Honors Projects and Presentations: Undergraduate

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But in Things: A series of collectives

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Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
But in Things

A series of collectives

A Senior Honors Project by Carolyn Wheatley

Fall 2009 – Spring 2010
Christine Perrin’s Introduction

It has been a pleasure to work with Carolyn this year on her project of sentient barf bags and pieces of gum. Didn’t you ever wonder what it felt like to be that? All of us have had passing fancies about the life of objects—Whitman said “ye objects that utter forth my meaning” speaking of the objective correlative, and the French Francis Ponge speaks about the mute supplication of objects asking us to articulate them. Carolyn heard this inaudible plea of the imagination and took it on. In some ways you might identify Rusell Edson or Francis Ponge or Italo Calvino as godfathers to this work. But look deeper: Old Comedy of the late 5th century is made up of the 11 surviving plays of Aristophanes. These plays, performed for the festival of Dionysius included elements such as the following:

A character who rides to mount Olympus on a dung beetle

A character who sets out to establish his own colony and becomes the ruler of the bird kingdom

A think tank called the Thinkery which does the following research: finds a new unit of measurement for the distance jumped by a flea by making wax booties, discovers that a gnat’s buzzing noise comes from its behind.

In his play, Clouds, Aristophanes has Socrates appear wafted in a basket at the end of the rope to observe the sun

Hence, we see Carolyn’s work whose narrators are a watch, a barf bag on an airplane, a piece of gum (among over 10 others) in good company. In Old comedy anything was fair game for satire and among the subjects mocked are: disease, physical deformities, ugliness, family misfortunes, bad manners, perversions, dishonesty, cowardice in battle, clumsiness. These were performed in front of crowds of 10,000 and Aristophanes was prosecuted for slandering the polis. We promise not to prosecute, though we may find these stories make demands on us.

The elements of the fantastic in both Aristophanes’ and Carolyn’s stories are there for a good laugh, toyes, but also to take down the defenses of the familiar in order to tell the truth. The
strangeness of the objective world. In these stories gives us access to difficult questions and allows us to penetrate the world of human relations. At its best it startles us into alertness. For instance, in one of the stories which Carolyn is not reading today—it takes inhabiting a pen writing in her mother’s journal for a daughter to see her mother outside of the categories which she has used to dismiss her mother as a woman like herself full of hopes in a life crowded with obstacles.

Remember that moment in your life, when you stopped seeing your parents as other.

As the weeks of our association passed, new objects began to tell stories. I asked Carolyn if she would read them aloud in an attempt to truly hear them and I found this to be the stories’ natural element—the spoken word. It has been a delicious pleasure to hear and be awakened by an expressive, human voice acting the articulate part of a coin, a pen, a book, a canvas. These are contemporary fairy tales in an ancient tradition with morals and satire that bites. A pleasure which I commend to you. Enjoy!
Introduction

Dear Reader,

In our experience in this world which we refer to as, reality, there are certain rules that always must be followed. The sun will rise and set, we will live within three dimensions, the four seasons will come and go, and we will be born, live, and die. If anything ever refuses to follow any one of these valued customs, we, in our great sensitivity and need for regularity, will become undone.

Those who came before us organized their observations of the world and its natural order into a set of laws. They used these laws to form instructions and passed them down to us as to the newly hired night guard at the local mall. We were told to watch the black-and-white TV screens for anything out of the ordinary and assured that in all likelihood we had nothing to fear, for nothing abnormal ever really occurs except for the occasional group of mischievous teenagers or some minor and easily rectified electrical problem. But does this accepted attitude toward our reality actually limit our world? Is it possible that something or some things out of the ordinary, and perhaps even extraordinary, occur around us all the time—flashing across our black-and-white TV screens unexpected and therefore undetected? Before I continue, I must hope to make an argument for the possibility of the extraordinary, because if you can’t believe me now, you will never trust the rest of what I plan to tell you which is only increasingly ridiculous.

There are many things that are hard for us to believe or even imagine within the limits of our three-dimensional world. In Faith we cannot grasp the idea of the Trinity, all one and yet distinct, or even Jesus himself, both fully God and fully man. In Mathematics we cannot imagine even the simplest shape in more than our standard 3 dimensions and in Science we cannot explain much that we learn about our universe within that same three-dimensional system. Superstring theory, a widely accepted theory that attempts to explain all of nature’s particles and fundamental forces in a single theory as vibrations of tiny supersymmetric strings, is only made possible in a universe with over 10 dimensions, which many now hold to be the case in ours. In order to
understand our world, we often have to look past our customary beliefs of what is possible, to accept ideas that at first appear impossible within it: ideas that seem fantastical.

In 1817, Samuel Colderidge, a poet and philosopher, wrote in his *Biographia Literaria* that a fictional story requires readers to have what he referred to as a “willing suspension of disbelief.” By this he meant that if a writer could instill a “human interest and semblance of truth” in his or her story, the reader must agree to withhold judgment about the plausibility of the tale in order to be able to gain that valuable truth. Colderidge asked that his readers temporarily believe in something they know to be false in the hope that their unfounded belief would result in learning something from the story. This is not what I am asking of you.

J.R. Tolkien took a very different approach, believing fantastical stories like the fairy tale to be wholly credible. He argued in his essay, “On Fairy-tales,” that fairy-tales must be presented as true because any story dealing with “marvels” cannot tolerate any frame or machinery suggesting that the whole framework in which they occur is a figment or illusion. This harder task of truly believing what we are told is unbelievable, is what I ask of you. Although it is certainly more difficult to accomplish, the outcome is much more rewarding. Tolkien explained that through fairy tales the author could bring the reader to experience a different world that is consistent and rational under its own laws which our world may or may not share. Tolkien believed that when we are allowed to see another world, we gain an outside perspective of our own, thus allowing our assumptions from our limited experience within only our world to be reconsidered and even changed.

To summarize, I felt as if before I gave my thoughts on this subject, I had to precede them with the thoughts and opinions of those with more impressive reputations of my own. Now, here are mine: this world is a lot bigger, older, wilder, and more unpredictable than we are, so how can we know for certain what it does and does not allow to occur based solely on our observations of its normal habits? Can we really be trusted to fully notice and understand everything about it?

Our dynamic world has seen dinosaurs roam its lands, water cover its surface, and mountains arise from flat ground. It has seen talking snakes, donkeys, and one human who rose from the dead. We are a people that spend about one-third of our lives finding our rest in our own private dream world, concocted by a part of our minds we do not control. Is the world our
imagination creates in our dreaming moments any less real than that which we experience in our waking ones?

The fantastical story I am about to tell you happened to me just as I have recorded it here. I didn’t seek it out—it found me—as is often the case with the important things in life. I would have merely kept it to myself, but I found that I simply had to introduce you to each other, knowing that you might benefit from the friendship as much as I have. Most of the time we find an explanation for unusual happenings that is something more acceptable, something less strange, but I ask that with this story, you resist that well-enforced, well-learned reaction, and hear it out.

Sincerely,

Lyla
I stared at the TV, accepting the slow, dulling effect that each channel-change had on my brain and sighed in dissatisfaction.

And then it began.

As I was exhaling, I felt as if someone or something was pulling the air out of me. I tried to stop but found that I had no control over the situation. I grew afraid and was deflated as the invisible force that had taken hold of my breath steadily drew it out through my mouth.

After I was completely emptied, the vacuuming continued, and quite painlessly, my entire body was pulled inside out. I know that this may sound impossible, but if you can’t believe what I’ve told you up until this point, then there’s really no point in reading on, because that is the most normal it gets.

Before I could even reach the questions of What or Who or How, I discovered that I had entered a new Where. I was no longer sitting on my lifeless couch but was instead in the midst of a powerful wind that seemed to surge right through me—whipping me from side to side as it rushed past, above, and below me.

I looked down through the whirlwind to see a small wooden ship beneath me. It looked as if it were quite old, with wood that was splintered and rotting in some areas, and floorboards popping up out of place. The bent, curved wood of the ship creaked as the boat rocked over the waves. The only straight line in sight was the distant horizon that circled around us and divided different shades of blue.

What am I doing up here? I wondered. I looked down at myself to figure out what had happened to me, and was shocked speechless when I saw that the arms, legs, and body I had always known were gone. I was too confused to be frightened and frankly, I was enjoying myself too much to cry for help. Instead I tried to further investigate what I had become. I was a thin,
cream-colored sail. All the stiffness that my usual bone cage included was gone. The wind whipped me around as proudly as if I were its banner, made to demonstrate its strength.

We struggled against each other in a playful tug-of-war. The wind pushing me back and I resisting it with as much power as my stretched fabric would allow. Above its howling, I heard water splashing on the deck beneath me. I looked down to see a man in clothes that looked as if they could have been made from my material scrubbing the deck on his hands and knees.

Surprised that he would work so hard to clean such a dilapidated ship, I observed him from above as the air used me to move us forward. In the next couple hours the skies darkened, the wind cooled, the sea grew rougher, and the man continued cleaning. He seemed not to notice how troubled the weather had become. And when the lightning began to flash and the thunder boomed and the playful wind become angry and loud, he continued cleaning. He cleaned despite the buckets of rain that poured down onto our boat, soaking the wooden ship, and making me sag with added weight.

The waves climbed high and broke down on us to get our attention. They crashed onto the deck, and rocked our small boat like a seesaw. Each wave sent one side diving down into the water and the other high into the air, and then pushed and pulled them back the other way.

The man continued cleaning despite this until finally, after one especially large wave, he put his bucket and washrag next to one side of the ship and came toward me. The fury of the storm terrified me, and I wondered if the man were blind and couldn’t see the lightning, or deaf and couldn’t hear the thunder. But I thought, He’d have to be insane not to notice these waters! He looked up at me, and I could tell by his focused gaze that he was none of those things.

He grabbed one of my corners in his hands, and I could feel its warmth through the cold rain that streamed down its calloused, rough surface. He gripped me tightly and with his free hand untied the thick rope that kept me in place. With its knot undone, the freed rope unwove itself, releasing me from my restraints.
The wind realized its liberty and whipped faster around me, trying to carry me away. The man’s hand was all that held me to the ship, but that was enough. He quickly wrapped me around his body, and the wind could do nothing more than push me closer toward him.

The man walked with me to the front of our ship, which was still being rocked by the dark blue around us. He lay down, and I could feel the soft wood bend to accept our weight. The wind jabbed at me again and small cloth waves raced across my form. I felt myself beginning to panic. My thoughts rushed in every direction—I couldn’t keep track of them all. What is going on? Where am I? The pouring rain fell hard against me like lead beads of sweat.

My thoughts turned toward the man I covered. Why are you out here? Can’t you do something? Can’t you help us? I focused my attention on him—our only hope—and I saw that he was asleep! In my astonishment, I momentarily forgot the storm raging around me, no longer hearing, seeing, feeling it. The man’s body was totally peaceful within my stretched shape. His slow, steady breathing was warm, and kept close to him by me, his blanket. His closed eyelids were calm and motionless and his back rested against the floor, moved by the shaking boat as if it were a rocking chair.

He opened his eyes and looked fearlessly at the seething sky. They told me that I was not safe from the storm, but wrapped around the source of its power. He was in control of all of it—all the chaos, the wildness—and he wanted to be exactly where he was, lying down in the middle of it.

My fear left me, and I silently asked, What should I do now? Immediately after I spoke, the man stood up, peeled me off of him, held me above his head, and said with a smile, “Enjoy it.” He let the wind thrash me around for another moment and then released me to it.

The wind picked me up and ran me high above the boat back toward its home in the sky. The man watched from the boat, and both got smaller and smaller as the ocean expanded beneath me.

I rose helplessly up into the clouds and then dropped down as the wind changed its mind and direction, diving downward toward the waters. My cloth skin flapped and flailed as we plummeted. I winced in anticipation of hitting the rough water below, and a crowd of waves
jumped up and over each other to receive me. But right when we hit, I felt no impact nor heard any splash.
I was strapped face-up to a warm, hairy arm. The wearer breathed heavily as we raced across a driveway and up three steps. We knocked on the door, waited a couple seconds, and then knocked again louder. “Coming! I’m coming!” yelled a woman from inside. The arm tightened as the wrist turned me about face. A man looked down at me to check his time and I was shocked to see that the arm wearing me was that of my father! Dad?! Is that you? I thought.

Secretly I hoped he’d somehow know, through paternal instinct, that I was not the same old ordinary watch he always wore but his own flesh and blood. I thought that maybe, underneath my methodical ticking, he would hear his daughter calling to him, but I shouldn’t have expected this—it didn’t happen. My father looked very different from the last time I’d seen him, although in all honesty it had been a while.

This version was thinner, fitter, and younger-looking. He had bounded up those steps in a way I hadn’t seen him do since he hurt his back ten years before, complaining about it along with everything else, ever since. His hair did not form grey, eroding lines on his forehead as I remembered; it was instead long enough to hang over his ears and eyebrows, which rose pleadingly as the door opened.

“I know I’m late.” He blurted out. “I was stuck in traffic on the highway and—” Inside, my mother, looking similarly rejuvenated in appearance, cut him off, “It’s always something with you, Willy.”

“I know, I know,” he said. His low, familiar voice carried with it a begging tone I didn’t recognize. “Look, I’m sorry I’m late, but can I please still see them? I’m trying. God knows I’m trying! You know I’m trying! It’s just going to take time for me to figure this out” he stopped, realizing that her expression and her stance were unmoved.

My mother stood still for a moment, hands on her hips, brow furrowed. She groaned in annoyance and said, “Look, Willie, we’re leaving at 5. They both have appointments with the doctor. We can’t be late or we’ll have to reschedule, and I can’t afford to take off more work.”
“At 5!” He consulted me. I pointed toward the 4 and the 8. “OK fine, that gives us twenty minutes! May I please see them for just 20 minutes?” My mother hesitated, and then shifted her weight as she did whenever unhappily giving in to a plea.

“All right,” she said as she stepped out of the doorway, “You can have 20 minutes, but don’t make us late!” My father clapped in celebration and sent me sliding up and back down his wrist. He looked at me again as we walked through the door and inhaled deeply, as if preparing himself for what was coming. I ticked steadily to remind him of his limits, and we entered the family room.

“Hey!” he yelled in excitement as he spotted my sister on the floor. She expressed her joy at seeing him by releasing an unfortunate toy from her mouth and yelling “Daddy!”

“How’s my girl?” he said as he picked her up from amongst a pile of hopeless puzzle pieces. “Did you miss your Daddy?” he asked, knowing the answer. My sister responded in the affirmative as she grabbed his arm and rubbed her sopping, saliva-soaked hands across my face.

“Do you like Daddy’s watch?” She looked at me, and asked him what I was. My father brought me up to her ears. “Listen to it!” he said as she grabbed me for a squeeze inspection. I wish she still looked like this now. I thought. She was kinda cute and a lot quieter. A second later she yanked on my strap, stretching my leather and pulling it toward her mouth. All right, I corrected myself, Maybe she has hasn’t changed that much.

My father held me up toward his ear, demonstrating how to hear me—something he’d never really mastered. He put me next to my sister’s ear and I did my standard thing—a practiced combination of number pointing and ticking.

“See?” said my father. “This hand tells you the minutes.” He stopped for a second when I warned him that he had already used up 10. Alarmed, he tried to change his anxious expression to a happier one despite my incessant ticking. “And uh,” he struggled to think. Tick. Tick. Tick. “And, this hand...” I interrupted again. Tick. Tick! “And this hand tells you the hour.” He concluded the lesson with a big, comparatively drier smile at my drooling sister. “Hey Mommy?” he called. “Where’s Lyla? I don’t see her in here.”
“She’s not home.” replied my mother coldly. My father kept his eyes focused on my sister as his tone changed. “She’s not?” he asked.

“No. She’s at a birthday party.”

His smile vanished, and his face tightened. He put my sister down, checked with me and asked, “What time did that start?”

My mother pretended not to notice his anger and stated casually, “Oh, I think I dropped her off around 2:30.”

“But I was supposed to have the kids from 3 to 5.” He pointed at me to back him up as he spoke. Amazing, even now I still can’t avoid getting stuck in the middle of this! I thought. “That was what we agreed.” he said, trying to restrain his anger.

“Yes, well, like you said, you were supposed to be here at 3, but you didn’t come until after 4:30, so—”

“So what?” he yelled, his voice meaner with each loud tick. He put my sister down and she followed behind him, pulling at me as he walked into the kitchen.

“So, I figured it wasn’t the end of the world to let Lyla go to a birthday party!” My mother acted as if she didn’t understand him.

“How can you say that?” he yelled over her. “This is the only time I have during the week with the girls! How can you not let me see her?” His voice cracked. This, I had never seen; the yelling was familiar but I had never heard such a hurt tone in his voice. Even my sister looked up afraid and yanked at my strap to release me.

My mother became uneasy and after remaining quiet for 13 seconds said, “I’m thinking about moving with the girls to be closer to my parents.”

“Closer to your parents? They live an hour and a half away from here!” Ignoring my sister, he threw his arms, and me, up in the air, shocked.
“I didn’t want to talk about this now.” My mother tried to walk past him. “I thought we could discuss this later when the kids weren’t around.”

He grabbed her with his arm until I pressed against her soft skin. “There’s nothing to discuss! How will I ever see them if you—” My sister interrupted him by poking my face and begging him to let her have me.

“Fine. Here you go, Sweetie. Take this into the other room.” He grabbed at my strap with his right hand but struggled to undo it as he was shaking with anger. No, no! I thought, I have to see this! I have to see what happens! He finally undid my strap and handed me to my sister. She shrieked with delight and carried me into the next room.

Now this part I remembered: my parents yelling at each other in the kitchen and me entertaining my sister at a distance they assumed was far enough away to protect us from their battle—they were just as wrong this time as they would be for the next ten years.

My father did most of the yelling in this fight. “Don’t take that out on me and the girls! This has nothing to do with you and me!” Each time he yelled I heard his voice shake more. It built in intensity like a volcano—vesuvian and quaking until it was ready to erupt. When it finally did three minutes later, he exploded loudly. He went off for a while about lawyers, appeals, a father’s rights, and revenge and then, when he had run out of lava, both opponents went silent.

My sister pressed playdough onto Barbie and myself (I was tied around her waist, fully reduced to a Barbie belt) to erect a colorful pyramid forever memorializing Barbie and all her priceless treasures, myself included, and holding us there to await the glorious afterlife. As each glob of playdough built the pyramid higher and higher above me, I heard the final pleas of my father, who had cooled to releasing only smoke and ash.

“I know I made mistakes with you but those girls are my life. Please—don’t take them away from me.” The architect called for more globs of blue playdough, and they were added and secured with a solid patting by her open palm.

“I’m sorry Willie but I’m really trying to do what’s best for—” A few more murmurs followed, a door slammed, and I was entombed.
Violin

Heavy, fast breathing came from the young man carrying me. His face was serious, and he marched forward with a body as stiff and rigid as I was. His arms swung me quickly back and forth and turned me around in his wrist. Across from me, in his other hand, a violin bow sliced through the air at equal speed. I identified the bow easily because of my extensive musical experience.

By extensive musical experience, I mean my short-lived career with the cello. Third grade was a good year for us until, running my life-size companion downstairs, I tripped and broke its neck (in half). It was killed instantly. I tried to move on to the violin the next year, but when I found that the most contemporary song I’d learn to play was the theme of Star Wars, I abandoned the irrelevant instrument.

I switched to piano which was more fun, and luckily for me (and it) had no need to be transported up and down stairs. I took lessons for years and was able to reach respectable mediocrity so that I have the reading ability of a third-grader (musically speaking) and can play the chorus of Fur Elise as many times as I like. I reflected on my glorious musical journey as the young man holding me brought his pendulating to a jarring halt.

I looked up at him and immediately recognized that the musician was not attractive. He was young with sharp features, tiny eyes, and light blonde hair as thin as the horsehairs of his violin bow. He wore a tux, although his extremely small frame couldn’t hope to fill it. Who does he remind me of? I thought, and realized that his body was reminiscent of many cartoon stick-figures I had seen. I wondered if he had any muscle at all or if his arms and legs were in fact additional violin bows, as long and slender as the one that seemed too heavy for him to carry. His overall body type was that which is most commonly found in men who are too timid to ever play sports, and thus remain sadly frail both physically and emotionally.

He rocked nervously back and forth on his toes, and I wasn’t sure if a breeze from an opened door was moving him. He breathed in deeply through two large nostrils and out his mouth, concentrating very hard on doing so. His face was pale with thick glasses and wrinkles that
stretched like sheet music across his forehead. As he continued his Lamaze breathing technique recommended most frequently to women...in labor, his timed exhales revealed two large buck teeth separated by a thin black space that created the appearance (intentional or otherwise) of piano keys.

I could’ve stared at the man for hours, but our introductions were cut short when a loud noise rose up at the end of a hallway. The nostrils sucked in one last long breath, and we walked with the rhythm of a metronome around a corner to find a rising curtain. The musician tucked me underneath one arm as he waved his greeting, and I felt, very his nerves soaking through wet cloth. (I never made it to the lessons about how to properly care for one’s violin, but I assume it included not soaking it in water—or perspiration—or anything else.) As his damp tuxedo jacket rubbed my wood, the applause stopped and the audience transferred their excited anticipation from slapping hands to eager smiles.

The musician raised me to his chin and held his bow above me, ready to begin. We waited, and a cell phone ring cut through our pregnant pause. *The audacity!* I thought in offense. I was horrified that some classless spectator would dare disturb our performance so thoughtlessly (sometimes classical music temporarily produces great arrogance in me—similarly to how I’m affected by watching British television). The musician kept me quiet and patiently awaited the end of the commotion while a dozen irate individuals turned fiercely around to stare at the panicked elderly woman frantically trying to silence her phone. Once the silence was restored, we waited another moment, undeterred, and commenced.

The musician began our song with rapid, effective strikes. The bow touched my strings quickly, tickling me. I would laugh right as it was leaving, and before I could finish it would tickle me again. He pressed my strings tightly against my wood, holding and releasing them with a rhythm I was too slow to understand but followed wholeheartedly. He seemed to draw the music right out of me. We continued this way until his choppy hits slowed into long, full notes. The bow glided across my taut strings, swerving as it did to create a smooth wavering in each note.

I responded with a slow, sad sound, changing my pitch as the musician held each of my strings in place. The bow continued up and down my strings, never fully leaving them. The frictions of its movements changed the expressions of the audience and softened their postures; it
played them as easily as it did me. The vibrations were all I could feel, and it was as if ours was the only sound in the world.

I noted the contrast of my piano playing experience—I used to pound those keys, trying to match it to the instructions I read as best as I could. But this performance was entirely different. The musician was not trying to manipulate me as I had that piano; he was simply releasing the sound that was already within me. He continued with skilled precision to free our sound and then—a slight misstep. It was nothing; he ignored it and left it behind as quickly as it had come.

We finished our song as our sound transcended into a renewed sense of hope, beautifully promising the possibility of joy after stanzas weighed down with the heavy hums of sorrow. As we ended our final note, the silence lasted but a moment before the audience erupted into grateful cheers.

The musician remained still, resting the bow on my strings to lengthen the final moment, and I heard him panting as he had before, although this time in a manner much less effeminate. He lifted the bow and me up in the air, and the audience mirrored our ascent by rising to their feet. I was not surprised by their vociferous adoration—it was the least they could do to reward us for the gift we had blessed them with.

A thin-lipped, canoe-shaped smile floated in the current of sweat flowing down the musician’s face as we bowed. The man looked out into the crowd, giving one last wave of appreciation, and the three of us exited triumphantly behind the falling curtain. The passionate cheers continued, but their sound grew softer and farther as we walked down a long corridor to the last room on the right.

I, and the bow I would assume, was feeling quite pleased with myself and couldn’t wait to relax and bask in the magnificence of our achievement with my teammate, the musician, but I was shocked to hear him slam the door behind us when we entered. I looked at his face to find it was burning red. He breathed fiercely through his nostrils, creating disgusting sounds as the air whistled in and out. His canoe smile had capsized and was now taking on the water that poured down from his forehead and eyes.
Is he crying? I thought. What the heck is his problem? We did great out there, everybody loved us! I could tell, however, that he felt quite differently. I had been so proud; I had never made music like that in my entire life! And now he was ruining it with his immaturity. This is just like a musician! I thought angrily. Always so oversensitive! Is this because of that one little mistake you made? Why can’t you just lighten up and accept that nobody’s perfect? He continued his pathetic tantrum. What a baby! I thought and decided that I wanted nothing to do with him. I wasn’t going to let him rain on my parade with his baby girl tears—I was phenomenal out there, me and the bow, and the audience knew it!

The door opened. An older man stood in front of us, and Baby Girl quickly wiped her wet little eyes. He snapped to attention, “Dr. Livniz, how are you” he stated, his words a practiced response rather than an actual question.

Dr. Livniz stared straight ahead from within the doorway.

“Come in, won’t you?” asked Baby.

Dr. Livniz shook his head to decline. He spoke slowly as if he were searching for just the right notes for his response. “Vut happened Thomas?” he asked in an accent I normally only encountered in bad guys in World War II movies.

What do you mean, ‘Vut happened?’ I thought. We were amazing! We were divine! Didn’t you hear the applause? They gave us a standing ovation! I was so furious I thought my strings would snap! I knew the bow had to be just as mad. It was the best piece of music I’d ever played...or been played...or whatever! And now this Livnitz character was asking “Vut happened?” I could’ve strangled him—Thomas held me back.

During my lengthy internal rant, Thomas searched for a defense, but Livnitz’s unmoved expression showed that none was possible. “It won’t happen again Dr. Livnitz.”

In the silence that followed, I could sense from both men that the two were accustomed to this unspoken communication. How is it that Thomas can create such beauty in front of an audience of hundreds with me, but he can’t find a brief stretch of syllables to explain himself to this
Thomas opened his mouth to play whatever sounds first came to him, and stuttered, “I will get it right tomorrow.”

Dr. Livnitz frowned to demonstrate that he had found Thomas’s words as cacophonous as his imperfect performance. “Tomorrow,” he said, shaking his head in dissatisfaction. “Ve practice again tomorrow. Zen maybe you get it right. You know Jonathan got it right tonight, not tomorrow.”

Thomas winced at the mere mention of “Jonathan.” I wondered if he could have been the performer for whom the audience had cheered for so passionately right before we had been called to the stage.

Thomas stared at the floor. “Yes, I know that,” he said with anger too strong for him to fully conceal. “And I will get it tomorrow.”

“Hmmph” was Livnitz’s only reaction. Having given his ruling, Judge Livnitz departed, closing the door behind him. Thomas didn’t move for a few moments but held me perfectly still as he stared at the floor. His brows lowered, his eyes closed, and his hand gripped me tightly. He did not grip me as tightly, however, as could anyone who had ever played a sport in their life. But motivated as he was by such intense fury, it was still pretty tight.

A low rumbling like the sound of drums rose within him, rushed out of his mouth in a furious yell, and was hurled along with me across the room. I flew straight toward the wall; I didn’t feel the collision—I only knew I hit it from the sound of my cracking wood.

Thomas threw pretty well for a wimpy music geek.
Gum

I sat in my pack, waiting to engage in the vocation for which I was perfectly designed. I was a piece of bubble gum—Bazooka Joe bubble gum to be exact. I lay patiently upon the other Joes in the dark and listened. The first thing I heard was a voice that sounded shockingly similar to a zipper. I thought this might be due to the solid cardboard that blocked its sound waves, but once I was removed from my box and carried into the light I realized that the cardboard could not be blamed.

“Thaynks” zipped a young girl as I was handed to her. Her bizarre speech was not due to a unique dialect or speech impediment, it was simply her own ditzy style expected in “valley girls” and found commonly in blondes. Unfortunately for Zip she fit easily into both categories and thus helplessly reinforced the stereotypes.

She removed me from my wrapper and placed me in her left hand. She studied my paper garments until she found what she was looking for. We read my comic together...slowly. Bazooka Joe and a friend were having a meaningful conversation in the first scene and Bazooka Joe told his companion that he reminded him of another friend he had. “How so?” replied the accused, “We’re nothing alike!”

In the final scene Joe quipped, “You both owe me 25 cents!” Zip finished the comic and moved onto the fortune.

“Early Bird gets the worm. Some reward!” she read aloud. At the end of her reading I looked at her face, curious to see her reaction. It wasn’t so much that she didn’t find it funny—it was more that she simply didn’t find it—the answer, the punch-line, whatever it is that a joke is designed to create when mixed with an active brain. One of these two ingredients—was a dud. She walked over to a trash can and threw the failure away.

She placed me in her mouth and I was immediately crushed between two hard, uneven surfaces that turned out to be rows of teeth. She kneaded me like a pizza dough—bending me in half and pressing me together with her slimy tongue. Her saliva soaked me and I felt myself begin
to loosen and stretch. She chewed hard as I struggled against her, sticking to her molars. I was attacked on the right side of her mouth and then was shepherded to the left by her sheepdog tongue to be pounded again.

Along with all the effort required for such intense chewing, Zip simultaneously walked over to meet a group of indistinguishable blonde girls and echoed their “Heyyyy” with her own identical, mindless greeting. I listened to the girls discuss what they considered matters of importance: Zip’s cute top, the tragedy of one girl’s ongoing saga with split ends, and Brad, who was, I gathered, “a jerk” and “a tool” and many other customary insults.

As Zip opened and closed her mouth to chew and speak in her peculiar, unimpressive way, I caught glimpses of the outside world through the gaps in her teeth. I had just decided that humans and animals staring at each other curiously from opposite sides of fencing meant that we were at a zoo when Zip’s tongue grabbed me roughly. I was lifted up and pressed against the roof of her mouth, widened, and flattened there. She shifted me down toward the front of her teeth, and I tried quickly to figure out what to expect for her next move.

Suddenly, a gust of wind came up from her throat, and I began to stretch. After one gust came another, a pause, and then another. With each breath I was spread thinner, and I formed the exterior of an ever-increasing bazooka bubble—filled with Zip’s breath. Just as I was sure that this bazooka was about to explode…it did, and I let out a loud pop and snapped rapidly back inside her mouth.

Zip rearranged me and began the process again. Why, I thought as I grew larger, must we do this? Do you think this time will have a different result? Let me save you the trouble and tell you what’s gonna happen—”Snap! I broke again under her pressure but this time landed all over Zip’s face. Ah ha! I thought, Sweet revenge! How do you like it! She tried to peel me off of her, but I clung to her skin, unwilling to submit.

Finally her long fingernails gathered my pieces and placed me back together. Zip seemed puzzled that she could have been made a fool of by her mouth-toy. Her expression showed her disgust with me as she realized, I would assume, that I was now quite filthy and covered in saliva, dirt from her fingers, and oil from her teenage skin. She launched me from her mouth with one
final blow, and I landed on the ground beside her. She watched me a second and turned her gaze to a trash can to my left, but disposed of the idea that demanded too much extra effort. Then Zip left with the rest of her girl pack.

I lay on the ground, content to simply observe the happenings around me and enjoying my freedom from the saliva cave. Swarms of people passed by, most including children pointing, yelling, and smiling—a combination not unusual for a place with live animals. I was stepped on by a shoe—a first for me, I immediately realized. Sandwiched between the shoe and the ground with each new step, I began to align myself along the ridges of the sneaker sole, when we hit a crack in the ground and I was transferred—caught on its sharp edge.

I remained motionless, waiting to see what would happen next, when I was approached by someone on all fours. Although at a zoo this mode of travel would most likely indicate a resident rather than a visitor, it was not an animal, but a human toddler that crawled my way. The baby wore jean overalls, a striped blue t-shirt, and a giant, wet smile. He cautiously reached forth one grubby finger and poked me. Intrigued by my sticky nature, he repeated his investigative probing until he decided he liked what he saw and picked me up.

He brought me toward his mouth and pressed me between four small, square baby teeth as if checking the authenticity of a coin. Dissatisfied with my taste, he took me away from his teeth and put me on his fingertip. Who is this kid with? I thought. I spotted his mother—carefully and lovingly guarding what had recently become, unbeknownst to her, a babyless stroller. Her loud talking and louder hand motions suggested she was fully absorbed in conversation with another woman whose child watched my baby expressionlessly from her own stroller.

My baby carried me on the tip of one finger and attempted with his other hand to lift his round-cartilaginous-self from the ground. We rose and then immediately fell. He tried again, this time using the hand holding me to stabilize himself. His rise was successful and he was instantly filled with an unwarranted overconfidence that caused him to lunge forward toward a nearby cage. In the ten feet we traveled, we fell six times: four forward and twice back onto a diaper that squished both audibly and literally upon impact. Finally we prevailed and made it to a cage that housed one highly intrigued monkey.
The monkey was as big as my baby and met him at the fence as if the two had prearranged this meeting. My baby and the monkey examined each other and my baby temporarily forgot me and let me dangle, slipping slowly off the end of his finger. Neither monkey nor baby were overly affected by the other until my baby fell again onto his diaper and unleashed another loud squish, and I watched what looked like two monkey eyebrows rising with surprise.

My baby, undeterred, again got to his feet and leaned his protruding belly against the fence to prevent another fall. His finger and me passed through the fence and into the monkey’s cage. No longer interested in my baby, the monkey turned his attention to me. He moved close enough to inhale my scent and then stepped backward as if to gather a more complete mental picture of me. I must have pleased him, because he snatched me before the baby could stop him, and I was transferred from a wet baby finger to a large hairy one I knew had been places and touched things that I, and even the curious baby, would never dare to.

The baby watched in silence while the monkey brought me oddly close to his wide, twitching nostrils to sniff me more thoroughly. I wondered if he might intend to snort me as a woman yelled, “Nathaniel! Oh, Nathaniel! Get away from there! Honey! Baby!” The baby turned his head, still wobbling against the cage. The monkey looked up for a moment to watch the woman run toward Nathaniel, looked back at me, and plopped me in his mouth. I never touched his teeth—I sat in his throat for a second, and was quickly sent sliding down his slippery tongue to a new, dark, wet destination.
**Painting**

I rested on my easel, a blank slate, completely vulnerable, and frankly quite open-minded to whatever should my future should hold for me. I was in the midst of an intense staring competition with a man who looked as stereotypically ridiculous as I would have guessed anyone of his variety to be.

We studied each other: his eyes ran over my vacant frame, deciding how I could be changed to fit the version of me in his mind. Conversely, his appearance had obviously already been painstakingly thought-out and irreversibly decided. His chestnut hair was straighter than he was and a bit longer than I would have recommended. He rested all his weight, which couldn’t have been much, on his left leg. His thin left arm held his right elbow, which in turn connected with his chin, via his fingers. His features were as sharp as the tip of the patch of facial hair that pointed like an arrow from his pursed lips, down toward his chin.

His dark eyes were overshadowed by two suspiciously well-manicured eyebrows and a pair of oversized, black-rimmed, rectangular glasses. He wore a low-cut, white t-shirt that seemed uncomfortable offering only chest hair as a replacement for the cleavage that normally accompanied that type of shirt. But his t-shirt seemed completely appropriate in comparison with his pants, which were probably tight enough to be considered an extra layer of skin rather than a garment separate from his body.

I smiled to myself as I realized that despite how strange I found his appearance and person to be, he had successfully made himself exactly what society asked of him. He embodied the word, “artest.” If art imitates life, I wondered what artist imitated.

I rested from drawing my mental picture of him to wonder what he could possibly be thinking as he studied me: square, white? His appearance had so many fascinating details, all very telling of the type of person he was, while mine was, inarguably straight-forward. He pushed up his glasses and summarized his findings, “Hmmph.” He declared. And in that word, he encapsulated all of his hopes for my existence.
He had settled on how I should look, and how he would make me that way. He turned around and grabbed several paint bottles. In our maturity, we both overlooked the different degrees of flatulence each discharged as he squeezed them fiercely and emptied their colors onto his pallet.

As he went to work, mixing the colors with a paintbrush, I looked around his surprisingly impressive studio. His stone floor was covered in dirt, various empty bottles of paint, and dried brushes. There was a dark red mug, complete with a tea tag hanging over its edge in one corner of the room, and a tattered notebook in the opposite corner, as if the two foes had to be kept apart.

The only furniture I could see was a metal stool, covered in paint smears, sitting five feet behind the artist. *Maybe he’s waiting for another check from mom and dad to buy the rest, I thought.* Large unadorned lights hung from the high ceiling, and most of the wall space was given to huge windows that gave us a nice view of the outside world, through the streams of rain water that poured down them.

The rest of the walls were reserved for paintings reminiscent of those I’d seen in hotels, and a few scattered mirrors. The artist wiped his hand across his forehead, which had already begun sweating dramatically, although maybe a bit prematurely. A blue streak marked the path of his touch, which, I decided, was most likely planned for effect.

He examined me once more, incorporating in his mind the last few essential details he would need for my glorious transfiguration from formless structure to brilliant creation. He began—dipping his brush into red paint, and raising it toward me. He let out a prayer of “Hmmph” to christen the commencement.

The fine hairs of his brush tickled as they streaked across me. He turned his wrist slightly to vary the paint’s texture from smooth and flat, to clotted and uneven. The cold, wet substance met and covered my white fabric; I didn’t resist it, but allowed it to soak its dye into my warm fibers, and change me.

Now his muttering quickened. He let out a grunt of “Hmmph. Mmm-hmmph” with every stroke. He redabbed his brush, and again dragged it across me, filling the white void, with *color!*
He grabbed another brush, and this time prescribed dark blue. More streaks crossed the existing red and white, but I felt these ones curve in a way the straight red lines had not.

He changed brushes, and changed grunt-speed, shortening them to a rhythmic “Hmm, hmm, hmm.” His strokes shortened as well, and drew small circles in my corners. His brow crossed, and he began to furiously fill in one particular circle that’s imperfect roundness, and placement upon both red and yellow streaks, made it look like an orange.

The painter’s grunts became more agitated, as if I were not becoming what he wanted. I was more than unsatisfactory—I was a mess! And we both knew it. My failure to match the image in his mind called for serious intervention. He grabbed his black paint, brought in a splash of emergency egg-white, and created the gray that was our only hope. For this he used a much smaller brush, and gave me large grey puffs that had an uncanny resemblance to those roaming the skies outside.

The brush pressed strongly against me, and I thought that I might tear. *I'm not the expert here, but I don’t think that adding depth to your strokes will make them any better. Neither will poking holes in me!* I argued silently. He grunted. He was coming to see that I was *not* successfully incarnating his flawless mental picture. *I* was the problem—resisting becoming his masterpiece, resisting him. I couldn’t help it, I didn’t know how to change to make him happy; I struggled to think of what I was doing wrong, but could find nothing.

He sighed with disgust, and turned away, unable to stomach looking at me! He looked out the window, and seeing the gray clouds, his eyes darted back toward me, and, saw, much to their surprise, that his creativity had been tainted by outside intrusion.

He put down his pallet and brushes, and grabbed me from my easel, adding multi-colored fingerprints to my edges. He struggled to an embarrassing degree to slide open a large glass door (sans muscles) and let out an equally laborious, “Ahhh!” to demonstrate his exasperation with me.

We went out onto his wet balcony, and he flung me over the iron railing, and out of his sight. I landed face-up, at the intersection of boulder and grass. I heard a door hurriedly slide closed above me, followed only by the sound of falling rain.
I rested there, propped against the rock. My dry body proved too great a temptation for the rain, which seemed to pour harder on me than on my surroundings. It rushed to conform me to the soaked world into which I—art outcast—had fallen. No one else was alone; it was just the rain, and me.

I always liked the sound of rain. Whenever life got too confusing, with its diverse cares and problems and questions, the rain would soothe, calm, slow things down. I would sit and watch it collect in puddles, and work its way through invisible mazes on my window. Its constant hushing could make things slower, unraveling all the tangling the day or the week or the month had done. Now, that same sound surrounded me, but something was different.

The sound was different—the rain didn’t seem to fall as one collective group as before, but instead each drop fell at its own speed, in its own path. The drops hit the grass, the rock, me, individually, and I heard the subtle sounds each made upon contact.

The rain that fell on me played with my colors. The drops loosened the paint from my fabric, and taught it their tricks. My colors imitated the rain—slowly flowing down me, meeting and mixing with other colors along the way. They zigzagged from the top of me to the bottom, where they leapt off to join the rain that waited on the ground. The paint would leave none of me untouched, and my white disappeared beneath interweaving, clashing colors.

When all the liquids finally agreed that they were pleased with their work, they didn’t stop, but instead continued to paint me, unafraid of the risk of going too far, of passing my apex of beauty and making a mistake that was irrevocable. Their confidence was unyielding, and I realized that the only person that was nervous was me. I was not what anyone wanted, but I was what I wanted, no longer the rejected letdown, but a work-in-progress.
Sandwiched between two of my competition, I stood upright, motionless, closed, and ever at the ready. A small boy dashed through the open doorway at the other side of the room and approached our lineup, deciding which of us would best suit his sophisticated tastes. His indigo, fleece onesy, covered in various types of construction vehicles, gave me several ideas about that taste, but I resisted the temptation to judge him prematurely.

I was disappointed in the insufficient advertisement offered by my plain, thin spine. It was so easily overshadowed by the others that boasted spines of several different colors, sizes, and even textures. The boy ran his index finger along each member of our ensemble as if it had the sensing capabilities of an insect antenna.

He stopped at the book right before me. His choice offered a nice thick spine, at least double the size of my own, of a shiny golden color, and accented by a beautiful light green that covered the rest of its exterior. On its front was a tree that seemed generally ordinary if you ignored its goofy expression and waving arms. The tree was accompanied by a gap-toothed rabbit captured mid-enthusiastic-jump and a flower with a round yellow face bordered by disproportionately large, purple petals.

The boy looked at the cover, intrigued by these strange creatures, and felt each one with his trustworthy feeler. He paused his research to stick his finger in his mouth, as if to very literally digest the information it had gathered, and then resumed his focused investigation. A woman in a black dress hurried into the room. “OK, Nicky, which one shall we read. Let’s see.” She looked at the clock, “Woops!” she said, “It’s very late. Maybe we’ll just read a quick one tonight!”

“Noooo!!” whined Nicky passionately. “I wanna wead a longa one!!”

“I know, I know” she concurred. “We will. Let’s do, um...” She removed his victorious selection and examined the rejects. She spotted me and, liking my thin spine, and (though I hate to assume) judging me by my cover, chose me to be their discussion piece for the evening.
Nicky scurried up the side of his bed like a pirate desperately returning to the safety of a ship in a raging sea. The woman sat down next to him, eager to begin. “The Tale of Froggy the Frog” she read.

Nicky’s eyes focused in on me as if I were the hidden treasure at the end of his long and perilous quest.

_And that’s only my title!_ I thought, _Wait until you see what I have inside!_ I was so excited to show them everything that I nearly opened myself. _I have so much to tell you both!_ I thought excitedly. I remembered my humility. _And I can’t wait to hear your thoughts, as well! OK, OK, where to start? Um, let me think..._ of course, _haha, we must start with introductions, obviously!_

“There once was a frog named Froggy” read the dress, moving me out of the way as Nicky jumped onto her lap. _Yes, yes! His name is Froggy; he is tremendous! You will both love him, I just know it!_ They took a moment to admire my illustrations: Froggy sat on a log, legs crossed casually, with what I always referred to as his “Mona Lisa smile.” He happily admired a friendly butterfly that had landed on his little green finger.

The woman turned the page. She was a little over eager for my liking—I knew we had to keep moving, but I wasn’t confident we had all had enough time to really take in every detail of the first scene.

“And Froggy had many friends!” she said, pointing at a few of Froggy’s worthy companions. _Yes, I thought. Froggy does have many friends... go on._ But I felt a small and sudden breeze hit my picture as she quickly turned my page. _Wait, wait! I had more to tell you! Don’t you want to know their names? You completely bypassed Lizzy the Lizzard and Porky the Porcupine!_ She proceeded undeterred, “And they all liked to play lots of games with Mr. Fox,” she paraphrased poorly, “and they all had a lot of fun.”

I looked to Nicky for shared outrage, but to my great shock, he was somehow unfazed by her fantastic error. _That’s not what I say! Listen to the rest of it; you’re missing a crucial scene!_ She ignored my frantic pleas. I felt as if my pages would catch fire. She turned to the next. This time
she ignored all my qualified insight into the circumstances of Froggy’s story to trust instead her own inexpert, amateur interpretation. Needless to say, this mistake led her very much astray.

Froggy was lounging on a lily pad, counting how many goldfish passed him by. This was the moment when Froggy would make the nearly unpardonable mistake of falling asleep which would carry hilarious consequences we would cover in greater detail later. The pivotal moment was the catalyst for the all forthcoming rising action and even for the conflict itself!

“And Froggy counted fishies! He counted one…two…three...” she pointed at the goldfish in the pond. “How many fish did Froggy see, Nicky?” she asked. Four, we said in unison. Froggy counted four fish, but that is really not the point. Woman, can you even read? Would Nicky be the more appropriate reader choice here? The whole point is that Froggy’s mother explicitly told him to be home by supper time and he is about to fall asleep. Don’t you see the plot development? The deepening of Froggy’s predicament? You are missing huge events in our story!

The woman turned the page again, ignoring my petitions. “And he loved to play in the woods...” False! I countered. First of all, not all of my sentences begin with “And.” In fact, none of them do! Second, I realize you must be illiterate, but are you blind too?! In this picture, does Froggy’s expression truly suggest to you that he is enjoying himself? His knees are buckling with fear! He looks ready to wet himself! He is a little, helpless frog, lost at night in an enormous, terrifying forest! He could be attacked and killed at any moment, and he knows it! He feels it! I’ve explained this all so clearly for you if you’ll just read what’s written there.

This time she skipped three pages—each detailing a key moment in Froggy’s tale. She landed on the page showing Froggy’s tearful reunion with his relieved mother. The boy stayed glued to my pictures, unaware that he had missed out completely on the character of Mr. Bird, whom Froggy had originally feared but had taught Froggy the invaluable lessons of both looking past outward appearances and the true meaning of friendship.

“Froggy loved to jump!” The woman strayed again from my clear-cut storyline, and poked the boy in the side. His body jerked in surprise and he giggled crazily at the apparently uproarious humor of her poke. She turned my page, finally reaching what she considered the ending and I considered three full pages from my actual conclusion.
“And Froggy and his mommy had a great night and were happy together.” Wrong. I thought. You have literally missed my entire message. But by this point, my fury had made me speechless. The woman started to close me. Having sucked out all my sweet nectar and spit out what had not pleased her, she now discarded my used carcass back on the shelf. Nicky stopped her, “Wait!” he interjected.

He reached out his hand and touched my picture. “That’s Froggy, and that’s Froggy’s mommy” he informed us.

“That’s right honey!” she agreed. “Now get under those covers; it’s time for bed.”

Nicky sighed, “I love reading Froggy. Can you read it again?”

“Tomorrow, honey” she replied.

“Yay!” Nicky’s celebration baffled me. How could he have enjoyed our time so much, if he had seen so little of my true message? I thought of how differently things could have gone during our time together. Poor Nicky. His mother, with her black dress (and matching heart) would continue to lead him astray, and who could tell how much it would cost him.
I waited, grasped and swung in small circles by a rough, sweaty hand. A young girl approached, and grabbed me from the open, wet palm. Her hands too, were sweaty. The girl was probably in her mid-twenties, and was sporting cranberry-colored, tight jeans, with loud untied sneakers, and a black v-neck t-shirt. She seemed that type of “city-cool” that few could actually pull off. She couldn’t pull it off.

Rough Sweaty wished Girl Sweaty good-luck, and then rattled off various instructions into his headset as she mouthed, “Thank you.” A moment later, I heard an excited and animated, to an arguably obnoxious extent, voice ring out from the other side of a curtain.

“Up next, we have a very funny young woman coming all the way from Boston. Please, give a warm welcome to, Carolyn Crane!” Annoyed at how long he had stretched out the simple, three-letter word, “all,” I began to bounce up and down in Carolyn’s hand as she carried me out onto the stage. Immediately, the bright lights and staring faces made my nerves heighten, and I could feel myself sweating. But, I quickly realized that in fact the sweat dripping down my black body was in fact, still due to Carolyn’s palms.

Carolyn stopped her overly methodical walking while waving routine, as she reached the center of the stage. “Thanks! Thanks a lot guys! Great to be here! Thanks!” She waved me around above her head, as if I were her firstborn, waiting to be dropped into the volcano below, a sacrifice to appease the tempestuous gods. As my mind wandered down that intriguing train of thought, she continued overly thanking the audience for their moderately enthused claps.

The more I thought about it, the more I wondered why she even thanked them at all. The audience had really given her anything substantial. You can’t eat claps, you can’t play with them. They last for a second, and don’t even sound especially engaging. In some instances, receiving the clap isn’t really something you want to be doing. And as I explored this new thought territory, clap-happy Carolyn continued her verbal gratitude.
She brought me in front of her mouth. “Yeah, it’s great to be here, great to be in New York Citaay.” A few proud cheers rang out. “Yeah! New York! Great city, obviously.” More cheers concurred.

“Yeah, it’s great. You guys are known for some cool stuff! Big apple, that’s pretty cool. You guys must be pretty proud of that—that’s really something to brag about. We’re not so fortunate back in Boston. Our apples are small—small enough to fit in your hand. Not here, no this is the big apple.” A few more laughs responded to her mocking tone. “Yeah, how great for you guys. And what else? Oh yeah, the city that never sleeps, right? Yeah, can you say bragging rights? That must be awesome!” Again our words pleased the gods.

“Yeah, when I hear that about New York, I’m like, how can I get me some o’ that! Boston, lemme tell ya, it is one lazy city. It’s always sleeping!” A few cautious laughs sounded, unsure of where we were headed. “Yeah, it’s terrible. Hey you wanna go into the city today? Can’t man, it’s sleeping! You know Boston, lazy as anything!” More chuckles emerged.

“It’s two o’clock in the afternoon girl? I know, I know! But, whadayawant? You try wakin it up? You try wakin’ that city up? It will get you no where.” We enunciated each word, delivering them at just the speed to seduce the laughs out of their homes. “Yeah, it must be nice here. It’s tough when your city’s in its puberty years. Always sleeping, always hungry. Ya, it’s just a pain.” Carolyn puffed “pain,” and I sent it echoing through the crowd.

“But like I was saying, it’s great to be here. How you guys doin? You guys having a good night?” More clapping occurred, and Carolyn seemed relieved. “Like Frank said, my name’s Carolyn, and uh—I come from a big, loud, Irish family, but uh—no matter how what our families are like, I find that one thing that we ladies do, is really funny to me. Every girl I talk to, whenever you ask who they’re more like, or even if you don’t, their mom or their dad, they always respond the same. Unless their dad is a total psycho, like, in jail, or recently having made some changes to become a second mom, they always tell you they’re more like their dad.” The laughter agreed.

“Oh ya, I’m more like my dad.” Carolyn said in an accented, ditzy voice, “Now, my sista, she’s all my ma. But me, I’m like my dad.” The agreement continued. “Yeah sure, ‘laidback’” I became a quotation mark, “and even-keeled like the men in our lives, right? An entire generation
of women that, by some miracle, turned out just—like—men. Girl I got news for you: you are as crazy psycho as that woman who birthed you, and there is no escaping it. Ya, that woman who looks like a mess in the morning, eye makeup down here, hair out to here,” her free hand was flying! “talking about what could have been if she’d only stayed single, how she was the smartest and hottest in her class back in high school, how that extra weight is your fault! Yeah, you’re gonna turn into the same, hormonal freak your mom is, so stop lying to your friends, and yourself.”

Her voice felt like a slide as she said stop, leading me down, and then back up again in the same syllable! The audience laughed, pleased with our offering. “Yeah but my mom is great, I love her, I really do. She gave me some great advice. She said, honey, if you get nervous, you just picture all those people naked! That’s what I heard you’re supposed to do. It’ll calm you right—” All of a sudden, I went silent.

She had said the word, “down” but I just couldn’t find the power to repeat it. I stood in her hand, silent, motionless, unable to remember how I had, moments before, so easily been able to boom her words across the room! Carolyn, unaware of my change in behavior, continued. “And I got pretty nervous before I cam out here...so...” Carolyn rested her mouth on my head, and slowly turned her gaze from stage left, all the way across to the right, making sure to suggestively look one man in the front row all the way up and down. But she was the only one who heard, and the man made a confused, and somewhat offended face at being objectified without explanation.

She went on, arms waving for added emphasis, expressions enlivening her words, but I was a dead end. I had no way to warn her, so I just watched as expressions changed from impressed smiles, to annoyance.

“We can’t hear you!” A distant voice yelled out, and I remembered, how nice it was to be that loud. Carolyn continued, as the agitation grew. “Your mic’s out. Turn on your mic!” A woman in the front row cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled, “Your—mic—is—off!”

Carolyn looked down. “What?” she said. I couldn’t even whisper her message, but somehow the woman heard her. “Your mic! No one can hear you!” She was so rude about it, she was lucky I couldn’t talk! I was ready to give her a piece of my mind. “Oh!” Carolyn said, and she turned me on my side. Confused, she struck me hard on my head.
Ow! I thought, but she didn’t notice. “Hello?” She tried again, to no avail. The audience gods grew angrier, and a low murmur of disinterested conversation began. Carolyn’s hands began to shake, and this only made things harder, and more slippery. She banged my head again, and knocked me right out of her hand. I crashed to the floor, and let out my loudest yell yet. “Boom!” I said, and I spun around on the ground, unable to make a get-a-way from the stage, with my limiting, circular route. Carolyn bent down, embarrassed, and grabbed at me. Her clumsy foot kicked me across the stage before she could reach me, and I hissed a high-pitched noise that grew increasingly loud and painful.

The audience covered their ears, acting as if they’d just been kicked in the head. I knew the feeling. Carolyn grabbed at me, this time more frantic, and picked me up. She shook me like a snowglobe, but instead of depicting a pleasant, silent, White Christmas scene, I unleashed another violent screech.

“Ugh! God, lady! Get it together!” The volcano had been quickly growing hotter all this time, and now, it seemed on the verge of bursting.

“Hello? Sorry.” She said. I repeated her words, trying to send them out as quickly as possible, but I could tell by the angry crowd, that had taken up my abandoned silence, that it was too late. “Sorry, the mic, it’s uh, nervous, so, I guess we know what it was doing, huh?” She shook me in her hand, and tried to laugh, hoping that the audience would do the same, but, to no avail.

“No we don’t, what was it doin?” Someone called from the back. At this the audience laughed, happy that their frustration had been personified in the form of this heckler. Carolyn had no ready defense. “What’d he say?” she asked the front, with a naïve smile on her face. I didn’t have the heart to tell her, so I just remained quiet, as did the unlucky recipients of her eye contact.

Carolyn, caught like a deer in headlights, breathed heavily out of a forced, nervous smile, and I helplessly let the audience know of her discomfort. She had forgotten where she was headed, and stammered a few different words before giving up. A few people coughed in their boredom, as we all waited to see what would happen. Again I felt foreign sweat, pouring down my sides, and I knew that we were done. The gods were not to be appeased, not by us, not tonight.
Carolyn opened her mouth as if to continue the torture, but I think she finally decided to have mercy on the audience, me, and herself, and she dropped me away from her mouth, hitting me against the side of her leg in her awkwardness. *OK so, no mercy after all* I thought, thinking as well as I could while being smacked against bone.

She looked backstage for assistance, and a hero emerged: “All right, put your hands together for Carolyn! Thanks a lot, great stuff!” Frank yelled. The audience clapped, but I wondered if they were solely appreciating Frank’s interference, as they grew louder and stronger as we exited.

Carolyn hustled backstage and slowed as she approached Rough Sweaty who waited with a sympathetic smile. Carolyn smiled, dropping her head in frustration. Rough counseled her, “Don’t worry about it, honey. Some nights just turn out like out, for everybody.”

“Yeah,” Carolyn replied. “You’re right, it just stinks, ya know? I was doing so well, and then, I bombed again! It’s so frustrating!”

“Yeah, I understand kid, but you gotta get over it. You gotta have thick skin in this business. You'll have a lot of nights like that, no matter who you are.”

Carolyn perked up, “Yeah, I know you’re right. I'll get over it.” She shrugged and smiled. “They better just learn to like me, cuz if not, they’re in for a lot of long, awkward, painful nights!” Rough chuckled, and patted Carolyn’s arm.

“Good girl, you keep givin’ em hell until they appreciate it!” Carolyn laughed and handed me to Rough. She gave him a grateful nod and walked toward the exit. As I watched her go, I wondered if possibly, although we had spoken the same on stage, we had heard very differently. Maybe she had missed the lengthy, annoyed silences, interspersed with taunting hecklers whose jokes got bigger laughs than hers.

*Why would she keep putting herself through that?* I thought. She walked down a couple steps, and out a side door leading to the street. She stood outside within her back to us, waited a moment, and then continued on her way. I didn’t understand. I didn’t see how someone like that
could deal with that kind of rejection, with that kind of failure. But Carolyn seemed to take it all in stride.

It had been bad enough to be her microphone, unable to break free of her grasp, no matter how slippery her sweat may have been. And I thought to myself, maybe she can relate. Maybe she too has felt that feeling of wanting to stop talking, to give in, and run off stage, never to return.

But there’s something that holds her there. Something keeping her on that stage, despite how desperately she may want to leave. Some sort of force, outside her control, that simply won’t let her. And suddenly I understood Carolyn a little bit better.

No matter how afraid she was of that stage, she was tied to it, knowing that it was where she needed to be. I wondered if she had realized this long before I had, and if she had at some point accepted that failure was an essential part of her pursuit of success.

I wondered if she had learned to stop fearing it, deciding that she wouldn’t allow it to hold her back. And I wondered if possibly, that was the reason that she was speaking, and all I could do, was echo her words.

Rough shook his wrist, forgetting he was still holding me, and I struggled to think with his commotion. I could hear the audience laughing generously at Frank and his microphone, who were still on stage.

I realized that Carolyn would not be quitting her dream anytime soon, and I was surprised to see that instead of pitying her for how hard it would be, I was actually happy for her.
Piñata

I inhaled a familiar odor: the unremarkable stench of dirty, sweaty shoes. *Is that me?* I wondered. In my periphery, I noticed that the unpleasantness belonged to my immediate neighbor, who lay on the ground to my left. The guilty culprit was a pair of cleats, spotted with mud, ripped up, and holding two filthy socks, abandoned, inside-out and slumped over the edges of both shoes. The toxic foursome sat unapologetically close to my face, releasing their worst. *Better you guys than me to be smelling that bad.* I thought, and then quickly realized how crazy I had become to be communicating with cleats. My embarrassment was halted, however, when another pair of shoes approached the line of light.

A door flung open. “Here!” said a voice in a high volume and higher-pitch. “I found it!” it squealed. I was picked up and held directly in front of the beaming face of a small boy. He couldn’t have been older than five or six and he sported a paper hat that said, “Birthday Boy!” and included a cartoon, and suspiciously smirky dinosaur. The boy paused a few moments so that we could stare at each other, and I felt that he was much more excited to see me than I him. The boy’s brown eyes squinted with his wide smile, which made up with big freckles what it lacked in teeth. His large ears came forward to meet me but were overcome by a mop of curly auburn hair that was the same color of my father’s hair, though much more unkempt. *I know this face…how do I know this face?* I thought.

“This will be the greatest!” He whispered confidently, though his discrete speech did nothing to dull the excitement in his tone.

We studied each other a moment longer and he placed me under his arm, ran me down a hallway and burst out a screen door. We entered a small party taking place in a fenced in, square yard. There were children running around a big oak tree in the middle of the yard, and small groups of adults scattered around its edges. One man in a dark suit wandered throughout, handing out drinks. The whole scene: the clothes, the hair, the cleanliness, everything looked like something out of the old *I Love Lucy* shows my father always used to make us watch with him.
And as I was reflecting on the uncanny similarities, I suddenly realized that the boy who now held me in his tiny arms was in fact a much younger version of that same *Lucy* fan.

My dad ran down the stairs. “Got it!” he yelled at another young boy who turned around to reveal that much more than just his backside...was extremely fat. After seeing his face I concluded that it wasn’t his huge cheeks, various necks, gap-teeth, or even thunder thighs that made him look so ridiculous. It was the fact that his sagging gut, too powerful to be contained by his small red shirt, or lessened by the distraction of his baseball cap, forced his tight gold shorts to carry a load Atlas would think twice about. “Thwell Willy!” the fatty lisped, sending a splash of saliva onto my face.

“Are we gonna do it now?” he questioned intensely, clasping his hands tightly and jumping quickly as he spoke.

“Yes,” answered Willy, bringing me again in front of his face. “And I’m gonna show pop how hard I can swing!” He put me on the ground while he and Fatty demonstrated their awesome power with imaginary bats. I was mesmerized. I was watching someone I had only ever seen in projected black-and-white slides, old photos, or the occasional silent home video. I’d never seen my father as a child this close. It was so different to really see him, swinging right in front of me. I was close enough to touch him! But I realized that even this close my stiff body prevented me from reaching out to touch him.

After the boys felt they’d had sufficient batting practice, my dad picked me up and ran me toward a tall woman in a red and white striped dress. “Mom!” Willy chirped, jumping to raise his words to her ear level. “Mommy! Ma!”

Fatty echoed Willy’s eagerness, “Mitheth Lewith! Mithith. Lewith! Exthcuthe me!” These simple phrases were anything but easy for Fatty’s sloppy speech. The woman continued her half-hearted conversation with a shorter lady whose graying hair was covered with a purple hat that annoyingly matched her purple martini glass. Purple turned and looked at both boys in disgust. Mrs. Lewis continued talking, but was stopped by a hand on her arm from an irritated Purple.

Mrs. Lewis turned to face them. “Oh in God’s name, what is it boys?” Her shallow drink swished as she waved it to emphasize her words.
“Can we do this now?” said my father, raising me above his head and pressing me toward Mrs. Lewis’ pointy chin. At that distance, I clearly saw her bright red lipstick, pancake-batter foundation, and thick-rimmed glasses that pointed to 2 and 10 o’clock and hid the wrinkles around her eyes. “Gramma?” I thought. She was so much taller, younger, and thinner than I remembered her. Gone were her bifocals, sagging chest, and standard grandmother-puff-hairdo. Her hair had been much prettier before it was tinted blue. She pushed me away from her and I felt something shift inside of me.

“Fine boys, bring it to your Uncle Ned. He’ll set it up for you.”

“Can Pop set it up with us?” My father asked.

“No dear.” said her already turned back. “Your father is busy entertaining.”

Willy let out a whine of disappointment and ran with Fatty to Uncle Ned, who sat smoking in a yellow lawn chair. The two showed their prize to Uncle Ned, and began their assault. “What is it monsters?” Uncle Ned teased.

“Can you hang this for us?” asked my dad.

“Course I can boys!” came the reply. I didn’t recognize this man, whoever he was, although I remembered seeing someone similar in a picture, in a mustache. He grabbed me forcefully, eliciting high-pitched cheers, and instructed Fatty to run and get a rope. After Fatty’s departure Uncle Ned quietly added that he should also simply run more in general.

We met Fatty at the oak tree after watching him bound into the house, burst back out the screen door panting, “Got it!” and then bounce roughly ten feet, trip over a small twig on the ground, pick his elephantine body up, and somehow run the last ten feet of his journey to a waiting, slightly appalled Uncle Ned. “Here it ith!” declared Fatty, raising his sausage rope-filled fingers with satisfaction.

Uncle Ned chuckled, threw the rope over one of the tree’s long branches, and tied it around me. Still unsure of what I was, Uncle Ned hoisted me up, and left me to dangle above the party.
Suspended and swaying, I watched the adults form a circle around the tree. A dozen or so children ran toward my dad, who, I realized without surprise, was not going to make any attempt to save me. The children were ushered into a line by body-guard Fatty who used only his waving arms, shouts of “Back it up people. Lettt-th go, Lettttt-th go!” and bodily intimidation. My dad took a practice swing, this time with a bat that was much less imaginary.

I watched the birthday boy swing passionately, and suddenly, the horrible realization of what I was, struck me in the face. Dad brought back his bat and smiled with that intense excitement I had seen so many times, although never with such intense concentration. He looked around and called out, “Pop, Pop! Watch me swing—”

“Your father’s busy, dear. Just swing.” Mrs. Lewis answered. The adults chuckled kindly but the boy’s face dropped. He turned around, and watched a good-looking, well-dressed, loud-talking man holding a drink in one hand and a burning cigarette in the other, elbowing a suit and laughing by the side of the house.

After another call for urgency from his mother my father picked up his bat and pointed toward his target—me. His forehead tightened, his eyebrows lowered, and his smile sunk into an angry frown that made his goofy ears and boyish curls seem very out-of-place. He squinted his oversized eyes and then, Thwap! released his fury.

The oblivious children cheered. “Good hit, Willy!” they yelled. I flew back from the blow, my contents always sliding the opposite direction. Thwap! I was struck again. “Attaboy, Willy!”

I spun around, each time coming back to that same small angry face. It looked eerily similar to my sister’s famous childhood face she brought out for the occasion of her greatest fury. The hits kept coming. Thwap! Thwap! He didn’t even give me time to return all the way back to him, but rushed toward me, swinging fiercely above his head.

It was only my father and me. The cheers and laughter blurred together, as I continued being hit, each time spinning from the blow. Thwap! My beautiful rainbow colored, papier-mâché body twirled at the end of my rope and my candy contents spun within me with each hard hit. My body weakened; my limbs began to detach.
“All right, Willy. That’s enough dear” came his mother’s voice, “Let’s give the other children a—” Thwap! Willy couldn’t hear her; I could barely hear her over his attacks. All he heard was the loud impact of his bat and he had no intention of stopping. “Willy, let’s stop now.” He hit me straight on this time and as I was sent soaring away from and back toward him I could see that his red face was wet with tears. He wound up one again. He wasn’t going to stop until one of us was smashed into pieces and given our circumstances, my chances weren’t looking good. I tensed up and waited for the kill.

Finally, there was a loud Smack! I felt my body burst, the sound of ripping cardboard, and a rush of candy from my body, mirrored by a rush of children diving on the ground beneath me. They grabbed at the treats, greedily scrounging up as much as they could while fighting off the rest of the competition. Willy and Fatty teamed up, with Fatty using his body to block the other children while Willy quickly gathered the goods. One little girl with two pink bows as big as her blonde pigtails grabbed and shook me and concluded, “Nothing left.”

I swung slowly back and forth, rejected after my defeat, while the last scraps of my belongings were grabbed off the ground. The crowd dispersed and I was left alone, ripped open and hanging.

I watched my father run over to one of the men in the adult crowd to show him his measly winnings, wiping tears with his tiny hand. He received a disinterested glance and was told to “Go play.” His face showed a hurt that was no longer angry and no longer obvious as before; it seemed buried further within his expression. He slowly walked toward Fatty, who sat devouring his much larger pile of candy on the steps. My father smiled timidly at Fatty as he sat down next to him and they compared their winnings.

I had never met my grandfather and had rarely heard stories about him from my father or grandmother. He laughed and talked loudly with all his guests, lavishly attentive to each one, and I watched now as my father watched him from his seat on the stairs. It made me dizzy. All around me began to sway. The ground, the people, the laughter and chatter, all of it began moving back and forth and suddenly, it all swung right out from in front of me.
Leaf

I hung on for dear life. The wind whirled around me, using every angle to attack and try to tear me away! The twig I held onto fought both to keep me and itself attached to the branch, which was firmly and effortlessly connected to the tree. The wind continued tossing me around for what seemed like forever, but I did not give up! You'll never take me alive! I thought as we battled. Every time I felt myself beginning to slip away I looked at those around me and was inspired to greater strength by the resolve of the other leaves, all of whom were determined to survive the hours of persecution from the ruthless wind.

Finally losing its breath, the wind’s gusts weakened. My hope grew stronger as I realized I had stood my ground and weathered the worst of the storm. A calm finally settled in, and I relaxed and took the chance to look at myself for the first time. My body was extraordinarily beautiful and not just because it was absurdly thin, as was the twisted desire of every girl my age. Bright yellows and bold reds rushed from my edges toward each other, crashing at my center and forming fiery orange hues. Small patches of stubborn, unchanged green covered some parts of me, but it only added to my charm. Fragile veins wound throughout my shapely skin, gathering and diverging like streams flowing from my source, the tree.

The wind had left to knock off other leaf-prizes, and I felt the full force of the sun above me. It treated me as its special pet, bathing me in its warm light. I enjoyed its steady, wide rays, remembering how fiercely unpredictable and changing the wind had been. And there, in that place and that moment, I saw beauty in a new light.

I had always been on the outside of beauty, only permitted to observe it, but now I was a part of it. The endless blue of the sky, the white clouds that passed like ducks and boats and hearts and all sorts of shapes through it, the deep green blades that shot up from the ground below, the rich, dark brown of my tree, all worked together with my unique blend of yellows and oranges and reds. I was an exclamation point.
I realized the sensation we created as I heard the people passing by excitedly discuss what a
gorgeous day it was, and I agreed that with all these colors, we did create a beautiful day. But my
feelings of joy were suddenly broken when a frightening realization entered my mind: I wanted to
stay this way. I didn’t want to change to become anything new or anything I had been. I wanted to
be able to always bring this sort of beauty to the world—to make people stop and notice the wonder
of us naturals. I wanted to always be one vivid color among many enlivening the world, and
transforming a day from ordinary to extraordinary. I wanted to be too much for people to
overlook, so that my mere presence did not allow them to simply float along through life with their
heads down and eyes closed.

I had never been given the chance to so powerfully affect anyone before. I brought joy to
people by being exactly what I was designed to be. I loved it, and it was so easy for me. But I knew
that my satisfaction in this new experience created a serious problem. I was far happier as petiole,
lamina, and stipules, than I ever had been as a human. I didn’t want this experience, whatever it
was, to end. I didn’t want to go back.

I looked at the humans staring up at our display from the ground beneath me and pitied
them. How could they ever hope to imitate this glory? What could any of them do to match our
effortless feat? I didn’t want to become like them again, being limited only to observe uninvolved,
to be powerless. I was overwhelmed and could feel the sap racing through my veins. I thought my
colors might be growing pale.

As my desperation rose, I heard a woman’s voice, “Peter, don’t worry about it! All you do
is grab a few leaves and go in the woods over there. It’ll be fine! I’ll keep a look out!” I knew
instantly what she was talking about. Peter, please don’t. I thought.

“Fine, fine. Tell me if anyone is coming” came a second, younger voice.

“I will! Would you just go already?” replied the first, obviously annoyed with the young
Peter’s idiocy.

Peter approached my tree and began picking leaves. I had fought and prevailed against one
of the earth’s strongest and most destructive elements, but Peter’s hand combined bone and
muscle in just the right way to overpower my outstretched stem arm. I was chosen and crumpled into a small pile along with a few more of my defeated companions. *This cannot happen!* I thought. *I am not meant for this, look at us! You are destroying natural beauty, Peter! You are violating higher orders! Stop!* But my cries fell on deaf ears, and the young boy took us behind a bush and held us in his small hands as he squatted and emptied his bowels.

His face showed no remorse, no comprehension of the atrocities he was committing. He had snatched us from our tree of life only to waste us on cleaning up the aftereffects of his vulgar defecation. This was unnatural! This was inhumane! This was ironic. I have always been a notorious germaphobe. If it falls on the ground or comes close to a hair or touches hands other than mine, I will have nothing to do with it. Sanitizer was to me a more important invention than the internet, and not washing in the bathroom was not an option. I shuttered with every handshake, gagged at every splotch of unseen saliva spit from an unaware mouth, and panicked if I accidentally bumped up against a shower or sat on a toilet seat. But now, lower than even the dreaded seat, I was the toilet paper.

Peter finished excreting and brought us, wrinkled and broken, toward his behind to clean up his mess. I was dragged across his dirtied flesh and thrown on the ground. He ran away as if trying quickly to escape and forget the mess he’d made, but I remained still. The warm hues that had splashed across my surface were replaced with uneven brown. My delicate, paper-thin form was crinkled and torn. My scent of fall and oak and nature was replaced by one much more fecal. More than feeling disgusted or angry—more than anything—I felt misunderstood.
Barf bag

I was pressed against a seatback facing two teenage boys, unable to free myself from their terrible conversation. Both looked as if puberty had just hit them—and hit them hard. In the window seat was a boy/man with tight, fiery-red curls that matched the patchy stubble of his face. At first, I thought that he might not be so heinous if he shaved off his uneven facial fur, but upon closer viewing I decided that any covering for his acne-riddled, oily skin and metal-caged smile was a wise choice. His scrawny arms stuck out the sides of a black t-shirt displaying cartoon characters drawn with minimal effort and angrily yelling various Japanese characters that surely meant something very different from what Ugly Red supposed.

Examining the passenger next to him, I decided he had the highest level of physical attractiveness that someone like Red, cleaned up and grown up, could ever hope to achieve, which wasn’t good news for either of them. His face was cleaner but his big nose looked like a roller coaster ride that began at two small blue eyes and ended in a dark pit filled with disorderly teeth and bordered by large, saggy lips. He also had a larger than tolerable mole to the left of the ride, right where the arch was highest, and I could tell it was a bully bull’s-eye by the way Red’s eyes kept darting toward it.

In stark contrast, trapped next to me was a magazine with the phrase Sky High, soaring across the front of it in what had to be some type of “flight” font. It was printed above the head of an attractive blonde stewardess holding a food tray.

Red discovered her and pushed me roughly out of the way to get at her. “Sweet,” he squeaked. “Look at this hottie! I wish our stewardess looked like this.”

Mole laughed, “I know, talk about false advertising. Ours has some serious cankles, and her face looks like a man!” They both laughed again, and I decided that although it seemed impossible, each giggle actually made them more unattractive.
“You’re so right! Dude, watch this!” Red said with a smirk that guaranteed prompt hilarity. He reached above him and hit a red button that had a white outline of a genderless figure on it and giggled again.

“What the? What are you doing?” questioned Mole with nervous excitement.

“Shut up, just wait!” Red smiled a greasy smile and began casually paging through *Sky High*.

I followed Red’s eyes to see a stewardess struggling to shove an oversized bag in an overhead compartment in an undersized aisle. *Oh my goodness, what is your problem? What are you idiots planning?* I thought. The stewardess finished and looked in their direction, and her expression suggested she was thinking the same thing. But she faked a smile and asked what they needed.

“Yes, sir—” Red pretended to misspeak as he snickered down at his magazine. He looked up in surprise, “Oh, I’m sorry!” He laughed and looked at Mole out of the corner of his eye. Mole’s cheeks turned the color of Red’s hair, and ashamed, he stared at his folded hands. The stewardess tilted her head and answered apathetically, “It’s all right. How may I help you?”

Red leaned over Mole as he squeaked, “Yeah, I was just wondering if you had any...nuts?” Mole’s discomfort grew. He squirmed in his seat to distance himself from Red. I too grew more uncomfortable—claustrophobic and trapped between fake leather and restrictive elastic along with the other paper products.

“Nuts?” The stewardess echoed, undaunted by his intimidation tactics. “Are you asking for some peanuts?”

“Yes, yeah peanuts.”

Mole was frozen in his seat. He stared straight ahead, unable to lift his gaze.

“I can get you some.” The stewardess’ tone showed she was willing to take the hit if it meant ending their exchange. She turned to go.
“Thank you kindly, ma’am.” Red released a final mocking blow and sat back proudly.

She stopped, looked at Mole, and then fixed her gaze on Red. She leaned over Mole, who now being fully an icicle stayed motionless, and smiled cruelly as she said, “No problem cutie. You two look as if you could use some nuts.”

Red’s nasty grin soured, and as she left them he looked at Mole in defeated disbelief.

“Dang, she’s an angry ugly chick!” He forced a laugh to hide his humiliation. He turned on Mole, angrily blaming him. “Alex, why didn’t you say anything? You’re such a pansy, you left me hanging and just sat there like you were retarded or something!” Alex was silent and still as red as a cherry popsicle.

Red broke the ice, “Whatever. That was hilarious, huh?” Alex melted under the heat of Red’s adjacent gaze and agreed timidly that it was.

The three of us sat in awkward silence for a while. Red looked out the window at the passing wisps of cloud and Alex relearned how to move his body and line of vision. Just as I was beginning to really enjoy the silence, Red spoke. “Yo check it out!” He pointed to three people in the row to their right. “Terrorists.” he whispered.

Alex glanced at Red’s victims and smiled, happy to have Red’s attention be on someone else. “Yeah, how were they allowed on this flight?” He added, and the pair laughed again.

“Yo we have to save the plane from them. They’re gonna crash it!” Alex continued.

Red lurched forward in laughter, awkwardly hitting his head on the seat in front of him. “Ow!” He rubbed his forehead for a while and then suddenly lit up. “Dude, I have an awesome idea! Let’s make a sign!”

Alex looked to his right. There was at least three feet separating him from a sleeping Middle-eastern man in a cream-colored turban, and a little boy and girl with the man’s same dark coloring. Alex considered the idea a moment. “C’mon!” Red insisted, elbowing him in the arm.
“All right, fine.” Alex submitted, grabbing me from my constraints. He flattened out my body with his hands and placed me on his knee. He turned me over and read aloud, “Clean Air Sickness Bag.” Alex scanned a descriptive paragraph about my dimensions, better qualities, and bragging rights: “Each Clean Air Sickness Bag contains our GelStor lining that absorbs all unwanted liquids and odors. Simply use and seal to cover all unwelcome trash materials!” He turned me over again to reveal my more barren side.

“What should I write?” Alex inquired.

Red offered his professional opinion: “Write something about Allah!”

Alex produced a pencil and wrote “ALA” in big letters across the top of me. He rubbed my thin paper body between his fingers, thinking of more material, and I felt his dirty sweat smeared onto my surface.

“OK, OK, that’s good enough.”

Red protested, “No way! We gotta write something better!” The little girl and boy glanced toward us, hearing their commotion.

Alex sighed in annoyance and quickly scribbled, “Don’t blow up our plane, terrorists!” in the open space below my description. I felt as trapped as I had in that tight seat pocket, unable to free myself from their antics. Alex turned me over and upside down and drew a thick beard under a large nose, angry eyes, and a scribbled unibrow. Above my features, on my bottom edge, he drew a turban that wrapped around my forehead. Red loved it.

He grabbed and opened me to add a third dimension to my 2D, rectangular shape. Red shoved his hand inside my boxed body and leaned over Alex to put his new puppet to work. He waved me around at the boy and girl who squinted curiously at us to try to make out my picture. Red turned me over to reveal the message on my backside, and the girl sat forward, trying intensely to read his message. I waved helplessly left to right above Alex, who faked laughing to accompany Red’s. The girl squinted and slowly mouthed, “Don’t blow up—” but before she could finish, her brother moved in front of her to block her view and pushed her roughly back against her seat.
“What?” she whispered innocently. “What were they trying to say?”

“Shut up!” he said, his anger making his whisper louder than he intended. “Shut up and ignore them.”

The girl continued questioning her brother, but he refused to acknowledge her—or us for that matter—he wouldn’t even look in our direction. Their father remained asleep the entire time—head back, mouth open and upward.

Red sat back and smiled with pride at their success. “Oh man, that was hilarious! That kid is so mad!”

Alex faked another laugh, but his hands squeezed me tightly. He took his pencil and drew heavily over the words he had written on me before, trying to scratch them out and making my white paper skin darker and darker. He pressed the pencil hard against me, dulling its sharp lead (felt like number 2) into a flat stump as he covered his words and me with rapid, deep streaks.

Every time the plane jolted his hand would slip and drag lead across my face, but after it stopped he always returned to covering over our words. The plane began to jerk more frequently and suddenly, Alex turned green.

“Shoot Alex, you look like you’re gonna barf. You might need to use that thing.” Alex stopped writing. No Alex, don’t! Listen to me, Alex, you can hold it! Put your head between your knees! I begged him.

“I’m gonna be sick.” He droned as he leaned in toward me—his only hope. No! Throw up on the floor; throw up on that idiot Red! Alex quickly unbuckled his seatbelt, but as he started to get up, his rushing insides forced him to sit back down, and he brought me to his mouth. The plane jerked again and this time thick, pale green vomit emergency landed on my insides.

Each time Alex lurched forward his throat let out a bubbly belching sound that materialized into the “unwanted waste” I had so generously offered to accept. Solids and liquids dashed against my walls and streamed down my sides toward my base, where all of it began to collect in a growing pool of green chunks. Alex’s violent yet surprisingly rhythmic retching showed
no signs of stopping and I sagged under the weight of hot liquid that smelled like stale plane air and burger. I was too disgusted to be able to process what was going on. Finally, as I had become nearly entirely green, Alex’s face settled from a sickly olive color to a shade of white that matched my last small section that had somehow avoided the vomit deluge.

From his seat, an amused Red yelled teasing remarks at Alex as we left for the lavatory. Alex pushed back a small metal door and shoved me into the trash, glad to be rid of me. My unsealed top stuck out from beneath the door and allowed my fumes to leak out my opening and into the small confines of the room. Alex leant over the sink, panting and waiting for any signs of future sickness. Finding none, he rinsed out his mouth and patted his face dry with toilet paper. He struggled weakly to open the folding door and move out of its way enough to be able to use it and rushed out into the aisle as fast as his waste slipped around within me to the beat of the heavy turbulence.

After a few minutes of my contents shifting from side to side on our bumpy flight, the door opened again and the middle-eastern boy entered the room. He was visibly upset and his eyes began to water as he hurried to slide the door closed. He stood in front of the mirror but stared at the ground, unwilling to speak or move. He wiped tears of embarrassment from his eyes with his shirt sleeves and tightened his pouting lips and raised brows into an angry frown. For a while, we rocked up and down amidst the sounds of muffled whimpering and sloshing vomit.

I hated that cruel Red and spineless Alex had enough power to affect someone in this way. I hated that they knew exactly what to do to tear someone down enough to make them hide in this tiny room. And I hated most of all that I had anything to do with it. Why did they have to involve me? I thought angrily. Why did I have to hurt this poor boy?

I wished I could have done something to stop them. I wished I could have been able to resist being their puppet and sharing their wounding words. But I knew this wasn’t possible. Red and Alex overpowered me. I was completely in their control. The boy broke down and sobbed, and his soaked sleeves couldn’t keep up with the tears and snot pouring down his brown skin. He grabbed the toilet paper to my right and blew his nose. Then he added his makeshift Kleenex to my pile atop my cooling vomit. The toilet paper soaked it in and added its own snotty center.
The boy calmed down and emptied his nose several more times, each time pressing more bursting toilet paper onto me. I was now no more than my reeking contents: vomit, saliva, tears, and snot. I watched him miserably, wishing that I could say or do something to soften the pain we had caused him. But I did nothing; I could do nothing.

He stood silent for a moment, finally getting his body to stop shaking, and let out a despondent sigh. His face had settled into an expression of quiet, guarded anger, and it remained that way as he dried his eyes one last time with his shirt and looked into the mirror to examine himself.

Deciding he was sufficiently tamed, he opened the door and quickly left. The door squeaked back into place along its tracks and cut off the small lavatory and me from the rest of the world. I sat in silence among the filth.
I clinked as I collided with the others. Surrounded by darkness, I saw nothing, but bounced on a cloth pouch as if it were a trampoline. As I was sent up and down again and again, I remembered the time that my neighbor, and childhood best friend, Megan, had gotten a trampoline. I worked with Megan and her father all that weekend to set it up. We jumped on it every minute from the time we got back from school, until the time it was dark. It was the closest we had ever come to flying. I would time how long she could stay airborne, and she would bounce close to me so that I could use her momentum to go twice as high.

And one week after we assembled it, her brother Freddy bounced right off of it and broke his arm. We carried him crying to their mother, his arm just flapping around where it had always been stiff and straight. And when their mother made them get rid of it, saying it was too dangerous, I was so mad at Freddy, but Megan wouldn’t even let him apologize. She said that no toy was worth him being hurt. It’s funny to think that even as a young kid, I knew that their family did things differently than mine. And now, I felt like I was back on that black trampoline, propelled into the air, and then sucked back down to the ground.

It was cold outside. I could tell because the hand that joined me and the others wore a thick leather glove. It chose about half of us, and we experienced the terrible transition a baby kangaroo must face when it leaves the warm, dark pouch of its mother to enter the cold world outside. Or, I would assume that’s how a baby kangaroo would feel. I really don’t know; I’m not a kangaroo expert of any kind. I know more about Dunkaroos than I do kangaroos. Either way, as we arrived in the world we encountered two strangers.

One was a woman wearing a long, light brown pea coat, and surprisingly aggressive heels that sounded like hammers when they struck the pavement (she didn’t find them nearly as maddening as I did). Her face was plain, I would guess; I couldn’t really tell because it was covered in makeup that resembled lopsided pancake batter.
My first impression of her was that she was one of those annoying people prone to extreme and unnecessary nervousness. Upon meeting people they always smile a bit too much, shake your hand a little too fiercely, and laugh a little too hard at your lame, polite joke. Their eyes always betray them—they dart around anxiously when they’re not focused intensely on you. It’s the kind of nervousness that’s so fierce it makes you nervous just to encounter them! And you find yourself saying, *Wait a minute, why am I so uncomfortable? I’m not usually this socially awkward.* They drive me nuts.

I assume confidently that she was one of those people, because she was behaving exactly that absurdly when I saw her. Her constant nods of agreement made her seem like a pancake-colored bobble head doll. She directed her bobble at the money to whom I belonged, at the moment. He waved a small doggy bag around the air as if making small circles would give his points some sort of extra merit. He brought his right hand, carrying us, into his gaze, examined us three coins—me being the biggest—and decided our fate. We walked along a sidewalk in front of huge glass skyscrapers.

“The thing is, oh man I’m so stuffed!” He interrupted himself. His fancy dress suggested that this was the only type of interruption he allowed.

“Oh, I know!” started Bobble quickly, communicating with equal insistence through forced speech and an aggressive smile. “I totally am too!”

He overlooked her comment and continued, “The thing is, the church needs to spend less time telling all of us to go to Africa, and more time equipping us for the mission fields we are in.”

“Mm hmm, yup, exactly.” At this point I couldn’t tell if Bobble or her nods were doing the actual speaking.

“I mean, God puts us all in different circles, and He wants us to evangelize at home. And I just feel like, ya know, look around! There are plenty of people here who need us!”

“Yes, yes, yup, plenty.” She agreed.
“So, why is it that they want me to go over to another country, when I can be used by God in my office to minister to my colleagues? I mean, I can’t tell you how many conversations I’ve had with guys just like me, and I’m perfect for talking with them because they can relate to me.” Even she seemed to be bothered by her incessant yes-ing, for this time she let only her nods do the talking.

“It’s like, I just want someone to actually—oom!” We had tripped over something. It was a leg, attached to an older man sitting in a pile on the sidewalk. For a moment, the shock and unacknowledged embarrassment of tripping over a human being stopped everything. The loud walking, the arrogant talking, even the perpetual nodding ceased. The man and woman at once looked down on and at the man and wondered why he hadn’t moved for us. Workplace Prophet appointed me the sacrifice to appease the wronged.

The glove opened, and released me. I landed on the ground directly in front of an old boot. From that close, I could see that it had no sole, and had a thick wool sock poking out of holes on the bottom. My impact with the ground broke the silence, and that seemed to do the trick. The man and the woman resumed their actions and walked briskly away from their awkward mistake. I could still hear “church” and “helping” and “yes” being discussed as they rounded a corner and disappeared out of sight.

I lay on the ground and studied my new owner. He sharply contrasted the last man who had claimed me. Lacking gloves to warm his hands he rubbed them through his tangled beard. With no panicky woman to affirm his words he simply muttered his own nonsense. He picked up the other coins and put them in a Styrofoam cup to his right, and then held me in front of his face.

“Lucky.” He mumbled, and I wondered if he had somehow missed the concept of that simple word. He rubbed me between his fingers and then shook me, turning me over and around as if hoping that by doing so he might persuade me to bless him. I did no such thing.

He held me still—as still as he could with shaking hands—and we examined each other. His eyes were hazel and distant, as if they hadn’t looked at anything particular in years, as if they had forgotten how to look or be looked at. His hands were cold, cracked, and calloused, and I wondered if I was the closest to human contact he had come in a while.
He looked more than simply tired, he looked worn, as if he had passed through too many hands and too many places to remember and had lost his value somewhere along the way. And I realized that we were probably thinking the same things about each other.

He turned me over to see my proud, powerful eagle on my backside, and I was once again reminded of how different we were.

“Lucky. Lucky penny,” he decided incorrectly. I was much too large to be anything less than a quarter. He brought his mouth toward me, and touched me with his cracked bottom lip and he gently kissed me. I expected to smell alcohol, but his breath reeked of spoiled milk.

The cracks widened as his mouth tightened, his eyes shut tightly and his body hunched over. He coughed up hot breath, small chunks of saliva, and blood. He wiped the debris from his mouth on his hand. He did not, however, notice the rotten milk, chunks of spit, and blood that had splattered across my presidential visage. I was much more alarmed at finding blood on my face than he was, for he left it to dry on his hand.

His breaths quickened, and he dropped me as he coughed again—this one deeper, and bringing out with it more of his insides. I landed on his cold pavement floor and listened to him cough a few more times, each time wiping more liquids onto his sleeve.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a picture, not noticing how it shook in his hands. He held the picture close to his eyes, lost in its world, and completely indifferent to his own. I was sure he had completely forgotten me until he whispered, “Lucky.”

His gaze remained on the picture, while his hand, seemed to have a mind of its own, scraping the pavement until it found me. He raised me to the picture, and began to rub me again, this time attempting to persuade me to use my powers for new purposes. I paid attention, not having the heart to tell him that I couldn’t help him.

He showed me a picture as shabby as he was. He rubbed us both with his thumbs, as if presenting us to each other. As if all three of us were at some elegant hotel, having survived walking through a cold night in the city with our warm winter coats and scarves and hats, all specially designed not to mess up our handsome hairdos, or wrinkle our stylish clothes. As if we had
entered the hotel doors already being held open for us the moment we arrive by a smiling bellboy, and waltzed through the lobby where guests from out of town stopped to look at us and point out to their friends with a raise of their chins how fancy we all look. As if we were attending a benefit ball—a night of dinner and dancing to benefit some cause we care for mildly, and as if this pile of dirty rags were in charge of making polite introductions between us two who run in all the same circles and really need to meet and have X and Y in common and both know Mr. So-and-so from different common experiences...

But in the cold, dark night, I was the only one who seemed to notice the ridiculousness of the situation.

I looked at the photo. It contained three people—an older man and woman and a younger girl—each with a big smile on their face and one hand on a young soldier who stood in the middle. The soldier’s smile was much more restrained. His whole appearance was much quieter than that of the others. Even his arms hanged limp at his side. The only bold things about him were the army fatigues and helmet he wore. The three civilians seemed so happy to be simply touching their soldier, and I thought I saw that their eyes were wet with tears, though it was hard to tell with such an old photo.

The man’s body convulsed as if another cough were coming, but this time he put the photo and me on the ground as if unwilling to soil us both. A lot more fluid came up this time, and the man wheezed a long breath. As he shook, he picked me up, and whispered, “Lucky” as he placed me on top of the photo.

He lay down, breathing slowly, and closed his eyes. His brown jacket and army green pants camouflaged into the pavement more than they had before. I sat on his picture, unable to bring the luck he had asked for, unable to do anything but sit in silence and watch him. His jacket moved slowly in and out as he breathed. A few snowflakes gently floated to the ground. There weren’t enough to form a real layer of snow on the ground. They silently dropped down to the pavement and upon reaching it, quickly disappeared.

Everything was silent. For the first time, I noticed that we were not the only ones on our street. On the other side was a tiny woman in a large jacket, sweeping the front of a small
convenience store. At the corner of that street was a young man, talking softly to a young woman who leaned against a wall beneath his arm. On our side, a tall couple and their child approached us. The small boy struggled to catch falling snowflakes, while keeping up with the woman, who held his hand tightly. The three of them walked quickly, releasing visible breath that looked like the steam from a train. I watched in silence, knowing I could do nothing to get their attention.

The boy looked right at us. “Hey cool!” he said, and let go of his mother’s hand to investigate.

Oh, good! He sees us; his parents can help him, or take him to a shelter, or something! I thought. But the boy didn’t even notice the human pile, and came straight for me.

“I found a quarter!” he squealed with delight. He brought me to his parents and held me up to the light. “Look!” he said with excitement.

His mother gasped, “Oh, honey! That’s dirty! Drop that, drop it!” She refused to touch me, and looked disgusted as she shook his hand to get rid of me. The boy struggled to keep his treasure, and as she shook his hand to get rid of me, the man with them squinted toward the pile and asked slowly, “What is that?”

With the emergence of a new object of interest, the boy dropped me, and I fell to the ground and landed on my thin edge, bouncing and rolling like a tire sent spinning off its car after a crash. I rolled freely on, with no one and nothing stopping me. I spun away from the crash scene down the sloped sidewalk, over several cracks, down the road, over a curb, and toward a storm drain. Aimed perfectly at its wide openings, I was unable to swerve out of the way, and I dropped silently into the filth, never landing.
Match

My flat wooden body was the only thing visible outside of a partially opened box. My head remained hidden in the dark, resting atop the other identical catalysts. Two voices mingled above me, and I immediately recognized the louder of the two. I had only ever heard one voice sound like such a ridiculous combination of the low pitch of a cello, with the cheerfulness of a young child. Jeff had always sounded like Santa to me, and now, I was as excited to hear you as any child on Christmas morning.

Concerned conversation interrupted my thoughts. “It’s just very hard on him, trying so hard, and still finishing last. You should’ve seen how much he studied for that test, I mean, did nothing else all week! And bringing back his score today, he seemed embarrassed, telling me. His dad always knew how to make him feel better about this stuff, and I don’t know what to do.” I recognized Jeff’s sister’s voice as her defeated sigh expressed all that her words had left out.

Jeff reassured her, “He can’t let one bad test grade crush him like that. When’s he gonna use algebra anyway?” he quipped, sparking a contained chuckle from his sister.

“Yeah, right. I think that Matty’s just tired of always failing, of learning things slower than everyone else. I think the other kids are starting to make fun of him for it. He’s not stupid, I just—I don’t know why he isn’t catching on with this stuff. It’s like he just needs something to start him up, and then I know he’ll be able to take off, but, he hasn’t found what that is yet.”

“That takes a lot of time. Some people are late bloomers and take years to figure out what they’re good at and how to be good at it.”

Jeff’s sister mumbled agreement and then asked, “Would you talk to him? If Matty hears it from me, he won’t listen. I think he needs an older male to tell him. And with his father gone...I think it would really be good for him to hear this stuff from you.”

“Yeah, I’ll talk to him, is he home now?”
“Yes, he’s upstairs. I’ll send him down. Hold on.” Her voice exited the room and echoed down the hall as she left.

I waited, along with Jeff, as a slow pair of footsteps approached us.

“Hey Boss, how’s it goin?” Jeff asked.

“Hey Uncle Jeff. Not that great.”

“Your mom told me about school, I’m sorry Matty.”

“It’s OK, it’s my own fault. I try real hard, but I’m just not smart like everyone else.”

“Who’s been telling you that?” Said Jeff, keeping his tone upbeat.

“Nobody, well, some of the kids said so, but nobody had to, because it’s true! I’m just stupid!” Matty’s voice cracked, and all of us stayed silent, respectfully pretending not to notice his sniffling.

“Matty, I’m your uncle, and I know you are not at all stupid. You’re one of the smartest kids I know, and anyone who doesn’t realize that, is stupid.” Another silence.

“You know, when he was your age, everyone tried to tell your dad he was stupid too.”

“Really?” Matty asked in disbelief.

“Oh yeah, it wasn’t until high school that everybody started to notice just how smart he was. We’re just a family of late bloomers. Look at me; I’m still waiting to get smart!” Matty laughed.

“The point is, Matty, you’ll get there, at your own speed. You just gotta be patient, and understand that you are a smart young man.” Matty sighed, and Jeff continued, “C’mon Boss. Your mom and I had these matches out to light these candles, but I have something much better in mind.”

“What?” said Matty excitedly.

Jeff shut my little box, sending me and the others out of the light, and along the cardboard into the consuming darkness. We rolled back and forth and over each other and out a door that
creaked to announce our exit. The cold night air seeped into my box, and blew along with the sounds of laborious footsteps, some slowly paced, and others quick and seemingly random, as we trudged through the deep sand. The reeds whistled to my left, and the waves crashed and recoiled to my right. Finally, we stopped, and Jeff rested his chin on one fist to show he was deep in thought.

“I’m not sure if there will be too much wind here for our purposes.”

“What? What are we gonna do?” Matty questioned excitedly.

“This is what we’re doing!” Jeff said, matching his enthusiasm. He placed my box on the sand, and must have shown Matty something important, because the sand shifted to accommodate his jumping.

“Oh, wow! That looks awesome!”

Jeff picked up my box, and I fell down to the bottom of the pile. He slid it open, and shook it. The other matches and I fought for the prime real estate—top of the pile—and tried to look our best as you offered us to Matty. I had lost the battle, landing near the bottom of the wood pile, hidden from Jeff’s attention. Jeff offered the choice to Matty, who grabbed the match right off the top—a flawless candidate, and the obvious choice—but Jeff grabbed it from him and threw it in the sand.

“Nah,” he said, “We want one of the ones that gets overlooked, the match that’ll surprise you.”

Matty reached in and this time pulled me out from the bottom. I knew I was lacking—my head was visibly scratched and my body was bent in the middle, but Matty handed me to his uncle with confidence.

I was thrilled, and shocked at my luck! On a windy night like this, using anything but the best was very risky, but I was determined not to let them down! Jeff closed the box, now a coffin for the losers, and read the caption on its cover: “Las Tapas Restaurant: ‘For me an object is
something living. This cigarette or this box of matches contains a secret life much more intense than that of certain human beings.’ Joan Miró.”

Jeff looked at Matty, who seemed confused. Jeff concluded, “Deep, Miró. Very deep. Well, it was a good Restaurant.”

“Ya, it was.” Matty agreed.

“OK, Boss, now I want you to pay attention because this was the point of coming out here. You see this match?”

“Ya.” Matty said.

“Although he may be a little crazy, Miró is right. This match does have a secret life. But most people look at it, and only see one thing.”

“A match.” Said Matty, happy, I assumed, to finally answer an easy question right.

“That’s right, Boss. But you, and I, and Miró, and this match know that even if the whole word only see it as a match, that doesn’t change the fact that it is much, much more.”

Matty shook his head up and down, as if he were trying to agree with you but couldn’t.

“And at the right moment, when it’s ready, this match will become what it always knew it could be.” Jeff brought me close to the box, and squeezed my head between his fingers.

“Oh, by the way, if, after this thing lights the wind blows it out, don’t factor that into the metaphor, all right?”

Matty nodded again.

“OK, here we go.” He pressed my combustible phosphorous head to the bottom of his shoe, and without warning, yanked me across his sole. Immediately, a fierce heat erupted between me and the sole, and something within me awoke. My thoughts raced to define what within me was stirring. I couldn’t figure it out, but I felt as if all of the potential and possibility lying still within me
had alighted! In that moment, my spirit grew feverishly hot, and I exploded, bursting into a rapturous flame.

I roared happily in my state of enlightened power, and Jeff shielded me from the wind, not as impressed with my astonishing combustion. Matty set up a firecracker below me, and Jeff whispered, “C’mon stay lit, stay lit!”

I laughed when I realized that Jeff was trying to block me from the wind, as if I needed such protection! Relax! The only way my flame will go out is if I shoot right out of your hand to flame across the sky! Maybe I should! Maybe I’m really a star, ready to start my celestial wanderings!

Jeff brought me toward the firecracker fuse, and I grew delighted, seeing that I would have the opportunity to inspire someone else with my special gift. I doused its tip in my orange flame. It soaked it in and responded with excited sparks of its own. Jeff dropped me, and I let the sand and wind snuff me out and cool me down.

I watched with pride as the firecracker took off into the sky, screaming and burning along its way, and letting out a loud, Crack! as the flame completed its journey.

Matty echoed the explosive excitement of my firecracker. He looked at Jeff, happy to see that he hadn’t been lying after all. And Jeff turned toward him with a smile of I told you so! I watched both, happily, as the Jeff playfully shoved Matty onto the ground, and the two raced through the howling wind and back toward the house.
We were moving down a hall (if you could really call it moving). Each small step took us closer to our goal although I wasn’t sure quite what that was. I waited impatiently in the lap of a pair of intentionally plain khaki pants whose owner drove a grey and blue wheelchair, Fred-Flinstone-style. The driver looked at least a thousand years old but was probably closer to 80 or 90. Her shoes were actually slippers and made me think that “one foot in the grave” could be taken literally—it accurately described both of hers.

I studied her face as we traveled. Her expression was that which I had observed on my maternal grandmother. It was the look of peace that came at the end of a life that had been lived the right way—whatever that might mean. I didn’t know how my driver had accomplished this impressive feat: had she found the adventures that called to her in her youth? Had she made a fortune, from hard work and her own resourcefulness—a real American dreamer? Had she traveled the world? Invented a cure? Become famous? What had it cost her, and had it been worth it?

My driver shared no such secret with me, but her dignified countenance helped her appearance overcome her elderliness. It was as if she’d invested all the hours and days and years of her life rather than simply spend them. But I was much more interested in considering all of this than she was; she simply looked straight ahead, smiling, and enjoying our slow, obviously routine ride.

I couldn’t be sure, but I thought I saw a family of snails pass by along the wall, leaving us to eat their slimy dust, and I wondered for a moment if the small, methodical steps the old woman used to drag us forward were actually taking us in a backward motion. But I gave up and decided to patiently allow us to head wherever she intended.

A cat meandered by our right tire, rubbing its long black tail on the spokes. The woman clicked with her mouth to get its attention and whispered, “Wispy...here kitty kitty.” She palced her hand out for it to use as it wished. The cat was pleased with her offer, and rubbed its tiny face—
black with white spots—along her aged hands—pale white with liver spots. “That’s a good kitty, good kitty” she purred.

A moment later, the cat ran away down the hall, and I found to my surprise that I did not envy its speed. I had rapidly grown accustomed to our slow pace, and suddenly I found myself wondering why that young whipper-snapper cat was in such a rush. Finally, we turned a corner and reached our destination. We entered a large room mostly filled with board games, and mumbling, meandering old people. The liveliest thing there was the blaring television.

We rolled up to one old man seated in a chair in front of a small window. His eyes watched the gardeners working in the yard outside, but his mind seemed elsewhere. “Sweets,” said my driver, “You are looking handsome today.” The man turned, confused by this greeting, but with a slight curiosity as to why this name was familiar to him.

“My oh my, you could spend all day looking out that window! I always find you here, right where I left you!” My driver’s confident smile sharply contrasted the old man’s panicked bewilderment. She tapped her large wheels, and looked out the window to see what he was watching, while he studied her for answers.

“Do I know you?” he asked hopefully.

Wheels was undeterred, “Well I should hope so!” She teased. “We’ve been married for nearly sixty five years!” The man looked shocked. “I’m Patricia, your wife. See?” She pointed at a photograph that rested in his lap. “See: that’s you, and that’s me. It’s right here on the back.” She turned the picture over and read, “Patricia and Henry, 1955.”

Henry stared at the words she pointed toward, as if trying to make difficult connections in his mind. Patricia flipped it over again. “And see there’s little Tommy, Mary, and Susan.” He lifted his head and turned his eyes from the picture Patricia, to the more recent version. He squinted, as if to force recognition. He started to speak but before he could, Patricia squeezed his hand to interrupt him.
“Sweets, I need you to do a favor for me. Could you do that? Could you help me please?” Henry’s eyes lit up and, ironically forgetting his earlier memory lapse, he inhaled deeply, puffed out his chest and regained his dignity.

“I can certainly try.” His eager tone made it clear how much he hoped he could help.

“What is it you need me to do for you?”

“Oh my, look at that shirt, what a mess!” Patricia tugged at his shirt pocket accusingly. She licked her thumb and rubbed it. “Henry you can be such a slob!” she teased. Henry watched her, enjoying being fussed over too much to protest.

“Anyway,” Patricia replied, still distracted by the stain. “I have this check, from both of us. See, I’ve already signed it.” She lifted me up from her lap and presented me to Henry. He took me and held me up to the soft light coming in through the window as if he were a check-checking expert.

Patricia laughed at his sincerity and continued, “I’d like to give it to a nice young lady from the Children’s Fund who is coming in here soon to collect donations, but I’m not strong enough to carry it to her.” This I found quite implausible, since I was in fact, no more than 1.5 square inches of thin paper, and my ink couldn’t have added an enormous amount of weight.

She pointed at her wheels. “You see, in my chair here, I just don’t have the muscles I used to. So whaddaya say Sweets? Can you help me?” Henry lowered me down from the light, and his shaking thumb and finger gripped me more firmly.

“Certainly,” he declared proudly, “That will be no trouble at all.” He smiled, and Patricia’s face reflected his with equal happiness. Patricia thanked him and began to share with him the events of her day down the hall. She covered the light lunch she’d enjoyed, her afternoon stroll through the gardens, and her phone call with her sister. Henry was enthralled, soaking in every detail. The three of us shot the breeze for a few more minutes—Patricia doing most of the talking, as was always the case I’m sure—and Henry and I listening patiently, unfamiliar with most of what she was talking about, but grateful to have a friend to listen to.
After some time, a nice young lady and a collection basket came just as Patricia had predicted and interrupted us. “Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham—how are you both doing today?”

“Fine, Sarah, how are you dear?” Patricia replied.

“I’m doing just fine. I see you have something for me, Mr. Cunningham?” Sarah smiled at Patricia as she asked.

Henry cleared his throat and answered confidently, “Yes, we do.” He rubbed his soft fingers along my edges. “I have a check to give you for the children.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Cunningham, I’m sure they will be thrilled to receive it.”

“Thank you,” Henry replied, nodding his head. He looked to Patricia for reassurance that he was conversing correctly. She smiled at him proudly. Henry handed me to the young woman, and she folded me in half while she made small talk with the pair. As she ran her fingers over my crease, I thought of how I wished I could spend more time with Henry and Patricia.

Truthfully, I had always found the elderly to be annoying and usually being around them was quite taxing for me. But these two were different. The three of us just...made sense together. Sarah spoke to the Cunninghams about what our donation would accomplish, and I sadly realized that I had to go—the children needed me. Sarah stuffed me into a slot designed for my new dimensions, and I joined the other contributions.
Pen

I lay in the dark on a hard, wooden surface. I heard approaching footsteps and a light switch on above me. Suddenly, the ground was pulled out from under me, and I was sent rolling toward the light that flooded my boxed-in room. The floor halted. I slammed against a wall and rolled back the other way. A hand grabbed me. As it lifted me out of a drawer I looked to see whose it was and to my surprise, I was being carried by my mother, looking again much younger than the last time I had really seen her.

She paid no attention to me, but took off my cap, which made a popping noise when released from our suction, shoved it aggressively on my round end, and tucked me between her ear and thick auburn hair. My tip poked out in front of her face like a third eye, and I watched her rummage through the antique wooden desk I had seen her at a thousand times.

We were in her private study, as she always proudly called it. My sister and I had only ever thought of it as that filthy, creepy room which was a glorified attic. She cherished and guarded it, although she had never had any competition to use it, other than from various spiders and mice traveling through, and the occasional lost bat.

But my mother never saw all that. I believe that she had a picture of it in her mind, and never once saw it for what it actually was. Her study was the golden child; it could do no wrong, no matter how much water it allowed in during storms, or how hot it got in the summer. Her view of it remained unchanged.

Mother would go to her study whenever she had real work she had to get done. Most of the time, it was when she prepared lessons for her classes. Eventually I noticed a distinct correlation between the amount of time she spent there, and the disobedience level of her children. The room’s roof had a steep downward slope so that you had to duck to walk from one end to the other, although my mother thought this only added to its character.

Its wallpaper featured various patterned scenes of wealthy couples in formal wear from the 1920s. The wallpaper always struck me as oxymoronic, with its various tears and dirt stains. My
mother said that she liked the families that appeared in its pattern. I had to agree with her there—the wallpaper featured a park with scenes of happy parents surrounded by laughing children, frolicking about. I saw it as idealistic; my mother saw it as optimistic. “The right degree of hopefulness” was the way she worded it.

The corners of the room were covered in old papers and shoe boxes storing everything but the shoes that had long since been outgrown. It was a mess. My mother had never held cleanliness next to godliness, I assume, or else she would have a lot to repent for.

As I continued reliving the room, a vital aspect of my mother’s life and a forgettable part of my own, my mother searched through her bottom drawer, disorganized like the rest of the room, and finally found what she was looking for. She pulled out a red leather book I had never seen. She flipped past dozens of pages, all covered in the same blue ink. She reached a blank page and paused for a moment, tapping her fingertips on her desk as if to remember something.

She reached for a tin of pens, grabbed one, and lowered it toward her page as if to begin. Typical, I thought. My mother was infamously forgetful. When I was younger, and I watched her daily ritualistic search for car keys, graded papers, and milk caps, I attributed her absentmindedness to the busyness of motherhood, and especially single motherhood.

As I got older, however, and endured embarrassments like being left at summer camp for an extra day because my mother misread the pick-up date, and having to explain to best friends why my mother confused their names, and trying to convince my teacher that my dog hadn’t eaten my homework, my mother had simply thrown it out, I decided that there must be at least some truth to all the stereotypes about mothers being flighty.

To this day I am intensely organized and tidy and every small failure I have in these endeavors, brings with it the fear that I might be turning into my mother. Just then Mother sneezed, flinging me from behind her ear, onto her desk. I bounced on my point, and then slammed down onto my long, cylindrical body, rolling quickly away from her.
She snatched me up, and a smile of surprise overtook her face. She pressed me to the crisp, dry paper and as we met, I spilled out my wet ink. Beneath me, the fibers of the pages soaked up all my ink, changing their blank, white color, to my dark blue.

“March 9, 1997” we began. 1997? I thought, Wow, how old was I then? 10? That was a lifetime ago! I looked closer to see the difference that more than a decade had made on my mother’s face. Her skin was much tighter, her clothing looked exactly like the outfits she wore in pictures that we’d tease her about now and she’d claim all the “cool” mothers had worn then. Her thick cotton turtle neck was covered by a patterned sweater and a necklace of dried, painted noodles; it lacked any real artistry, so I assumed it was the work of my sister. Her hair was arguably a mullet, though a sheepish one, with tufts of hair escaping the sides of her head in a half-hearted attempt to hide that fact.

She stared off into space, the classic look for my mom, and another for which my sister and I had teased her endlessly. As I got older, I decided this habit to be additional evidence that there wasn’t a whole lot going on in my mom’s brain. I never thought she was an idiot, by any means, she taught high school English so she must have had some intelligence. But I did not expect her to be able to form novel or important ideas, unless it involved making a casserole. She broke her gaze, and touched me again to the paper.

“Today was another hard one. This morning was Hannah’s eighth birthday. How is that possible? Eight years ago, I was happily married—happily gifted with two healthy baby girls. How has eight years gone by this quickly, and changed so much? My little Lyla is 11 now, and the thought of her quickly approaching teenage years wake me from my sleep.” She raised me above the paper, resting me in her fingers as we both gathered our ink.

“I don’t know how to feel. I don’t know how to swallow this—” She looked at me as if waiting for an answer, she lowered me again and I wrote, “change.”

“Birthdays make me so uncomfortable, all it means is that another year has passed, another time in life is coming to a close. I love watching the girls grow up, but I hate the slow fade of who they have been.”
Another pause, another consultation—I assembled her words. “Today in class I shared a passage from a book I’m reading. ‘Without pause, without confusion, without consideration and reflection, there can be no revelation.’ I feel like others see the dynamic nature of this life and readily accept it. They remark, ‘My how time flies!’ but then for them that is the end of the matter! While for hours I wonder, why? Where does it go? Why can’t I slow it down, even for a moment! I was once eight years old, with my own ideas about how my life would go, but where is that girl now? Where are the friends I had, my old room, my young parents, and my glass horse collection? Did those things even exist?” As my mother paused again, this time to examine her beloved wallpaper, I realized that her classic expression of elsewhereiness, was in fact one of contemplation rather than mindlessness. I grew nervous as I realized my misjudgment.

She broke her gaze, and we resumed. “When Willie and I were first together, we were so happy. Life was a daydream—I was blissfully happy, almost to a fault! Things just seemed to be, under control. But then everything happened, and now—” My mother looked to me to provide her next words but I was speechless. She moved her hand to my point and swung my body, tapping my far side against the paper, as if hoping the words would tumble right out of me. After a dozen more rapid taps, they did.

“Now things are forever different. We have all recovered, all pieced our lives back together in our own ways. And we are happy, but there are certain times. Times when I don’t feel angry over what happened, or unforgiving, or even hurt, simply confused. As if somehow during that wonderful daydream I fell asleep, and now I wonder if it all ever even happened. I forget much of our lives together—the details—but I still remember images. I remember lying in the grass with him in the summer, watching him run thin blades of grass through his bear hands. I see him coming home from work, ringing the doorbell, and laughing when I didn’t expect him. I remember how I pictured him when we would talk on the phone. I had such a specific mental picture of what he looked like and where he was, on the other end of the line. One night I was so cruel to him that I made him cry. That image stayed in my mind for weeks. Sometimes I wonder if all the images I’ve collected are real, or if they’re simply part of the dream.

On the rare occasion that Willie stops by to see the girls, he looks different, he sounds different. He smells different. And now, after six years apart, I can hardly remember how it felt to
look at him as mine. To see myself as his.” My mother’s eyes watered and my ink spilled more slowly, as if in thick, heavy tears. I couldn’t imagine those happy times either. All I remembered was my mother’s exasperation, and my father’s coldness. The images in my mind were the expressions of disgust on each of their faces as I stood between them, where tension filled up all the space.

My mother wiped her eyes with her hand, and I skimmed her cheek as I crossed her face. “Catherine visited last week, and I loved having her, as did the girls—they love the gifts their aunty brings them. But after she left, that same, dreaded, contrast.” We underlined for emphasis, “How is it that one minute I can talk with, touch, and see her, and the next, she’s simply gone?”

*I know what you mean!* I thought loudly. *I always think the same thing when I go to school.* *I always wonder how I can be talking with you at home one moment, and then hours later, only be able to hear your voice through the phone!* I had thought about that, the strange inconsistency of people and spaces and things, and moving from one world to another, and trying to belong fully to both, every semester I had returned to college. I wanted to ask her if she experienced the same sense of displacement I felt, that was strongest the first few mornings back at school or back at home. In that first brief moment, when even my senses hadn’t yet awoken, and as I left my dreams, I wondered to which world I was returning. My mother did not hear me.

“When Catherine is here, I love to feel her presence, but when she is gone—I feel her absence. And that is what I cannot stand. Sometimes it is so potent that I wonder if I would have been happier if she had never come.” We realized the same thing and continued, “Would I have been happier if Willie and I had never met?” I hoped with all of my being she said no. And this time she heard me.

“But without Willie, I would not have my girls, and they are as much a part of myself as I am.” I wrote easier now, relieved by her answer. “As is Willie. Those images, those memories, although they seem to be something less than real, are still parts of me. I can’t take them back, and I wouldn’t want to, because they made me who I am.”

“I am not someone who can simply accept these things. I can’t accept the fact that time simply marches on, the world continues spinning, and every second the present that I know is
replaced by the waiting future.” I was shocked. I had the same thoughts as my mother’s that I released across her pages now. I felt wondering sadness at what my own memories were, and why I had to leave them behind to form my past. I was filled with regret at having been oblivious to my mother, who shared my questions.

*How have I missed out on talking to you about this? About everything?* I thought. As the image in my mind of my mother changed itself, she stuck me in her mouth, and rotated me in a chewing circle. I was a rotisserie chicken, simultaneously chewed and cooked. She slowly turned and gnawed, hoping that eventually she would taste the right words. Finally she was full, and we wrote again.

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“I realize that the Earth is never still. It rotate on its axis, constantly, and thus, is always turning over new leaves in my” She stopped. I crossed out “turning over new leaves in my,” guaranteeing her that her mistake had been fully undone. We replaced it, “bringing with each new day, CHANGE. Am I meant to understand my own dynamic nature? Am I meant to accept it, and not let the loss of the past sadden me? Is my only option to live in the present, allowing the spinning world to bring me my future, and the broadening past to slip out my window as I sleep each night? Will the world never stop to breathe, to rest with me for a moment? Only in my writing can the world slow down enough for me to really look right at it.

Perhaps I was never meant to understand all this. Perhaps I would be bored if life did not constantly shed its old to display its new. But what will happen when the change that reaches my doorstep takes my daughters out of my house? Will I again be left only with more images of what I live in now?

*How did I not see her this way?*

My mother, lifted me off the paper. She watched as my long shadow covered over her words, hiding them from her small desk lamp. She twirled me in a circle, manipulating my shadow, and then did what every good mother does in hard circumstances—she found a bright side. “This is all too depressing. Each stage brings with it novelty that I love and need. I simply lament that they may only come at the conclusion and expense of the old.”
There, we had included what she thought she must. “As I write these thoughts down, I feel such relief, as if I am overcoming all of these things. When the pressures and thoughts that cling to my chest grow too heavy, I drag them off of me, and chain them to these pages. When I write, I know that these words will not change. They are not simply images, they will be as real in twenty years as they are now. They are not mystical as are memories. They will remain with me even when the faraway future becomes the departed past.” Her face now wore the slightest smile of gratitude.

“My words, my writing may not be eternal and important for the whole world, but they are in my own, small globe.” I smiled, in gratitude as well. We were satisfied with our conclusion, and my mother raised me from my canvas, and shut her book. She replaced my cap, ran her fingers over my smooth round end as if caressing it, and placed me back in the tin container.