending me short sentences disguised as the back of a postcard.

I found a post-it with fuck off written on it. The bright white light was as thick as mayonnaise. A decapitated man shares the form of an exclamation mark!

I worry about the mail, and the cereal, which, probably, is soggy by now.

OIL ON CANVAS

I was lost in the Museum of Modern Art last Sunday on the 5th FL in Painting and Sculpture, in front of Rene Magritte's "The False Mirror" in Gallery 12. I have not been able to consult with security, for obvious reasons, but the newspapers have reported very similar facts with the aid of security cameras. The footage reveals the back of a man's head, a surrogate pupil perhaps, in front of a painting of a large eye whose cornea is the sky. Modernism, it turns out, is a hallucination. It has been noted by the associated press that I "simply vanished," and as prophetic looking as Magritte's painting of that eye is, I must assure you that it had nothing do with my disappearance. (Here, I'm referring to radical theories that I was somehow pulled into the eye.) If there any irony, it is that I wish this entire experience was actually surreal, and not, verily, so very real. I have been thrown into quite a melancholic state over this, especially after seeing my family so composed at the other end of the cameras. I notice the lawn needs mowing, and don't suspect the dog to be as diligent as I. Remorse is a donut hole you never knew was missing, and my wife's frail face gets shiny behind my watery eyes. I've been watching shadows crawl here and there and realize not only are they without a soul, they cannot dance. Life may well be a waiting room. It is surprising that this entire time no one has bothered to look in the café, sitting at what in the past

few days has been table 28. The fennel and arugula have since wilted in my canvas bag, whose contents fortunately also carry a bottle of extra virgin olive oil. Who would have known that a simple trip to the farmer's market then MoMA on a nice Sunday could be so postmodern, which is how I thought about it as the canvas bag fell off the table, meeting the floor with an extra virgin oily crack.

ROSE PERIOD

The word "ugly" is a complicated word. There are no gross anomalies or dissymmetries on my face. It's plain and simple except for the nose, and yet, instead of calling it plain and simple, they call it ugly. By "they" I mean this entire town.

They call me Picassoface. A little understanding of modern art won't hurt here: Picasso abandoned mimesis in favor of distortions that supposedly mirrored a subconscious countenance that was closer to truth than mere anatomic renderings. He put both eyes on one side, made the nose part of the forehead, and violently punctured new orifices wherever he wanted.

They call that genius. I call that cruel.

The word "gross" is another complicated word. I said there are no gross dissymmetries on my face, but there are indeed dissymmetries. My nose is about half an inch off the center of my face, to the left. It's also somewhat large.

Guys pretty much don't want anything to do with me. Brandon was nice, for a while. We walked home from school; sometimes we even stopped by Stop n' Go for a snack. His father always came home red-faced and pissed, so Brandon would come over to watch TV. I loved the commercials because he would stop looking at the screen and look at me, and I would smile.

He never held my hand or even touched me. I settled for the air around him.

Brandon said he wished he could get rid of the last letter in his name. He loved Brando in *Apocalypse Now*, kept on quoting him and ad-libbing alternate versions of Kurtz's speech in the end. I watched that movie five times, hoping to have something interesting to say. I guess I'm that cow that gets decapitated.

One time, coming back from school, we saw some kids burning a huge pile of dried leaves by the Methodist church. Black bits curled and floated in the air. One landed on his cheek, and I brought my hand up and touched his face. He stepped back and looked at me. His eyes were watery, and then he looked away.

That moment was a razor blade, and it seemed to remove the skin from my body. Our walks home from school became farther and farther apart. He said he found a shorter way home, had to hop only one fence. So I let him hop.

One day, he stopped looking me in the eye. It was that easy. I came up to his locker, and I was invisible.

The word "beautiful" is not a complicated word. It's a feeling that drops inside you and stays there, and you hold onto it with trembling hands.

Dusk is beautiful because the foreground—the ugly parts filled with faces, cars, and things—becomes a blurry silhouette that crops out the sky as it changes from color to color. Finally, it decides on black. I guess each day has a little funeral.

Soon, Brandon started calling me Picassoface, too.

Love is like gathering all the emptiness in your chest the way one gathers laundry from the dryer without a basket, hoping not to lose any socks. When I find all the socks I've lost, I will make a pillow.

My father says I'm beautiful, which hurts the most. I can see the love mixed with lies in his eyes. I can see my mother look away every time he says it; sometimes, she even runs the garbage disposal.

I go upstairs to my room and look in the mirror. I touch my nose and bring it to the middle. My eyes give birth to soft, salty diamonds.

Picasso was only twenty years old when he moved to Paris and painted on cardboard and pieces of scrap wood, anything he could find. He was less cynical, I guess—the faces then were only sad, having leaked out the entire rainbow except blue.

I've started studying Picasso in the library during lunch. I share the long tables with the brown kids. They know better than to go out there in the quad. Hashim is addicted to his Nintendo DS. Neeraj does his calculus early, in time to take care of his grandmother. We've been talking every day. He's sweet.

I show him Picasso's painting of this old lady with a glass eye looking off into blank space. "She'd be a good friend," I say.

"Why?" he asks.

"She'd only see half of me, like this."

I bisect my face with an imaginary line traced with my finger, stopping at the chin.

He smiles, and I smile back.

[N/08.12.18] [*Holland, 1660* by Jimmy Chen]

Reverse Chiaroscuro

A bead of light on his nose blends into an illuminated smudge made by its reflection. This nose, with wrinkles and warts, is arguably Dutch. It twitches with each breath as a wakeful mitigated snore. The subject returns home after a long day of posing. The painter, still working, has resigned to the memory of the subject. The light from the nose traverses dimly across the cheek, swiftly by the ear, into the dark corners of the room. Had it been daylight still, the light might have leapt out the window, towards the shallow clouds, into the sun.

Reverse Light

Reverse light, or 'day,' is acted upon the body by tagging its atoms and binding them to receptors through lymph nodes as a synthetic hormone. This results in depression, anxiety, and dry mouth. The shape of this light's intersection is a so-called 'day rotation.' Each ray corresponds to frequencies for which no division is needed. A face will always seem like a face. (Note that if a ray is $2m$ long, its reflection will be $2m - 1$, or 'empty.' The day is θ value.)

Reverse Time

The development of structural models of memory has been the focus in our cognitive branch for a long time. Structural theories are based on the assumption that Q-units of Information (QUI) in memory reflect Derived Meaning, Diffused Meanderings, and Divisional Malleability (DMs). We've been developing an algorithm which aims to reduce human days by production of 'junk space' and non-time. Use of religious scrolls to mediate spiritual deficits resulted in improved serotonin transcriptions and violence.

Reverse Portrait

'Day behavior' in men with congenital doldrums have been extensively recorded. In order to investigate all facial and spiritual aspects of his models, Rembrandt employed his infamous 'bag over the face' strategy (self-explanatory). Development of bag breath, claustrophobia, and other Golden Age onsets were assessed. The bagged subjects remained willfully anonymous. That the perimeter of their 'days'

were dramatically reduced was greatly welcomed.

US, PEOPLE

FACES HAD NO PORES because the people were not alive. Lie buttons, or eyes, were affixed onto their faces with conjunctivitis seal. Before bed, they removed their faces and tended to their sore skulls. During the day, they brined themselves in swimming pools for hours with chlorinated water. Each morning they applied their new face with a caulking gun.

To smile for no reason was a common tactic known as 'affectation,' or Affleck, which was often confused with Aflac, a wild goose often confused with a duck, a disparity popularized by the game Duck, Duck, Goose—in which children learn about the law of ratios and exile. Aflac and Affleck both shared the same countenance and lived good lives off their royalties.

The sexiest man alive was dark brown. His name was Washington. Celebrity, a political movement of the west, comprised of man and woman—both known for secreting notable amounts of fluid from their glands. Men like Washington were said to have the largest glands, which determined attitude. When attitudes got out of control, it was called 'French.'

When the daughters began budding in the chest, they were encouraged to snort cocaine and crash expensive cars into people, or trees. This behavior, 'social,' made farmers wince. Other aspects of social included: injecting the Botulinum toxin, or 'sausage poison,' into one's face and rendering it useless; spray-painting one's body a dark bronze hue to mimic the sun's prolonged affect on the epidermis; and bleaching one's hair until it resembled hay. Once an appearance was settled, it was cast in resin.

What was important was what people wore. Incidents in which identical outfits were worn by two people were chronicled extensively. Pictures of people wearing the same outfit were posed next to the other, so that the public could rate them. People were keen on rating things, even themselves. A simple question permeated everyone's mind: am I hot or not? The answer, unfortunately, was lost.

In the evenings, partisans of the Celebrity Party would copulate, incurring moments of cosmic faux-nearness, or 'coming.' They vocalized affirmations into the air, the most common one being yes; or prayed by saying 'Oh God' repeatedly. Men didn't want children and thus propagated their genetic emissions on, or into, non-living things. This behavior was distinct from the Second Coming, which involved only one man.

At first, the blackouts were drug induced. People, after 'clubbing,' woke up in unfamiliar apartments, lying on carpet made damp by alcohol. Soon however, entire cities underwent blackouts. In the darkness, people struggled to keep themselves occupied. Black television screens showed Eternity on every channel; skin detritus surfaced as Jacuzzis slowly went cold; pop-tarts remained stuck inside toasters. People began burning candles, unaware that such flames would have to carry them to the end.

Within a year, the people had no choice but to burn the magazines for energy, for they were cold and naked. The magazines burned, and the faces on the covers curled inward as the flames chewed at the receding contours like centipedes on a leaf. The faces squinted, grimaced, became spotted with air bubbles resembling warts. The last of the people coughed up carbon and cried as the flames grew bigger, and though they cried, tears vanished in the soot halfway down their cheeks. Their innards began liquefying, exiting orifices in the form of baby food. As everything burned, the sky grew freckled with a listless ash that jerked haphazardly in the air now and again, as if randomly tugged by all the tendrils of melted skin.

YOU HAVE NO IDEA

that pale blue shirt that lowered itself on to your body every dimly lit morning by the hands of outside branches because your room was only in your head. You awoke so early, each time waiting.

Your bed lost its darkness when dawn came over it. There are parts of rooms inside mirrors and you saw that the edges cut you into pieces. Ideas have no sound and I saw that I was slowly becoming deaf. You called me opaque once so I called you on the phone.

Now you will remember that I was in front of this damn country, somewhere near the ocean, fighting off the bolding. I had no hair by then, darn my mother and this damn country for having me so soon and late, respectively.

I turned into a person and you turned onto the freeway. It was raining so blurry with your windshield wipers waving hello and the storm was a wet and lovely song that you wore on your ear as you pressed the pedal forward to move forward towards me.

You were so young and so fast and this damn country became so small like the soil in a potted plant. Sounds make the most sense when they are moving upwards like a prayer. The ceiling of your car was beating down.

You turned on the radio to a rock and roll station. The beat was so dead on it was almost lost in its precision. You played air drums beautifully though you almost lost control of the car.

And that's when I knew that you had no idea how much I wanted all of that, you.

ASTRONOMICAL SOCIETY OF THE PACIFIC

Light from the day, collected in upward palms and cooked down into syrup, is sealed off at 5PM everyday. This syrup, or 'shine', is held in a vat. It is sprayed onto the moon, using a large hose, in tiny increments every time anybody on earth blinks. This process takes about three hours. Despite the claims of Canada, this hose is to be used only for such purpose.

The moon orbits around the earth every 27.3 days, until 1976, when it becomes memory. The moon is the same size as the sun, but much further away. To determine the distance of the sun, draw a triangle in the air with your index finger sharp enough to cut the sky. If a shard of daylight falls and breaks, you are near.

While the moon 'shines', men sit in leather armchairs and contemplate balls. Women, washing dishes under the kitchen window, contemplate the shine's affect on their skin. If their skin absorbs too much shine, they will begin to resemble ghosts. They close the blinds and have panic attacks. Girls may recite popular lyrics under the moon's shine as a form of pre-lactation. Sons ignore the moon, waiting for the complete end of light.

A lunar eclipse is the subjective interface one has with the moon-dependent on the moon's position in orbit around the earth, and the earth's orbit around the sun. Such orbits are called 'languishes', forming cycles which are aesthetically marked by the ratio of lit to non-lit parts of the moon. The Flemish refer to this phenomenon as 'chiaroscuro'. Non-lit parts are under the jurisdiction of dreams (patented by Marcel Proust in 1913). Lit parts are churned into sticks of chalk for school the next day.

There is a face on the moon. She is David, Chief of Endocrinology. David's eyes and nostrils are formed by dark lunar plains call Maria (from the Latin mare), as they were believed to be seas. We now know they are merely solidified pools of eye-glaze, a form of cosmic wax. David's nose, forehead, and other protrusions, are mountain ranges covered with highly reflective gloss. The David calendar is comprised of paper and traces of pencil lead; therein holds the key to all legal emotions.

Comprised of a crust, a hard-core, a soft-core, and an upper and lower mantle, the moon is prone to initiate tidal force. People will experience swelling around the neck and lower-back pain. They will call their lovers in vain, for all lovers reside in non-lit parts. New Jersey, despite common sarcastic remarks, is non-lit State. Where there is flooding caused by tidal waves, people are forced onto earth plateaus, which are also made by foreheads and other facial contours.

David is either grimacing or laughing. Prolonged arguments about this, referred to as Foreign Diplomacy, will end in 2001.