Microfictions

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Writer's Statement

For my Senior Thesis I decided to write a collection of microfiction. After taking a summer course dedicated solely to that form, I became interested in its mechanics. I found the shorts useful as a student of writing because through their compression, the narrative murk of the longer short story is significantly reduced; that is, in order for me to see all the parts of the story (tone, character, plot, and tension) I don't have to navigate through a long stream of text. One can study the mechanism of a story in a condensed model. In a way, it makes it easier to dissect one's own work.

One of the things I felt I needed the most practice with, or that I could learn to do a lot better, was ending my pieces. In the workshop environment there's much more time for revision, trial and error, and tinkering in general, at the beginning and middle stages of writing a short story, than at the end. As such, I hadn't gotten much practice improving my conclusions. I would always be either embarrassingly heavy-handed, or entirely too subtle.

The endings of published microfictions are usually incredibly weighty, or astounding, or just intense. I think the compression sort of demands this punch (or pinch,

or stab) at the end, a strong last sentence, last image, last surprise or punch line. I've read some criticism on microfiction, and it has been compared a few times to Zen koans, or riddles, both of which are, in a way, narrative mechanisms that bring wisdom or delight at their conclusion.

By writing a total of 13 pieces, I've gotten a fair amount of practice with endings. Of course, there is always room for improvement, and there certainly are several stories in the collection whose endings have not completely crystallized on the page, but I feel that in working on so many of them, and on building as many stories towards their endings, I understand the mechanics of it a little better.

The distinguishing feature of microfiction as a form is, of course, its length. This is another area I felt I could improve. I tend to be long-winded when I write. I get caught up in over-describing, or I sometimes begin stories much earlier than the action calls for. Obviously, microfiction is a direct attack on that tendency. In a very limited number of words, one must have three-dimensional characters, a consistent palpable tone, credible and engaging conflict, and a satisfying climax. One must be capable of making one scene, one moment, last the entire story, or one must be able to move through years of time with a sentence or two without sounding threadbare. I decided to write most stories from 350 to 750 words, with no more than three over 1,000. In the end, they were all between 350 and 750 except for two.

I found my focus on microfiction very rewarding. There are a few stories in the collection that I feel are either finished, or very close to it, and the others, through editing

and workshops, have a much clearer direction than when I started. It's certainly material I plan to come back to and refine, hone, or, in some cases, completely re-write.

A Row of Irises

Lupe saw her new neighbor trample over the geraniums at the edge of her front yard. She had been peeking out of her living room window, watching the old couple move into the very next house on the row. They looked to be in their sixties, like Lupe. Valeria, the wife, had been carrying a large wicker basket. She stumbled under its weight, and stepped on the small plants.

Who does she think she is? Lupe thought. She weaved her gray hair into a heavy braid, put on rouge, eye shadow, and changed into a black church dress patterned with hundreds of rose buttons. Lupe waited for an apology in her living room. She tapped a chipped red fingernail on the chair's armrest, but Valeria never came.

Took all day to plant those with my bad knees, she thought, *not everyone has a husband to fix up their yard.* Lupe had become a widow earlier that year, and afterwards, crabgrass and broadleaf weeds crept onto her lawn. The geraniums were the first flowers she planted since her husband died.

Before sunrise the next morning, Lupe gritted her teeth as she knelt in Valeria's garden, and she ripped out a row of irises by the fistfuls. Neither confronted the other, and silence settled between them.

Five years later, after the spines of both women had begun to curl into the hunch of old age, the red lights of an ambulance lit up the curtains in Lupe's living room. She saw paramedics roll out Valeria's husband on a stretcher, his body covered in a sheet as white as a wedding gown.

Every night that followed, Lupe could hear Valeria weeping through the walls. Every night, Lupe lay on her bed facing the vacant spot her husband once filled, and she murmured a rosary until sleep overtook her. But the words of her prayers were hollow, automatic. They had become to her mouth what tears were once to her eyes, and the prayers came in torrents.

Lupe wondered how long it would take for Valeria's garden to succumb to weeds. She wondered if Valeria lay on her bed facing the wall, and she wondered if the day would come when Valeria could bear to sleep in silence, facing empty space. *On that day,* Lupe thought, *I'll join her in the garden and we 'II plant a row of irises.*

Bobby's Song

Ever since Bobby bought himself a used guitar, he felt he'd grown a second tongue, and he wrote a song about it. He let his hair grow long and shaggy, let the curls his mother gave him grow wild on his head, and the rips of his jeans he wore like badges on his knees. Bobby walked the brown-tiled floor of Placid High with a new skip to his bounce, one shoulder forging forward, and the other weighed down by his guitar.

With a pick bright and red as a shard of cherry candy, Bobby did a violence to his tongue. He wrote a song about the sun, the spring, and trees, and on Mother's Day he even wrote a song for Ma that made her cry. Ma and Pops had ears for him then, and would listen, cleaning black grease from knuckles, wiping hands on aprons, and when Bobby finished singing they would clap.

Bobby became fluent in guitar. He would prod and pluck while he thought about what made him sad. He strummed for the bottle under Pop's bed, picked the high notes for the purple pills his mother popped, and he wrote a song about them. Those songs his parents never heard, and slowly, the silence grew.

No longer was the living room a music box, no longer did his parents want to hear him sing, instead Ma said to Bobby: "Pot is not for cherub's, honey," and Pops, less shy, said, "Son, you need a job."

It all made Bobby want to leave, and when he hit the road the night after graduation, when he got high with a girl from Camden and kissed her big pink lips beside the freeway, he wrote a song about it.

Bobby moved north and west, hitching rides from strangers. He wrote two songs about the time he almost got his guitar stolen, one about the white-haired lady who tried to kiss him, and one about the black-eyed boy who touched his knee.

He made it as far as Indiana before he started missing Ma and Pa. On that rainy night when no song would come, when the only words were blank or sappy, he called home and asked for money, "for the bus to take me home," he said.

Ashamed and tired, listening to the Greyhound roll, Bobby thought about his music. He wondered where it came from, if it would ever come again, and looking out the window at the plains, at the swirling rush of raindrops, a guitar note filled his chest. From this note grew a chain of them, grew a sad harmony, a melancholy melody, until the whole string unspooled from his chest.

It had no name, but while the bus trudged on towards Ma and Pa, towards their pills and bottles that filled one mind with mud, and the other with fire, toward everything that made his fingers itch for strings, he named it many things and changed his mind. But on the tip of his tongue, weighing heavy, was the title that had come to him first, and in the end, the only one that would do. He called it "Bobby's Song."

Earl's Gig

Earl and Jon waited for the three-hundred pound sow crouching on their bearstand behind a laurel thicket. The black barrel of Earl's Grizzly .45 rested on a branch, and through the sight he could see the hunk of rotting meat dripping with molasses at the bait site thirty feet from the tip of his gun. He glanced over at Jon and saw him fumbling in his pockets.

Damned fool, he thought. He waved his hand at Jon, and brought a finger to his lips. He mouthed, *be quiet.*

Jon shook his head and mouthed something Earl couldn't read. His hand was still in his pocket, and he tugged at it, as if he were pulling weeds. He leaned closer to Earl and whispered, "My wedding ring caught a loose thread. It's stuck"

It'd been less than a month since Jon married Maria, a green eyed woman with rich olive skin. The day Jon introduced her to Earl at the county fair the previous fall they walked under the lights of the Ferris wheel and shivered when the wind grew gusty. Earl asked her where she got hair so black and eyes so green.

"I got Cherokee and German in me," she said, and she leaned against Jon.

"Don't be getting' any ideas there, Earl," said Jon. He had laughed and even gave him a little push. Earl hadn't said much more the rest of that evening.

There was a rustle in the rhododendrons near the bait. Earl covered Jon's mouth with his free hand and made a quiet hiss.

And then there she was; an ambling mass of black fur that shone in the sun. Earl took his hand off Jon's mouth and brought it to the cold heel of the Win Mag. The sow sunk her maw into the rotting meat, and as her orange eyes caught sight of Earl, a blast exploded from the barrel.

Earl drove them home that evening, with the dead bear weighing down the truck. The bullet had gone in through her collar bone, and blew out her right shoulder blade taking meat and bone with it.

When they got to Jon's house, Maria was waiting for them on the porch, smoking a cigarette and drinking beer from a glass.

"Look what Earl got," yelled Jon.

She looked at the bear and nodded. "It's big," she said.

"She's a sow," said Earl. He grabbed the bear's ear, lifted the head a little, and smiled. "She weighs 'round three-hundred pounds."

Maria looked up at him and blinked. She brought the cigarette to her mouth and turned towards Jon.

"I didn't get nothin'," he said, and pecked Maria on the cheek.

"You'll get it next time. I know it." she said.

"Naw, I'm a lover not hunter," Jon said, and his hand patted Maria's behind. "That's Earl's gig. Ain't that right Earl?"

"That's right," Earl said. *You goddamned fool.* He let go of the bear's ear and the head flopped onto the truck bed with a metallic thump. "I better get goin'."

Earl watched Jon and Maria disappear into their house on his rearview mirror as he drove away. It was a moonless night, and it felt colder for it, but he rolled the windows down anyway. Earl picked up a case of beer on the way home and drank all of it that night; it took him until sunrise to flay the sow.

Milk Teeth

The day Alicia and Marcos moved into their new home on Willow Creek Rd., she found a small pile of teeth in the fireplace. The previous owners moved in a hurry and left everything from rusted forks in the sink to ancient pennies under the abandoned couch, but nothing as bizarre as the teeth. They were buried in ash, and the way they were stacked reminded her of a primitive grave built of gleaming white stones.

Alicia and Marcos had been looking for a house through most of her pregnancy. Marcos would sit at their apartment's kitchen table for hours, peering at the newspaper through his bifocals, and Alicia imagined his salt and pepper hair graying completely as he worked through the ads. Marcos was 45 years old, 18 years her senior.

"We've got to find a good house before the baby comes," she'd say to him while she ran her hands over her heavy oval stomach.

"We should relax our definition of 'good,'" he said without looking away from the paper.

Every house they'd seen made Alicia uneasy. There were what she called "prison bars" on the windows of the Walnut Street house, which Marcos thought only made the

house safer. Then there was Sleepy Cove Rd. and the house with the earthen cellar and a pungent industrial freezer that, though empty, made Alicia vomit, but that gave Marcos the idea of saving money by hunting and storing game. Then there were the spools of barbed wire leaning against a sycamore on the Briar Lane house. "Are you going to tell me cowboys used to live here?" she asked Marcos. His only response had been a sigh.

And then they had looked at the Willow Creek property, a two bedroom cottage style house, brick with dyed wood siding and a steeple roof. It was shaded by a warped oak tree with gnarled branches and a tumorous pouch sagging from its trunk.

"Spooky," said Alicia.

The real estate agent, a blond woman in blue pinstripes, smiled and said, "It's got character, but it's not ready. It needs to be cleaned up a bit."

"Maybe we should keep looking then," Alicia said.

"The baby is due in two weeks," said Marcos, "I can clean it myself."

A few days later, they closed on the sale and moved in. Then she found the mound of teeth.

Alicia and Marcos were both on their knees, bent over the peculiar pile. "Why do you think they're there," she said. Her black bobbed hair fell like a curtain across her forehead, and it made her pale face glow.

"Maybe it's where the tooth fairy hides teeth," said Marcos, and moved his index finger close to the heap of bones.

Alicia grabbed his shoulder. "Don't touch it," she said, and the water in her stomach shifted, "it may be bad luck."

Her womb made an audible gurgle, and then the blue maternity dress speckled with lilies grew a dark blot between her legs. "I think the baby's coming," she said.

They were in the car and on their way to the hospital in a matter of minutes.

"How do you feel," he asked.

"Happy," she said. She touched his hair, felt the stiffness of the gray strands, saw the crinkled skin at his temples, and she thought of black birds she had seen on the twisted oak. She thought of how well Marcos's reading chair fit in their new living room, and she wondered if a crib would ever look like it belonged in the nicotine-stained house.

Alicia rolled the window down and closed her eyes to the wind. She felt the cold edge of autumn in the air, and as the waves of pain ebbed down her stomach and settled between her legs, she could think of nothing but crows, and the small grave of milk teeth waiting in the hearth.

The Last Game

A boy and his younger cousin walk along the stream in the fields behind their neighborhood. Tomorrow, the boy will leave his grandmother's house in Mexico, a yellow adobe brick relic topped with red clay shingles, and move into an apartment he's only seen in pictures. His father mails the photos from a place his mother, his aunts and uncles, call "the North." The pictures show a man wearing large aviator sunglasses sitting on the rusted hood of a car; the same man sitting at a card table in a yellowed kitchen, toasting the camera with a bottle of beer. In the six years he's been alive, the boy has never lived with his father.

Lemongrass blades lick at his bare calves, and some of the green tongues make thin cuts on his skin. Beside the two boys, across the stream, green tomato fields unfurl under the orange sun, and on their left, a jagged row of houses begins. Some are two story affairs painted bright royal blue or boiled yam orange, but others look shrunken. Those homes were built before the road was paved, and they were never raised to the new ground level. To step into them, one must sink.

The boy wanted to spend his last day playing behind his grandmother's house, in the fields and creeks. His cousin came along, and they built a dam out of rocks and dirt up the stream. They had been building them for months; a tradition born of boredom, of exhausting marbles, the sling shot, and of losing two soccer balls to barbed wire. It was always the last game, the one they played at dusk, when all other games ended.

The boys would raise the dam far enough so that they could run home, sit beneath the pomegranate tree at the edge of the stream, and wait for its collapse. The sound of rushing water came first, then, the gentle swell, the cool laps at their toes and their ankles, until finally, the water rose just below their knees.

Today, they built the dam in silence. They walked from the stream to the edge of the field and back again, carrying heavy stones and chunks of earth. They carried on until the stream shrunk to a trickle and disappeared into glistening silt.

And now, the boys arrive at the pomegranate tree. They sit at the lip of the stream and wait while the sun falls from the sky, while the oranges and reds smoldering in the clouds choke into blue and gray and black, but there is no sound, no rush; the water never comes. For the first time, the boys notice thin gray slivers flopping in shallow pools. Fish as long as their fingers make O's with their lips, flare their gills, and catch the dim light with their sides. Once the sun fades into darkness and the cousins can't see a thing, once the wind dies and birds sit silent in the trees, the only sound the boys hear is the slap of fish writhing in mud.

New Smile

Monica, my wife, has started whitening her teeth. This morning, after she left for work, I went in the bathroom and found the blue box that the bleaching strips come in. The front of it shows a disembodied smile against a backdrop of stars.

I don't know where she gets these ideas, but they all end the same. There was the time she wanted us to give up meat.

"It's not for the animals, Daniel" she told me while she julienned zucchini on the chicken-shaped cutting board, "it's just healthier." A week later, we were eating chicken nuggets.

The last undertaking was the week she took up jogging. She was stretching in the living room, oofing every time she bent to her toes. "You'd think running would *wear you out*, Dan," she said, "but really, *it perks me up."*

Her walkman was hanging onto her waist and pulled her sweatpants down a little on the side. I could see a corner of her pale stomach

"You should come with me tomorrow, Danny." Monica pulled the headphones off her ears and dropped them at her neck, like a collar, and I could hear a tiny David Bowie

being melodramatic. She only listens to cassettes, and she stopped buying them in the eighties.

"I'm not the type," I said, and grabbed a handful of my gut.

Her sweatpants were neon green and stretched out purple hoops ran down the sides. She probably found the pair at her mother's house. There's a trunk there where she hides all the clothes that used to fit in high school.

"You went running in those?" I said.

"What's wrong with them?"

"I don't know." I said, but it wasn't enough. She stood there and stared, half smiled even, maybe thinking I was about to deliver a punch line.

"What is it?" she asked in a mock pleading tone.

"They're a little.. .tight," I said.

Her earlobes turned bright red, and David Bowie kept singing as if nothing was happening. I looked at her shoes and tried to laugh, but she didn't make a sound. Eventually, she clicked the walkman off. She didn't speak to me for days.

After that, when Monica spoke again, she did it in one word sentences. She stopped asking me to join her new obsessions, and eventually she even stopped obsessing. She took to pacing the house as if she were exploring it, as if she had never actually looked at it or noticed our things. Once, I saw her pick up our wedding picture; she stared at the soft pink frame, brought it real close to her face, and her nose wrinkled, her lips curled, as if she didn't know who could've chosen such a thing. Then, this morning, I found the whitening strips.

The Stray

The dog showed up during the storm while my boy Efren and I sat by the window and watched lightning split the sky. We saw him coming from behind the line of myrtles and soon as my boy laid eyes on him, I knew that was it; we had ourselves a dog.

Efren was only five years old, and small for it, so skinny his elbows looked as big as his knees. His eyes made me think of a river; still, but moving just so, as if a current flowed beneath them.

He liked to watch me work the square baler, crouched under a shade or in between wheat rows. He stared while the machine chewed up windrow, chomped it down, sliced it, and packed it into heavy squares that fell out of its mouth. Efren never said a word, but I could tell there were things roiling around in that head of his.

The animal was a tall, lean terrier, and looked used to a farm. He had a bald patch on his neck and cut scars running across his ribs from barbed wire or bobcats or worse. A beard as gray as mine hung from his chops, and his maw was big enough to fit around a man's throat, but he was gentle with the boy.

They played next to the fireplace that evening. The dog pulled Efren's shoe laces undone, and then he sat there and waited. Soon as the boy tied them again, the dog tugged them loose, and it made Efren smile.

When it was time for us to turn in, I led the dog out back behind the house. Figured I could take him to the barn and he'd find a dry spot in the hay to curl up in. Then the storm got worse; started hailing so bad it sounded like God was hammering nails into my roof.

Next morning, the dog was gone. Behind the barn, there was a runoff pit where the rain ate into my land. I found him there, lying on his side, half buried in mud with his red tongue steeped in a brown puddle. I touched his neck, and the bald spot was as cold as the mud. He must've fell into the ditch, and tried to crawl out 'til he tired himself out, 'til he sank.

I wanted to bury him before Efren came and found him, but the pit was so slippery that the only way to get him out'd be to drag him with the tractor. When I turned back to get the rope, Efren was at the lip of the pit.

He watched me fall and cake my knees with mud, watched me loop twine around the dog's ribs, and watched when the tractor spat black smoke and lurched forward. The dog made a groove in the mud, and when I went to cut the rope, I saw brown streaks on the boy's shirt. He had hugged the animal when I wasn't looking.

In Efren's small eyes I could see water just below the surface, could see it ebb to the edges, and I knew that his river ran a little darker, that in its waters, a dead dog drifted along; a bloated belly bobbing in and out of foam, swelling in the morning sun.

Wolves in the Woods

The two boys walked along the playground fence, one in front of the other, and struck at the chain link weave with two sticks. Both gleaming blond heads turned back as they approached the shadow of the choir class bungalow. They could no longer see Mrs. Redder, their third grade teacher, and beyond the fence, they stared out into the woods, into the shadows made by the thick green canopy of late summer foliage.

Mrs. Hedder had been standing amidst yellow spiraling tetherballs with a silver whistle dangling from her lips. "Stay where I can see you," she shouted when they disappeared behind the walnut tree. The skin on her cheeks and forehead had already turned pink and splotchy from the noontime sun. They were only out of sight for a few seconds, only as long as it took them to find thick sticks that wouldn't break during their game.

"She can't see us anymore," said the boy in front as they disappeared behind the building. He was thin, his limbs altogether longer than the other boy's, gangly and spider like, and on such limbs he wore a light sweater that appeared flawless, knitted out of fine red yarn. If one were to look closer, however, one would find a few snags in the fabric, a

few rips at the elbows and sleeves, something yellow and crusted in circles near the breast pocket.

The boy in the rear scratched the top of his head and pulled the thin slicked-down strands of yellow hair away from his eyes. His cheeks were bright red and round, as if a small red sun was caught in his mouth. The mouth was a broad thin-lipped slit, like that of a toad, and his eyes were the dull blue of thick smoke from fires consuming tender green branches. "You ready?" he asked.

And with that, the boy in the red sweater swatted the walnut stick at the other boy's round face, almost catching him above the left eye. The smaller boy dodged the club and struck at his opponent's bony thighs and shins with quick brutal swings "I told you we count to three," yelled the round faced boy, "cheater."

After the initial outburst of violence in the shadow of the choir bungalow, the boys settled into a calmer bout of stick fighting. They swung and beat club against club over and over, mimicking sword fights they'd seen on television in which hero and villain seemed more interested in colliding metal against metal than metal against flesh. Then they both noticed the black shadow hanging from the bungalow's roof.

At first, the boy in the red sweater thought it was a black garbage bag caught in the gutter, swaying with the slow breeze, but as they stepped closer the black mass flapped a pair of jagged wings and swooped down near their heads.

"It's a bat," yelled the round-faced boy.

The animal crashed against the bungalow's wall and fell to the ground, where it began to crawl. Its black fur was in harsh contrast with the tan siding on the choir

classroom, and both boys wrinkled their noses in disgust at the round protruding eyes which gleamed deep wet black. The wings, hairy, impossibly thin, and threaded throughout with red veins, were folded and limp. They reminded the boys of Mrs. Redder's arms. Her wrinkled skin, loose, slackening beneath her chin and dangling from her arms as she read them stories, as she seemed lost in the words and flapped her arms about baring her teeth in an incredulous smile, a smile that would, for a moment, convince them that the books were true, that Jack existed, that there were wolves in every wood, and that there was ever only one possible ending; happiness.

A wheezing gasp escaped the animal every few seconds. It struggled for breath. It yawned a red mouth, and bared two sharp teeth, white as milk. It inhaled deep, exhaled a hoarse hiss, and its head spun around confused in the sonic chaos of a playground during recess.

"It's a vampire bat," said the boy in the red sweater. "That's why it's like that. The sun is hurting it."

"A vampire?" asked the round-faced boy.

"We have to kill it," answered the other.

They silently stepped closer to the crawling rodent. The boy in the red sweater lifted his walnut club and held it a few inches above the bat's back, readying himself to spear the animal. The other boy followed suit, and began to count to three.

"One, two, three," said the round-faced boy, and at "three" both sticks became lances, and the boys leaned their entire weight on them, crushing the bat against the ground.

They both felt the bones crunch beneath them like dry leaves, like the walnut twigs they walked over day after day. They felt the flesh rip and unravel, spilling out spools of entrails.

But it did not die. The bat writhed on the grass, coated the green blades with blood, with red beads, and it screeched shivers into the two boys as soon as they lifted their weapons from the broken animal.

"She's going to hear!" said the boy in the red sweater, and he began to strike the animal with the stick.

"I think she's coming," said the other boy, and he too swung at the red and black mess on the grass. The walnut clubs came down over and over, eventually silencing the noise. Only the wet thud and slosh of something solid striking something liquid could be heard when Ms. Redder rounded the bungalow's corner.

She stared at the two boys. She saw red sprinkling their faces, saw the blood on the sticks run down the rough bark and collect between their fingers. She couldn't think of anything to say, anything to scream to them, she could only blow her silver whistle.

The boys stopped, startled, as if they had just been woken from a dream. They panted, dropped the sticks, and wiped sweat from their faces.

Both sets of parents were called. They were told to bring a change of clothes for their children. While the boys waited in the office, swinging their shiny black-shoed feet

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from the tall chairs, Ms. Hedder went back to the red smear on the grass. Recess had ended, and there were no children about, but the two bloody sticks still lay there. Mrs. Hedder picked up the walnut clubs, was surprised by their lightness, and took them to the

farthest corner of the school grounds, where there once had been a hole cut into the fence. She wondered if the hole had been cut as a way in by someone coming from the woods, or if it was a way out. The wind picked up, and she shivered.

Mrs. Redder stopped several steps away from the fence. She listened to it rattle as wind blew through it, and heard the leaves hiss when the current made its way to the trees. *The parents must be here by now*, she thought, and she threw the sticks over the fence, into the woods.

The Window

Don Andres noticed the missing table in the painting while he knotted his navy blue tie. He worked as a night watchman at an old office building outside of downtown L.A., and his second-hand uniform was so large that he looked like a wrinkled child playing dress up.

Impossible, he thought, and moved closer to the frame. The pot of dead carnations that rested on the table was also gone, and their only trace was a ghostly white silhouette. Don Andres touched the surface, felt the leathery smoothness of dry oil paint, and then felt it disappear into the rough texture of canvas. He painted the scene long ago, and couldn't remember what had inspired him, or even what he had titled it. All his other works were thrown away or given to thrift stores, but somehow this one stayed with him.

The painting was not detailed; it was blurred by thick smudges and broad brush strokes that up close appeared chaotic, but from a distance translated to the vagueness of a dream. It depicted a small boy in shorts, black shoes and white socks running up a shadowy stairwell, his left hand on the simple railing, and his right in mid swing above

his knee. At the top of the stairs was a thin window, the brightest object in the piece, and a bough heavy with snow could barely be seen beyond it, almost lost in the whiteness.

Each time Don Andres blinked he thought the objects might return, but the blank persisted. He wanted someone to confirm the disappearance, but he lived alone in the yellowed one-room apartment with its cracked porcelain sink and miniature stove. On most days, the small wrinkled man didn't need to utter a single word; groceries, work, rent, none of it involved direct communication.

He tore himself away from the painting and looked out his third floor window. It was already well past ten in the evening. His street was lined with boarded up business fronts whose upstairs shanty lofts housed weary mothers and skinny youths with dim eyes. There on the corner of Orchard and Mendel, beneath a flickering lamp post and the blinking red eye of a traffic light stood the girl Don Andres sometimes spied on before work each evening.

The binoculars were small and bright yellow, meant to be a toy, but they were strong enough to show the girl tugging at her frayed and discolored shorts, which might once have been pants. Her green sleeveless shirt was unbuttoned, tied into a knot above her navel, and her black hair was bound in a simple pony tail.

He went back to check on the painting, and the walls of the stairwell were now gone too. Don Andres' face grew pale and a cold film of sweat ran at his temples. Now, all that was left amidst the vast blankness of the canvas were the stairs, the boy, and the window.

Don Andres ran his hands across the stretched cloth. There were no tears, no stains, not a speck of paint. He touched the edges of the image, and thought, *someone has to see this.*

With the frame tucked under his arm, Don Andres hobbled down three flights of stairs as fast as his knees would take him. He crossed the street and shouted, "Hey."

The girl turned around. Her lips were painted red, the brightest red he'd ever seen, and he feared that they would disappear into thick brushstrokes when he approached, that they would become abstract and unrecognizable.

"You want a date tonight, Daddy?" she asked

Don Andres took a step toward her, "I just want you to look at this," he said. He held out the painting, and his hands shook; his tongue felt coarse, dry, and it stuck to the roof of his mouth. "What do you see?"

"What?" she said.

"The painting, what do you see? What's in it?"

The girl glanced down at it but still wouldn't touch the frame. "It's just a little boy," she said, "and snow." She pushed the frame aside and smiled. "You want a date?"

Snow, he thought. *Snow.* Don Andres sat on the curb and placed the painting on his lap. The stairwell was now gone as well.

"Fine, Daddy. You don't want a date that's fine, but you gotta find yourself a different corner," she said and she shoved him a little with her foot.

Before Don Andres's very eyes, the white void that had left the boy floating in mid air reached the window. *Snow*, he thought. He held the painting up until his nose

touched it. *Snow.* The wooden window frame began to vanish; it started on one corner and spread, until the whole rectangle was eaten away, *Snow,* until it was swallowed by whiteness. And then, *Snow,* he remembered his dream as a child, *Snow,* of an immense blanket of cool *Snow* white flakes covering the trees, *Snow* the sidewalks, and *Snow* the black roads of downtown L.A.. Don Andres now remembered the name of the painting: *Snow in the City of Angels.*

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting on the curb, staring at the painting, but the girl was gone, and the sun was beginning to turn the clouds from black to gray. Don Andres rose to his feet and stretched. His spine expanded, popped and shifted, and he let out a long yawn, a deep yawn, warm and heavy with all the sighs his chest could hold. He looked up at the sky, at the thick white sheet of clouds, and he thought, *Snow, snow.*

The Nuclear Family

Eve leaned down to her pastel green kitten heels and rubbed off a few black smudges on their snubbed tips. She stood at the top of a stairwell awash in blue tinted fluorescence, and she flicked the switch on and off several times, just to make sure the bulbs wouldn't fail if the power flickered from a seismic Shockwave.

Atom, her husband, had paid off the contractors to dig the fallout shelter a few feet deeper than they would have, and he bought the thickest steel door available—four inches of tempered metal with five hydraulic bolts that would hold it in place even after two bombs went off, the catalogue said.

Eve walked one step down the stairs, her left hand against the smooth finished concrete, and she imagined her house after an atomic blast; a stump left where the chimney used to be, and an erect, blackened door that lead to the shelter in the center of a smoldering wasteland of calcified bodies and charred skeletal cars.

Before taking another step, Eve turned and pulled the door closed. She was surprised by how light it was on its hinges, and the soft hiss of the bolts, followed by a reassuring click, pleased her.

The room was a simple rectangle. Its walls were lined with empty metal shelves affixed to the concrete with fat screws. In a day or two, those shelves would be stocked with everything from canned vegetables and meats, to peanut butter, vacuum sealed crackers, powdered milk, and enough duct tape to turn the earth gray. There would also be a bed pan as large as her stew pot and three containers full of a bright blue powder labeled "disinfectant gelling agent."

She sat on one of the four cots—one for her, one for Atom, and one for each of the twins, Kane and Eva—and felt the springs press against her through the thin padding. The pillow was more comfortable than the mattress, and as she lowered her head onto it, it exhaled of breath of new plastic.

Eve couldn't hear Atom walking around upstairs, but she knew he was there. It was exciting, the lengths he had gone to when she told him about her nightmares; blue-eyed men in gas masks with red insignia rushed into the ruins of her house, shoveled out the remains of the twins, put a bullet behind Atom's left ear, bound her hands behind her back, pushed her down onto the hot radioactive earth, and took turns with her until she bled. And through it all, they never removed their masks.

The next day, after Atom had gone to work, she found pamphlets on her night stand. They were from *America's Shield*, the shelter contractors, and inside he had left a note: "It's taken care of."

Her hands found their way to the hem of her dress. The twins would be at school for at least three more hours. The soft cotton moved up her legs, gave her goose bumps, and two fingers found their way inside her. She closed her eyes and imagined Atom in a

uniform similar to those of the blue-eyed men, only his was adorned with white stars instead of red, with thin blue stripes, and emblazoned with an eagle at his breast. *He would take off his mask,* she thought, and in her fantasy, he did, and her fingers gripped blonde hair, and pulled it until the scalp turned red, and she pulled, and she pulled, and she pulled, and she writhed beneath him.

Eve felt it coming, a rumbling in her body, a wave of heat and sweat radiating from beneath the patch of curly hair between her legs, from the bulbous lips that both of her hands were cupping, and then, it was there; an immense mushroom cloud spreading from her, all over the neighborhood, all over the city, and the country itself. She bit her tongue, her lips, and whimpered once.

Her heart began to calm, to slow itself, and she pulled the bunched up hem of the dress down to knee level. When Eve opened her eyes, she was still panting, and it was then that she noticed a crack on the ceiling directly above her. At the opening of the crevice, a drop of water swelled, grew fat and heavy, and then tumbled down onto her cheek.

They Say

Don Jaime used to be a kind man before he found gold buried at the back of his little grocery store. They say he was never stingy when he weighed out half a kilo of rice, if he knew things were rough he'd even let the scale rise extra. And that his bunches of cilantro were always thick and green.

His son and he had been knocking down a section of the wall behind the store to build it up with better brick. They dug to get to the foundation and the gold was sitting there in a bed of upturned dirt, bulging out of a rotten burlap sack. They say Don Jaime laughed so hard his suspenders snapped off his bony chest; and the son, they say his curly black hair, his tongue, and even his muddy brown eyes turned green just looking at the gold. The first thing his wife did was put black muck in her gray hair. Her thick braid used to look like a stiff husk, all dry and brittle. The gray went away, but they say she left a trail of black drops wherever she went.

The son bought himself a shiny black car with wheels barely thicker than a bicycle; don't know what sense is in it, since all the roads are dirt. The whole town has

seen him kicking up dust and rocks when he swoops by, driving like the devil's chasing him.

And he just might be. Some say that the night before Don Jaime found the money he met a man in a black suit behind his house, under the crabapple tree. They say the man's skin was gray, and that he spoke real low before they shook hands.

Maybe it was the handshake that did it, or maybe the money was cursed, but after the money, all of a sudden, Don Jaime's scale barely reached half a kilo and his cilantro was just a handful of wilted stalks. All of a sudden, his stomach swelled, and his cheeks got pink.

Then, one morning, less than a year after he found the gold, Don Jaime doubled over and his red face landed on the pile of scrambled eggs he was eating. It was his heart that did it, just stopped beating, the Doctors said, just like that.But some say it was the gold

The son built him a mausoleum out of marble, with cut glass doors, and a casket made of a strange crystal with a pale green tint. The whole town has seen the thing. They've seen Don Jaime inside, seen his hair grow longer, his hands warp and twist into claws, and seen how his nails keep growing, keep getting sharper.

Since he died the nights have been getting colder, windier, as if something's flying in the air. Some say they've seen strange shadows on the moon, heard strange bird calls, and some say they're missing chickens from their coop. Some are missing calves.

They've had meetings in the church, when the sun was out. They talked about how the wife has gone gray again, how she sleepwalks. How sometimes they find her in

the morning, with her bristly hair unbraided, sleeping on the wet grass under the crabapple. They talked about the son, too, how they never see him, how they only hear his car at night, going somewhere out of town, and how he's always back before the sun can catch him. They talked about the missing animals, about the cursed gold, and they even talked about the man in the black suit.

They decided that tonight, they're going to make sure he's dead. At midnight they're going to break the doors of the mausoleum with stones, and take Don Jaime out of his coffin. They are going to stuff his mouth with cloves of garlic, and drive a wooden stake through that black and green heart of his.

Earlier, just after the sun set and shadows crept up the corners of the church, they talked about how Don Jaime and his family deserved what they got, how their hoarding spoiled the money, how they misused it and how they didn't even need it. They said they were glad they didn't find the gold themselves, said they were better off in their small houses, but with pure souls; but that was earlier. Now, as midnight falls and the moon rises; as dogs bark at the wind, and the owls sing, nobody says a thing.

What the Daughter Saw

A green minivan glided down the steep hill before Gray Rock Gorge. Its lights sliced off a yellow wedge into the night and illuminated the wet trunks of the maples and the pines. Earlier in the evening, while the couple inside the van sat in a dark auditorium and watched their daughter's kindergarten autumn pageant, gray clouds had rolled in and unburdened themselves of the year's first cold rain. But now the clouds were gone, and left for the father, the mother, and the daughter, only blackened tree trunks, gleaming orange leaves, and a slick road that hissed softly beneath the van's tires.

At the pageant, the mother and the father sat together, but their heads drooped away from each other as if weary. The day before the pageant, the daughter received a talk where her mother and father bit their lips and looked away red-eyed. Her mother paused before saying, "You'll have a room at your father's house too," and her father tried to smile while he pinched her cheek and said, "You'll have twice as many toys."

The daughter had waddled onto the stage in a lumpy pumpkin suit. Her thin brown hair poked out in tufts along her forehead, beneath the green vine tip hat, and she saw her parents rise from their seats. She saw their elbows almost touch when they

clapped, saw their brief whispers to each other as they winked and smiled at her, and she could almost hear them call *her pumpkin.*

The radio inside the van played a slow piano song about airplanes flying on snowy nights, and the road curved right, too sharp a right for the father, who was distracted by windblown leaves drifting into the headlights' beam. The van tipped to the left and swayed for a moment, a long moment in which the mother, still numb to the situation, thought, *how strange are the stars and the sky, from this angle.*

The van flipped. It tumbled down the mountain, crumpling, catching branches and scraggy trees, snapping them cleanly off the hillside, and then, once the ground fell away into a gorge, into a deep slow river, the van flew freely.

The last thing the father saw was the scattering of rocks and boulders along the edge of the river. Some were jagged, protruding from the sandy banks like the bones of a buried animal, and others were flat and broad, covered in a fine green down of moss. But in the pale moonlight, their gleaming backs all reflected a cold certainty that made him shiver; *there's nowhere to go, through us you will not pass.*

What the mother saw last was the cliff, the gentle slope of it, and then, once the gentleness was choked out by thorny shrubs and stunted white pines, she saw the lip of it. It was a jagged edge of red clay, menacing in its frailty, in its ability to disintegrate into fine dust and disappear beneath her feet, emptying her into a space surrounded by nothing, where she would be still, and plummet in the dark.

What the daughter saw was her father's right hand and her mother's left grasp for each other, saw their clasped fingers, white at the knuckles, trembling, and through the

windshield, she saw the moon's broad yellow face shifting, fluttering on the water's surface, and then as the van landed, she saw the moon explode into mist and give way.

Our Business

We heard about the accident before Mrs. Luviano, the drowned boy's mother. The other boy had run back muttering, "The river took him," and the tragedy rippled away from him in rings. Old women in shawls drew crosses over their hearts, children picked up balls from the ground, held them to their hips, and we all watched him run to Mrs. Luviano's house.

She sat outside on a squat green stool, peeling a potato over a metal bowl. When she saw the boy, her elbow and forearm ceased their quick whisks. The concrete he stood on grew dark, blotted by his long shadow, by water that dripped from his black hair. All of us in the street stood still and chewed our lips. We could hear his teeth rattle, and we felt the evening breeze cold behind our necks, behind our ears.

"The river took him," he said.

Mrs. Luviano dropped the peeler into the bowl, brought her hand to her brow in a trembling fist. Her lips twisted, shrunk, and she screamed. She cried and wailed and pulled at the collar of her white blouse. She pulled at her hair, and some of us thought we saw clumps of it come loose.

They found him the next morning, caught in the branches of a rotting tree downriver, but when they showed her his gray body on the sandy bank, flies dotting his lips like warts, she said, "No."

We didn't understand. We had all come to beat our chests and claw our necks with her, to tear our cheeks with her. We all looked at each other, could do nothing but blink at each other, while Mrs. Luviano walked back home along the river.

Every evening after that, after she peeled potatoes outside her door, she stood and yelled, "Miguel, dinner!"

We only watched her do this the first few nights, because since her door was never closed, and since she went on calling out to her drowned son, there was nothing we could do but go about our business.