

Where To the Wild Heart

Prescription:

Everything comes down to respectability, respect in the reflexive sense and reflexive in both senses: that I should be given respect rather than give it, and that I should arouse it instinctively, without demanding it, so that anyone would be surprised to discover, when my name comes up in conversation with a friend, that both parties share a strong respect for me without knowing exactly why—but there must be something there, for otherwise how would they have independently developed the same respect? If I am verified in this way, if I can consistently produce this reaction, then there *is* something respectable there, not fraudulent, just manicured; it may even appear manicured, as long as it doesn't appear demanding. The imposition is to be avoided, for it will only set the mechanics of respect playing within the submissive types, and if my aim is to produce so universal a feeling of respect so as to have verified my own respectable character, I must win over the world, the world over, yes yes.

No sacrifices can be made in this pursuit. Respectable character requires no sacrifices, so any made outside are considered unnecessary, and unnecessary sacrifices are in poor taste. Taste, however, can also be forgotten, for snobbery knows no respect anywhere, and tastelessness, so long as it be *knowing* tastelessness, works in one's favor. Neither endearing nor pitiable—and completely undemanding!--such self-awareness allows for the inclusion of all sorts of quiet standouts which stack together nicely like dining-hall chairs, provided self-awareness never becomes vanity and shims up the far leg. So long as I maintain a distance between my right and left arms, as it were, I can live atop this throne of ignorances. I preside with sympathy and entirely without cunning.

I have seen the limits of my intelligence; they are even closer to me than my thoughts, which often wander out beyond the fencing and never make it back, so quiet is the homing call that my faculties of reason can put out. I generate initials constantly, the first glimpse of a thought, and then as I tighten around it is shoots out like a pinched pea. Nothing can be held in the vice of my mind; it hangs open at one end like a *V*. If I strain I can close the loose end somewhat, but this only causes the thought to shoot out faster, (the boot leans down upon a marble and it rolls beneath the radiator). So I have decided to leave the loose end loose, seeing as I cannot get it all the way parallel (so weak are my powers!). I learned my lesson, thankfully, before I began setting the vice upon the more important things and have lost them, too, shot off beyond the horizon of retrievability.

I do not mention these limitations to drum up any sympathy—no misstep of mine could lose you from my side during the story we are about to tell each other—but rather to explain that situation I am now in, especially my unique ability to knowingly cultivate respect for my ignorance, is a special case. I recognize that here, officially, in writing. I have lucked into a defect that allows for this contradiction, and it troubles no one. The stability is curated, yes, but it is also virginal; I have a natural skate to life. I move across its wavish waters on the frozen blades of this broken vice, making efforts now and then to align them and gain speed, but mostly snowplowing with knock-knees, braking on the V-point. My talent, I mean to say, is to move slowly without getting wet.

Now, having sufficiently delayed in starting the story that I sat you there to tell, I am ready to begin. You will forgive me, immediately, for this introduction, and in time you will even be thanking me for it, but only once the story has finished. Let's begin to build the trust.

I

I awoke in a foreigner's house.

In the disorientation of late morning, I mistook the green air outside the window as that of the countryside. This moment soon joined to the next—in which I stood and surveyed the city park that had been the cause of my confusion—and I was touched again by the new walls into recollection. I had arrived in this foreign city the night before, taking a car from the train station to the foreigner's house. It would've been around one or two in the morning when I got in, but I was lucky enough to find the housekeeper about. What he was doing I could not say, it is not so large or clean a house as to call for late nights from its staff, but as the mystery played to my fortune, neither did I feel like complaining.

My late arrival did however mean that I hadn't yet spoken to my host. The stay had been arranged through a mutual friend, so I knew little more about her than her address. My friend—the sort of connected person who is always happy to connect their connections—had given me only a handful of details and their full recommendation. Perhaps she would resemble her address, and I'd have a reasonable running start for our meeting. I dressed.

I found her in the main room downstairs. She was eating breakfast, so while I negotiated the largest acceptable meal onto my plate I was able to introduce myself and offer my apologies for everything that came to mind: my late arrival (to the house), my appearance, my late arrival (to breakfast), the heat, and even interrupting. It has always been my strategy to open these situations with a great groveling effort, especially with a foreigner, for there does not exist a culture on this earth in which the sniveler does not pass respect to the besniveled. I have found that it sets up the ideal relationship between guest and host, for one appears at once eager to please and immediately unpleasant. This way, when I proceed with whatever business brought me to town, my host is neither imposed upon nor desperate for my company, and I can make use of the room as I would a hotel's, coming and going at odd hours for the duration of my brief visit.

I was nearly done with this introductory (or effectively eductory) speech, and still the woman had not interrupted. It was concerning, for if she allowed me to continue I would be forced eventually to finish, which is a horrible honor; there is nothing crueler than refusing to interrupt a hesitating apologist for eventually the apology becomes outsize and must be excused as well—but to that depravity I would never sink to avoid mere conversation, there are demons and then there are rats, after all.

“Oh!” I cut myself off, since someone had to. “I nearly forgot to mention—that's some dedicated housekeeper you have, to your advantage as much as mine. I was just going to drop my luggage off and find a hotel, and there he was in the window!”

Where before she had been smiling a mild, bored eye she now gave a strange look. I wondered if she was going to pull along my obvious lie, and if so, which part: that I meant to leave my luggage in the vestibule or that I was going to search for a hotel rather than ring the bell and enter what I had so far showed to be my dominant mode: profuse apology.

“I haven’t got a housekeeper,” she said, and resumed shelling pistachios into a pile on her plate.

“No housekeeper?” I asked, and paused. She had no husband, that I knew, and the man was in a servant’s uniform—true, not that of a butler or a hand servant, but oh, yes, that’s right, he’d had that machine with him, now I remembered, and I told her so.

“Ah,” she said, pretending to now understand, though surely she’d known the whole time what I meant. “That must have been the gardener. He works nights.”

“The gardener?” She nodded. “At night? Inside?”

“Yes, well, it gets cold at night and he’s an old man.”

“Why can’t he work during the day?” I asked, and regretted my investment. It would be best to drop the subject while she’s ahead, it can work well enough this way.

“During the day the plants are busy with the sun,” she responded.

“Oh,” I said, and began to eat.

We continued to converse more comfortably, as her shelling allowed her to talk without looking at me and me to eat without being looked at. I learned that she had been a sculptor, working mostly in media long-since discontinued for public health reasons. None of these cancerous sculptures, I learned on inquiry, were on display around the house. I expressed my regret, and she took it so sincerely I was worried she would promise to show me one. I had no doubts about their quality—judging from the decoration of the house and the shapely triangle into which she had absentmindedly formed the nutmeats stockpiled on her plate, she had some dextrous good taste—I simply did not wish to curse either of us with promises of further involvements. The topic of profession, however, swung back to me, and as I explained the nature of my work, my visit, and my research, I was relieved to see her begin eating the pistachios.

“And you speak at the conference today?” she asked.

“Tomorrow, actually,” I said, “but I’ll need to spend today preparing. I should set off soon, in fact. Are there any pharmacies nearby? There are some items I need to procure for my presentation.”

She gave directions; I listened carefully. She gave me the name too, which had the full sonic estrangement of their language behind it, and I contented myself with memorizing the first sound, a “k” sound far back in the throat, “kahh”, forceful past the bunched tongue and then dropping into a rattle breath. It had a choked naturalness to it, and after excusing myself all the way out the front door I set off into the heat repeating “kahh, kahh” to myself like a coughing crow.

The pharmacy was on the other side of the city park, although my directions skirted the greenery at a few blocks distance. I had wandered through a few aisles enjoying the novel script make gibberish out of what was clearly soap, or water, or chocolate, when I became aware of another customer in the store. We were sharing, the two of us, one of the more embarrassing aisles, and as I continued not looking at him I felt him also continue not looking at me. I experimented: I took a pain relieving gel (most items had recognizable pictures) from the shelf and made as if reading the back. It was intended as a deference, and he returned it, pulling down a miniature barrel of protein powder and rolling it about in his hands, as if lamenting that he couldn’t see the whole surface at once, like a child spinning in front of a mirror.

I raised him again, replacing the pain gel with the darkest shade of hair thickener. He must have seen, for he then shook the protein barrel next to his ear and set it back on the shelf, not ripe. He took female razors; I countered with anti-fungal foot paste; he compared, at arms length, two different generic brand bottles of hydrogen peroxide; I smelled a closed tub of knee cream. We went on exchanging blows like this for a good while, neither of us facing nor approaching the other. Eventually he wandered out of the aisle, tracing the shelf with his finger like a library-goer who's just realized their book is actually around the corner. I knew he wouldn't return, but I restrained myself from watching his retreat all the same.

I found the stethoscopes and aspirin near the medicine counter at the back of the store.

The park, where I then wandered to and in, must have been a recent installation. For one thing, it was not in the guidebook I'd brought along with me, and the guidebook was only a few decades out of date. One would hardly need a reference volume to discover the artifice, though: perfectly smooth and tiny hills, steel insets along the pathside, almost ironic cat-ponds and suntan high-grasses. If the ground had been uneven here it had surely been leveled, developed, and leveled again long before the construction of the park had begun. In the city of my guidebook it was, in fact, a landfill. I imagined trash patted into shape, forming the picnic hills that the path pretended to skirt, as though they were not equal partners. They curated a playfight, the paths mock-cursing the troublesome terrain—'ach!' the bend was saying, 'just my luck. Another hill! Let's see if we can't get through around this way...'

I knew they had known each other since birth, but that only made the fiction more compelling. Besides, there is no comfortable stroll along the hypotenuse. As soon as one realizes they have fallen into the optimal path, the obligation is to speed, course records, and all manner of things that distract from the basic pleasure of movement. Here, I was compelled to stop on idiotic bridges, drag my fingers through the high grasses that kissed the pathside, and when I came to a square in the center, I felt no guilt at stopping to sit on a bench next to a young woman. Together, we faced a little copper fountain in which three cherubic statues were playing, and in times of better water pressure one could imagine them spitting arcs as children do through buckteeth. Today, they drooled into the basin.

The woman, as I looked at her now, appeared deformed. I did not wish to stare, so I did not, but some internal mechanism had spoken at something to do with her left hand, or her left forearm, or perhaps lack thereof—I couldn't say and felt immediately upset at having noticed. What right had I to notice, after all? It was shameful to think some subconscious aesthetic process had assessed and flagged this stranger's body, and I was repulsed by the judgement. But even that, I knew, was the wrong direction of operation—I should repel the thought.

I would have liked to have spoken to her, but I had no command of the language (and indeed felt that forcing her to speak a language that was not hers would not help dispel my unwanted sense of her deformity). Instead, I concentrated on trying to shift my own sensibilities as deeply as possible.

The program followed a series of steps, beginning with an exploration of the ways in which imperfections can make things beautiful (or stronger). I then synthesized these insights into categories and then the categories into a set of mantras, each developing a different facet of what was to become my new appreciation for imperfect creations. I picked, from low among the grasses next to the bench, a flower for each mantra and placed them in my lap. I would take one

at random and repeat the associated saying twenty times to myself, spinning the flower by the stem. The petals of the long-eared flowers would fan out in the rotation like a gown, and then, as I reached the end of my spinning finger, sashay back the other way.

After an hour of so of this exercise, the woman got up to leave. I couldn't resist the chance to test my progress, and raised my head to look at her as she walked away—only to find no deformities at all! Her left arm—I could see it now as she rinsed her hands in one of the dribbling statues' streams—was of completely standard form. If anything, it was *above* average. She had thin bones, or else very tight skin, either way: slender fingers, articulated like an armature. Her forearm was not merely present (as the hand had all but given away) but shining as though poreless. It absorbed the water like cream.

I was of course disgusted. Briefly, I thought my disgust might be a sign that my training had already succeeded in adjusting my taste towards the imperfect, but I knew this was not the case, for it was jealous resentment, not rejected beauty, that those well-formed arms had aroused in me. I began to feel the heat of my own blood behind my forehead and as soon as she swung off along the path I plunged my head into the basin and held it there. The water was gloriously cold as only metal-made water can be. I felt layers of oil and acid pull away from my skin, hissing buoyant along my cheeks. The vein in my forehead recessed and then, as the effort of holding my breath climbed, returned.

I returned to the house an hour before I guessed dinner would be eaten, with the intention of taking some papers to a cafe to continue preparations. I made it to my room without seeing anyone and sat down on the bed. Within a minute I was lying down the wrong way full across the bed. At this point I knew I would fall asleep, but as punishment I allowed myself neither pillow nor covers. I drifted off to the chanting of my already degenerating mantras.

I awoke in a foreigner's house. Blue dim rose from the park to illuminate my room. It was some uncertain post-dinner hour. Living only a post-breakfast life myself, I went downstairs to look for food.

The first floor was empty, but a few table lamps had been left on. I found the kitchen just off of the room where we'd eaten breakfast. White and blue tiles ran in strips along the wall, forming a reflective crotch with the stone countertop. I gathered appealing ingredients from the fridge onto a little wooden table.

Using the sort of bread traditional in that country's cuisine, I set about the construction of my sandwich. First to go down was a salted meat—not preserved, just salty in preparation—that tasted something like lamb. Then, red onion, cheese that tasted only of milk, and olives. Finally, I laid a loose tomato spread on the inside of the back cover and set the sandwich aside while I put the ingredients back away.

I took my plate back into the dining room and sat in one of the entertaining seats along the sides of the table. I had intended to spend my meal reworking an especially awkward section of my speech, but there was never much hope of this. It is a strange thing: eating does not give itself easily to multiple concentrations. The body, while satisfied, releases its focusing control. Thoughts sneak around, throwing open unused doors in the mind. This cleaning cycle is so notoriously wandersome that most convents designate a reader every mealtime to whom they listen silently, for man does not live by bread alone. Leave the soul hungry, as I had that night,

and it will gorge itself on that which it first finds. Some nervousness within me prowled, and my eyes followed.

A painting hung upon the wall opposite me. It had a shallow frame, so despite the oblique angle at which it was lit, I could see the entire scene. The scale was initially difficult to make out because the perspective was flattened by an iconeseuq overlighting. When I realized that what I had thought were bushes closer to the foreground were in fact trees seen from a raised angle, it became clear I was looking at a landscape painted into a portrait frame.

It was a woods, broken in the center of the frame by a massive rock. The rock sloped downwards as the eye followed it from the top to bottom, so that its face lay essentially parallel to the foreman's-angle observation. There were holes in the lower two thirds of the rock face, approximately round and heading straight down into the rock. Figures moved about the holes, carrying objects and ropes. At the far high point of the rock was a ring of yellow lightshafts about a meter wide and two meters tall, each crowned by a star.

I sat there for a while, eating and contemplating this strange picture in the low light. When I finished eating, some of my sense returned and I brought my empty plate back into the kitchen to clean up.

I stopped in front of the painting as I passed back through the dining room. There was no signature.

Sleep came slowly.

II

I awoke in a foreigner's house. It was seasonably hot, and I had sweat the sheets into full contact with my skin. I got up to open the window; it was already open. A desert lull had eaten any potential wind at the city's edge, so that now the sun ran down toward the center as in a valley. The park must have been the hyperbolic focus. It nearly steamed.

Downstairs, we ate in silence. I tried to apologize for missing dinner the night before, but she waved it off with an unwounded indifference. She read a novel while eating, and I sat with my back to the painting so as to focus on the conference papers spread before me. I would be speaking just after noon, and had already arranged a taxi. I worked on sobering the tone of my speech to better match the gravity of its subject—let it be known such pretention comes slowly even for me—and went out to meet the car around eleven o'clock.

The driver started the air conditioning as soon as I got in the car. The cabin cooled as we drove, and even as I grew cold, truly cold, I kept my suit jacket folded beside me. Although I knew the convention hall to be on the other side of the city's river, I never registered the bridge. That is to say: never was the road just a road; there was always a block: shops on the ground floor, housing above, stone government buildings and open air markets, all coda, and leaning out the window is a porch.

I was met inside by a representative of the convention's organizing committee. He quickly explained as many administrative matters as he could remember, and then ran off back to the lobby. I was left wandering in a hallway, where I walked about looking at plaques and posters.

The hallway curved all the way around the circular performance hall, so as I walked, counter-clockwise, I would occasionally pass doors propped open into the auditorium seats. Whenever I drew parallel to one of these portals the chatter from inside would unmuffle into a

discernible lecture. I imagined the speaker buried to his neck in sand and I uncovering and recovering his head with a plastic bucket. When I had traveled so far around to hear the entrance hall again, I knew the time had come to enter.

I passed through a door with a laminated sign featuring the city crest and the following text:

THROUGH HERE:

SYMPOSIUM ON THE HUMAN HEART

PLEASE WATCH YOUR STEP

The stairs descended to the central stage in a straight line, with section breaks every six or seven rows. The current lecturer, who looked very small from where I was standing, was making quarter turns with each slide change to accommodate the circular audience. I was to sit in the lowest rows, all the way at the bottom, with the other waiting speakers.

The first and highest section was occupied by non-specialists, curious laypeople, and a few respected researchers whose work had long since gone out of date. They looked disinterested in the current topic—something about a new non-chemical clotting—and talked mostly amongst themselves. Being the closest to the exits, I imagine they would have left were it not so hot outside and so cool in here. I put on my suit jacket (as elegantly as a single free hand allows) and continued down the stairs.

In the next section were students, They watched the proceedings with such rapt attention that a single blink could have revealed it a joke. They did not notice me observing them and they did not turn to watch me as I passed through into a quiet section. It would have been silent, but there was the sound of frantic note-taking. Here, attendees bled onto legal pads and stenotypes, frantically transcribing the speak singing up from the speakers set into each balcony's wall.

Next were the business interests and the interested businesses. They seemed to be engaged in endless introductions, each new acquaintance bringing about another, so that they shuffled continuously about looking generally very unhealthy. I recognized a few countrymen here, but was not inspired to slow down.

Following the business section was a roped off area not to be used as seating where mic stands stood before disorderly lines of question-askers. Animated discussion carried on in the queue, and every now and then an administrative orderly would hush the lively group and remind

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them that questions would be taken at the end of the presentation. Until then (and here he pointed at a little sign) there was to be no talking.

I stopped for a moment on the question deck and looked up at the display hanging above the stage. It had four screens, one facing each quadrant of the auditorium, and each displayed a live feed of the lecturer. As the lecturer spun, the feed would cut to the appropriate frontal angle. It's stability worked with the spinning man at the center to create an illusion of motion, as when the neighboring train pulls away from your stopped one, and it felt as though the auditorium itself was revolving around the presentation stage.

The next section was completely empty, although none of the seats were reserved or cordoned off. As I passed through I, too, understood that I should not sit there, and was relieved when I found myself among what could only have been government people clustered in small,

remote groups. They whispered in permanently hoarse voices, and cast me accusing glances over golden epaulettes. I smiled dimly back and hurried on down into the final front rows.

Here were my colleagues: practicing doctors and medical academics. I was hailed by an acquaintance in the third row, and although I had no particular love for the man, I was greatly relieved to find his eggish face among the crowd. I sat within his group, demure but pliant, while we watched the lecture turn toward my time.

On stage, I placed my bag inside the foot of the hollow podium and my papers upon its face. Monitors displaying my image, situated at the compass extremes of the circular platform, tilted up at me. They seemed somehow grubby and servile—no small comfort for someone at the bottom of a well.

“Good afternoon.” I began. “My talk will take an unusual format necessary to its unusual subject. Please forgive me. I will be very brief.”

“Today I will be presenting recent breakthroughs made by my group in practical extensions of the somatic nervous system.

“The nervous system, as many of you may have heard, is usually broken down along physical and agent distinctions. So the central nervous system, which works in the brain and spinal cord, is distinguished from the peripheral one, which runs nerve endings from the central one out to all the muscles of the human body. This is a physical distinction. The peripheral nervous system can be again separated into the autonomic and somatic nervous systems. This is a participatory distinction.

“The somatic nervous system facilitates voluntary control of one’s muscles, while the autonomic works autonomously, controlling certain muscles without any impetus from the conscious mind. The autonomic muscle functions are not subconscious, they are unreachable by the conscious mind.

“The respiratory system, for example, is an *automatic* somatic function, because one can take control of their breath. It is not *autonomic*, and neither are autonomic functions controllable: one cannot flex digestive muscles at will, or dilate the pupils on command, or generate physical arousal on impulse alone. These things happen reflexively, on reflexes out of our control.

“One might choose to remember, however, that at the most basic level these systems are functioning in the same way. The difference between conscious and autonomic impulses, seeing as both originate in the brain and travel through the central nervous system, is a convenience.

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The more accurate, broader picture—but one that is uncomfortable to use—understands the conscious impulses on a deterministic utility level with the autonomic ones.

“The autonomic impulses work within the body using the body as input while the conscious ones interact with the outside world and therefore use the outside world as input. Neither is more *intentional* than the other. Not in any anatomical way.

“It was working from this idea (that of the close compatibility between the somatic and autonomic systems) that our discovery was made.

“I have here a stethoscope.”

I took the stethoscope out of my bag and showed it to the audience, making a full turn. I pressed the earpieces to the microphone, and tapped the drumhead lightly, a couple of times. It carried through the speakers.

“So you can see that it is real and functional. Now, let’s see if we can hear it beating.”

Keeping one hand on the podium, I used the other to hold the chestpiece over my heart. A soft pumping began to beat up into the arena.

“I am beating the heart you are now hearing. I am focusing, right now, on the proper contractions, the order of sub-movements; I am orchestrating, and I am conducting. Listen, I will accelerate.”

And I accelerated.

“It was difficult at the beginning. I had to learn the operation, and I had to learn it well enough to develop an automatic fallback. I will now slow it, so that you can hear something.

Now I slowed it.

“Listen, I can break it.”

The one-two beat now split: one, two.

“Remember: I am closing the valves. I will not do it out of order, but I can syncopate the rhythm. Listen again, and closely, for I can only hold it for a moment.”

The one-two beat split again and repaired, one, two-one, two-one, two-one, and then back to normal.

“The beat is a ribbon, and it feeds forever. I have only put my hand on the crank. This demonstration, I believe, has sufficed.”

I put the stethoscope back into the podium’s hollow.

“Now that I have debuted this spectacular achievement, I am going to disappoint. Many of you will be expecting a detailed explanation of methods. The possible clinical uses for voluntary in-patient heart manipulation are, we can imagine, astounding. So too the potential abuses.

“I cannot in good conscience yet reveal my method. This concealment damages my scholarly pride and hounds my practitioner’s heart. Even now I desire to share it with you, to perpetrate a mass transmission—but I will not. To ensure the protection of even the most basic continuity—a tie that this discovery will permanently fray—protective action must be taken prior to the method’s release.

“I believe I am in a position to make demands, but how can I know yet which ones to make? The possibility for mutability between the autonomic and somatic systems is an unexplored area in the medical space, so its ethics have not yet been developed. I am calling first and foremost for an immediate investigation into the ethics and potential misuse of this

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technology. So that the prize of method revelation does not bias the investigation’s results, I would remind the usual critics that this represents a unique chance to fully prevent the rollout of a highly disruptive procedure.

“Once this investigation has reached its conclusions, should there be merit enough for its eventual adoption, I would require a moratorium, agreed to by all world governments, on any use outside of the purely clinical. When no reasonable fear remains among the world’s populations, and if I have not myself changed my mind (especially should a change come as a result of my altered state), then will the method be released.

“I eagerly await that day, or the day I know it will never come. “I will take no questions. Thank you for your time.”

A few colleagues were waiting for me in the pit ringing the stage. They whispered me through an arched exit I had not registered. I walked in their center, disoriented by the darkness of the tunnel. Were it not for the herd, I might have wandered back out into the stage lights. Comfort came breathing warm, spoken air; they animated to me, all of them, and they guided me as though following. I did not focus on what they were saying.

I was grateful and faint. Had I been able to put my hands out, a blind man in a hallway, I would have despaired at the parallel walls: that they should never meet each other, these lovers, that they should never make swerving an approach and touch touching ends, and force my outstretched arms around myself so that I could love as well, so that the world could love itself and I myself, and I could nest into the crook they made, nose into the neckline crevice. No, in blindness I would be their only joiner, and I would have to conduct them forever, since they went on forever, so tragically parallel are a hallway's walls.

But they surrounded me with the towel of human companionship, my lowly monitors and mothers, and I changed there on the beach, since I was not able to connect the walls. They, who had eyes accustomed to the tunnel, they who ferried me down the sewer with a pole, they had vision enough to see perspective kiss the walls together, so they could move as towards an end, and not worry about conducting.

I returned to the house exhausted to the point of tranquility. It was very late.

They had taken me drinking, and then we danced. I was harangued endlessly, but in the good-natured way that dancing drunk people have. Unsteady as I was fumbling to lock the door behind me, I knew I hadn't given up any information.

I unlocked and relocked the door again, then tried to open it. I was unable, which was a good sign.

I had, however, allowed myself to make plans with one of them. She had cornered me, late in the night as we were all wandering about on the streets, and begged me to demonstrate on her. At first I refused, misunderstanding her, but as she insisted into an explanation I realized what she meant. I agreed, and took the stethoscope out of my bag. She placed the earpieces in her ears and I unbuttoned my shirt. She listened, her wide eyes aimed directly at the spot where she was pressing into my flesh, softly giving me commands to quicken, slow or pause the beating.

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When she was satisfied, she invited me—very loudly despite how close we were standing, since the stethoscope was still in her ears—to have lunch with her family the next day. There was a reason that I agreed, but it was gone by the time I made it inside the house.

As the night before, most of the lamplights had been left on in the house. I turned off the ones I would not need, and then went into the dining room. This time, rather than squinting from across the table, I turned around the nearest chair to face the painting and sat down in it.

First, I let the entire picture come to me fresh. I noticed a few superficial things. There was, in fact, a signature. I had missed it, scrawled into the canopy in a slightly lighter shade of green. I made a note of the foreign name.

The frame had a silver plate fixed to the bottom slat, but it was blank. And I was no longer sure that it had been painted in oils. The details of the scene, however, appeared to me

exactly the same as they had been imprinted upon me the day before. I knew I would get no further in the natural state of mind.

An idea pretended to occur to me, because I asked it to. I feigned surprise, we both did, and took it reluctant as though I had not been thinking of it all day, as though I had not walked in the house, directly over to the painting, and then coughed. If the painting would not surrender to me as I am, I am forced to become me that I am not.

I began to slow the beating of my heart.

There were eleven figures in all. Their poses suggested unrecognizable actions. I slowed my heart again.

The actions, in fact, *were* recognizable, but their contexts were not. Over to the right side, for example, one of them was kneeling next to one of the openings with their arm in a bag. Nothing about the tableau was foreign to me, but the implication was entirely unclear.

Because their hand was still deep in the bag, for example, its contents were not known. The direction was also captured at an ambiguous moment, since there was no way to tell whether they were loading or unloading the bag. Therefore it was not obvious whether the hole was used as a font, where materials were produced or found, or more as a receptacle, into which something is hoarded, disposed of, or fed.

Again, slower. That was the question, and the figures—oh, humans! I realized, yes, these were humans. Why I should have thought them anything else? Physically, there was nothing not human about them, and they were engaged in human activities.

Now I could see that they did not look downwards. They looked out, to the dark woods, and those that were near enough communicated. A pair in the center, sitting with their legs hanging over the lip of a hole, work together on a craft project. Or, to be more accurate, one has the craft in their hands and the other watches them, or maybe the hole, and seems to be caught mid gesture. If they were correcting them, against what?

Although by now I had reached the lowest end of a plausibly healthy resting heart rate (which had been as far as I'd planned to go) the progress was too encouraging to let up. As long as I continued to breathe deeply and minimize my body movements, I should have enough oxygen to continue down, if only for a minute. So I pushed, and found more give.

It was not a complete ambiguity. In fact, the figures—humans, I suppose—suggested only two interpretations. The picture froze them in the moment of transaction, as in a photograph of money changing hands. Among humans, the borrower and the lender can be distinguished by

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signs of power, which might present through clothes, posture, or expression. The two parties in the painting—the people and those holes—were not so easy to read.

Still, whether opposing or not, having it narrowed to two solutions is not a hopeless situation, for between any two things there must be a line. I pushed more.

Ah, I could hear something new, at least. Or, I had been hearing it, hearing myself say it, even, but now it was ringing and I could parse the logic that let me say it so many times before hearing. In either interpretation, the holes were *collection sites*. The idea of collection, I had just seen it in my mind, revealed underneath thoughts now shifting too slowly to cover themselves, yes, it was the name *collection* that compared the figures' game in one interpretation to the other. Either they were collecting material from the depths to bring back with them into the woods or

they were using the holes as a sort of storage or disposal, where their own material would collect and store. The actions, when depicted at the pivot moment, would look the same because they portrayed the same thing: collection. Push.

A face, I saw a face; it was the head of a man in a hole. I had not noticed it before, for he was in the instant shadow of an opening. He was holding a rope that was also tied around his chest, and two others on the stone's face held the other end taut. Whether he was ascending or descending I could not say, but he too had a bag across his shoulder. I saw his face flush pulsate then drain, separated by entire seconds, until I could look at nothing else. He faced upwards, towards his belayers, and squinted a wave across his forehead. I wanted to feel my own, to see how cold it had become, but my limbs had grown long. Behind the forehead of the man I saw my own thoughts, and I knew this was all I had ever seen, for even seeing is thought, and I watched them, lethargic, wade about a marsh of comparisons. I saw through, for a whole slow age, to a subcutaneous fish, and the fish was lazy in the marsh. There is an accidental computer in a quarry, and I watched it processed by an unlucky wind until the wind began to worry and leave. It was leaving, and leaving, and it left, and a new one came weaker through, and they were working on something with the death-drive of a fruiting tree, and the fish and I watched them work on it, whatever it was, for the whole brief life of that dying, fruiting, tree, until out of the quarry rose the knee of a symbol and a giant; it was suddenly there and it caught me. Catch, and pop, pop, the fish is accelerating and then the marsh is out of view, pop, a cold rush in my ears, pop, and vivacity resumes as though always resumed, pop, but I saw it resume; this time, I saw it. There is the painting, and here is my heartbeat, who decided it had been forgotten, but I saw it. There is the painting, but for now I can rest until later, and later, when I wake, I still will have still seen it, yes!

III

I awoke in a foreigner's house. I had slept in a pose that could only have been the product of my partial atrophy the night before. My entire left side was left contracted, sprung like a ribbon that someone has pulled a scissor across. I uncoiled as best I could, first in my bed and then standing by the closed window. There was a light rain falling. In the park, umbrellas obliged the winding paths, taking to higher, unflooded ground where necessary. Some radiance of the weather had hushed even the traffic now congested with dry-minded commuters. Watching the little carousel, a grown desire pulled around inside me, and I knew immediately that I should like

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to speak with my host, should in fact like to breakfast with her for hours and hours. She must have stories of other artists, other people, other years, and we could talk and eat about them in the pleasant dining room, until such time as we conspired off to the sitting room to talk without eating in those deep window-facing chairs as they have in libraries.

It was a wonderful idea, and I glowed upon it as I dressed and came down the stairs. So well-going was my moment that the stairs, because they took along the west wall of the house, tapped out the rainbeat into the stairway corridor. I let my fingertips trail lightly along the walls as I descended and imagined I could feel the collisions.

I found my host in the dining room, breakfasting in the same position as the first morning. The room was dimmer than I would have liked—she had not yet drawn the curtains—so there was a beat before I realized I had left that chair facing the painting, away from the table.

She, too, had left it that way, which worried me, but perhaps (and perhaps this was the case with the curtains as well) she simply was not one to fuss. I turned the chair around and sat in it, smiling to my host. She said nothing.

“Good morning,” I offered.

“Ah!” she looked up, into my eyes. “So you see me!”

“See you? Well, of course I see you.” She said nothing, and shook her head back down at her food. I continued “Although it is a bit dim in here. Would you like me to open the curtains, I —”

“Leave the curtains; leave my curtains alone. I don’t mean for the light. I can see you just as you see me: rarely, in the mornings, curt as a sparrow.”

She spoke strongly, though not in the tone of discipline or disappointment. I knew it, oh, right away, to be the voice of hurt. I could not collect a sentence to protect myself.

“You have been here, in *my* home, three nights now, and not once have you joined me for dinner. You spurn not only my time and my interests but, I can only imagine, my culture.” She glanced up again. “Or, do correct me—did they have any exhibits on at the pharmacy?”

It had sounded like a rhetorical question, but as she then turned mildly back to her food I began to wonder if I ought to answer. Not answer the question, which could have no response, but the entire accusation. I knew I could not excuse my actions, and I even recognized then that I had known they were inexcusable when I took them, that in fact taking inexcusable actions was a crime I often delighted in. Here was my host, from whom I had *taken* something, an action, advantage, or unit of power, and I did not know how to give it back. I had never needed to before, and although I knew how (for one learns what giving looks like in a career of taking), I could not do it. There was a bulging feeling, just as money makes in the pocket passing a beggar by, only now it was in my entire boneless throat.

“I do not often get visitors, so you’ll forgive the excitement I felt on hearing from our mutual friend. When you did not show up the first night—we had prepared a traditional dinner, most of which the gardener took home, cold, to his family—I let myself imagine further an innocent, inexperienced traveler who had been caught up in an unfamiliar transport system and would arrive to me lost, obviously lost and scared, to whom I could be a resource as well as an anchor.”

I could barely see the room as it was. Instead, the cold dinner dominated my vision. At times, variations: she adjusted a platter and looked out the window, she checked a clock, a

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mirror, she ate alone. The food was wrapped and smashed in portable containers, wet with condensation, and taken away by the gardener—oh, *after* he’d let me in!

“But when you came down to breakfast that first morning there was nothing wrong with you at all. You humored me as long as you could manage and dismissed yourself away. I knew better than to prepare any food for you that night.”

I said before that takers know giving, and I knew then something I could give. I could have told her that I *was* lost in this city, that I did stumble in, scared in my own way, that I would have liked a resource or an anchor. Those are gifts, and giving them would release them from my skin so that it could close again fully. I strained towards eruption; I tried to eat the cold dinner so

that I give it back to her, warm and mine, but I could not. If she should reach inside my chest, a hand between my ribs, and take what's feeling there!

“Really, it's my fault—one has to learn the news eventually. I don't imagine you are an exception, as modern guests go. It was my confusion. It is just my pain at learning, and you have not been an especially kind teacher. But now that I have learned, let me reassure you: stay as long as you need. I'm not going to cast you out, not even to see you face the streets you so contempt. But when you do go, kindly *leave*.”

I would have liked to show her what I saw. The cold dinner, yes, being sloughed off into plastic containers and covered with foil. I would have liked to show her the gardener carrying them into his home and placing them before his wife and children, I among them, the gardener's youngest child. If she could only have seen how I sat at that low table in the searchlight of a bare, swinging bulb, gorging myself on that cold dinner, taking it into my body. I want her to know how I have incorporated everything I took, and if I took it cold, that I have made it warm in the oven of my fever, oh, that I could give her that, I who am the gardener's child showed up at the master's home.

The longer I sat to her in silence, the more I felt a beggar myself. If I could not give, then I needed time to show her how to take it back, but if I waited longer here she might be compelled to give again and even worse. She was still eating, so I, who had bounded in wishing to speak like lovers, would need to leave. I was glad to have somewhere to go.

The bus heading out to the exurbs had forward facing seats and an accordion midsection. This allowed it to make tight turns while we were still in the city, during which the passengers in the front half could not resist turning to look at those in the back, as they seemed for a moment about to break off from one another. It was a natural, slinky movement, and I grew so accustomed to it that, while the buildings dulled and shrunk to residences, then trees, then grass, I was able to lighten my mood a little by looking at the hard-bodied, unbending vehicles on the road below. When a funeral procession at one point halted our journey, I nearly laughed out loud at the sight of a hearse turning a corner. Had the rain not stopped early in the bus ride, I would have thought it skidding. I kept myself distracted with its obscene memory until my stop came.

The town, although only a half an hour out of the city, had an entirely different look about it. Of course, I had come through many similar towns on the train ride in, but that which meets the train at the platform makes for a distorted cohort.

It seemed that the chain restaurants and stores from the city had only barely reached this town, confined as they were to a single strip mall near the turnoff. Past this commercial plaza

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was a stretch of local businesses. The street was too narrow for parking, so few cars came this far down the road except to pass through, but a considerable local population mingled on the sidewalks. The road sloped downhill as one continued into (and soon through) this main stretch, and at the bottom of the hill joined a bridge over a canyon off into the woods. Once inside the trees on the other side of the bridge, the road rose again and turned off into a switcher's hillside pass.

Once I found the street signs (brass plates fixed to corner buildings), it didn't take long to find my friend's house. Only a quarter mile or so out of town in a flat, pastoral neighborhood, the house was boxed with the sort of white walls that suggest an interior courtyard. My friend was

around the side of the house, kneeling with a child by a flower bed. She saw me approaching and waved, saying something into the child's ear. After a few seconds' contemplation, the child waved too. It had small, drunken hands.

The house proved to have not just a courtyard but skylights, so that one entered without feeling to have come inside. To compensate for this free passage, the cabinets, closets, and drawers were fit hermetic plumb in the modern fashion, so that a second, truer, interior was created for the house's possessions. We ate lunch at one end of a twelve foot dining table, like so many close knit apostles: my friend, her husband, their child, and I. The food was filling, clean, and I suspected much of it to have been store-bought—the spreads, certainly, and even possible the regional casserole.

I spoke with the child at great length on varied and difficult subjects. The modern schooling system, whose standing appears to correlate inversely with its region's, had done such marvelous things with this specimen that I felt my opinion of the country lowering. Not only did we discuss railroads, bridges, and ghosts, but when the topic of my recent scientific breakthrough arose, as I had dreaded it would, it was the child's response that gave me the greatest edification. On the potential adoption by the medical establishment of my somatic heart, the child gave me a sudden look of acknowledgement, or recalculation, in the transparent way that children tally their judgements across their face, so that I saw some new idea manufactured there, to order, in its nose. I would have liked to continue naming strange ideas (a railroad bridge! a ghost train!) into the child's head all afternoon, had I not already promised my friend a walk of the grounds.

We set out across the trampled areas of the meadow overgrowing the land behind their house, supposedly en route to the town's lake. I inquired after my friend's research and work, and, as a reward, learned about it. The exact details are hashed away somewhere deep by now, but I recall that it involved placebos and/or homeopathy and almost certainly organ failure. I have no head for the heady, but it seemed to me the practical, bodily work of the sort that my intuition fixes upon. She was appreciative of my praise, and directed a few personal questions to me. It had become clear that she was not going to push the issue of my withheld methods, and I relaxed, surprised to not regret my visit.

As I permitted myself and her a brief account of my upbringing (details I have and will continue to spare you), she diverted us into a sculpture garden. It was at the edge of their property, abutting the tree line beyond which, I imagined, lay the lake.

The sculptures were mostly stone, carved into angular abstract forms. They had been given the hollow look of closed metal shapes, although, of course, in stone. Though certainly hundreds of pounds, each looked light, tippable, and insecure on its foundation. My friend

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explained to me, with no small regional pride, that these were artifacts of a local artistic movement of a few decades ago, a group called The Singers.

The Singers had developed out of a backlash to a Bauhaus revival, unified by a common rejection of any sense that an artist should cater to their medium. Whatever is represented in art, The Singers claimed, is already being represented in a medium other than its original. That clay should only represent clay or paintings the texture of canvas was, for The Singers, to remove the only real achievement of art: working against the medium. In their time (and here I heard the pride rise again) they were considered radicals—or reactionaries, depending on the newspaper or

the weather, and though the movement didn't last very long, it is often cited as one of the only conservative movements in non-representative art.

Listening to her informal lecture, the stone began to look increasingly constrained to me. The unnatural shapes really *did* seem to disagree with the material, which grimaced like a horse goose-stepping in an overtightened harness. I felt I was touring a prison, or a museum, or a zoo (they are the same feeling)—although, this was a museum-zoo-prison of the sort one finds in the animal hall of a natural history museum, only someone had stuffed all the animals with another animal in mind. The lion's pelt had been stuffed to make the shape of a giraffe, and the giraffe's hung loose over a crocodile armature. It produced a conceptual motion sickness within my low chest such as creates news of an unexpected death.

Rather than communicate such feelings to my well-meaning friend, I thought to mention the name of my host, who I knew to be a sculptor active at around the time of The Singers. My friend did not recognize the name, but if she was living and working in this area during those years, the odds were high. It would have been difficult *not* to be—less as a matter of probability, and more due to the conformation power the group held. In the house, my friend said, she had a collection of art books, and she promised to look my host's name up when we returned.

The path to the pond was straight and newly paved. Probably, it had also been recently installed, though the woods were thin and did not much need a path to be traveled through. I turned to my friend and asked about the child, in whom my interest had not lessened. She explained about the particularly insane bent of local schools, and we together admired how well their little one seemed to be getting along in the system. My compliments brought a full-faced pride to her parental body, and she seemed to take them (as I meant them) as directed as much at her as the impressive child.

When we came to a gate in the path, beyond which one could see the stillish surface of lake water, she stopped. Attached to the gate (through which we would have progressed onto a dirt path that followed the lake's edge), was a sheet of paper. She read it to herself while I looked around, trying to determine whether it was an artificial lake. The rock that looked to make up the lake bed revealed itself along a peninsular outcropping, and its pale silver color seemed to me unnatural to a lake. Everything else, though, indicted this was not only a natural lake but an ancient one—the strange rocks were calcium-crusting and overgrown with algae, the embankment had fallen away in places to reveal strata of sludge and humus, into which had been drawn fragments of rock and some anonymous fiber.

The note, my friend told me with a sigh, said that the lake was closed for the month. Some water quality authority had discovered an abnormal level of a certain microbe in the water and gone about posting signs on all the entrance points. Of course, the gate was more ceremonial

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than secure, only as wide as the path we had come in on, but I, too, felt it impassible. My friend apologized and I refused it, for in truth it mattered little to me. I had seen the lake well enough from where we were.

Inside, she took me to the living room where the art books were. As she went through the volume in which she figured my host's name would show up, if anywhere, I paged idly through another, smaller book on national artists. The first half of the book showed icons and oil portraits, after which the landowners joined their land and then, in the second half, left the frame

entirely for a series of landscapes. The countryside here, which differed so greatly from that of my own country, was given in beautiful detail. A number of water scenes fell especially close in my own memory.

She succeeded in finding a short section about my host, deep into a comprehensive volume on *The Singers*, and as she read to me I continued to examine the landscapes in my lap. Although beautiful, I realized they did not look idyllic, or comfortable, or even habitable. Human traces had been removed from the images.

My host, the sculptor, had apparently struggled to stay in with the more formal side of the movement. She produced a great deal of works, but mostly for commercial use (in restaurants, public spaces, or sold to private collections) so very few of her pieces exist in the museum world. There were only two pictures in the book, and the sculptures did not have any major impression upon me. It is not a sculpture's strongest showing, I imagine, to appear in a small photograph on the bottom of a page, scaled only by the listed dimensions.

In my own book, I turned to a new page and made a noise. It was the painting from the dining room. There was the rock, and there were the people, and here at the edges were the trees. I told my friend, as though adding my own information to the biography she had just read, that my host must, in fact, be a collector of art as well as a producer of it, for she had this painting hung in her dining room.

This surprised my friend a great deal. She began to speak quickly about the significance of this painting (which must have been by a famous artist, or perhaps was unattributed folk art, I didn't quite follow her explanation), and it became clear that it meant a great deal to her even that I had seen it in person. She asked me questions that I had no way to answer about what it was like to see up close and what I thought of it, and eventually I relayed to her (it was all that I had) something of the experience I'd had the previous night.

This, too, had a profound effect on her. I feigned as though it didn't mean so much, although even in telling the story I had began to feel that lovely bile rise once again behind my eyes. Strange, self-convincing thoughts as accompany the smell of alcohol before the taste—the return of a strange desire. We spoke, but did not look up from the picture. Once my entire story had been told, she suggested something to me I had long since thought of, and her suggested alteration came like my own voice for following.

I invited her to come see the painting in person, as I was suddenly resolved to go and see it again myself. She agreed, and we left in her car just before sunset.

It was dark when we arrived at the foreigner's house. The house was silent, and no lights had been left on. I led my friend into the dining room and turned on the floor lamps until the

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painting was fully illuminated. Then, I shut all the doors, pulled out two chairs, and took the painting off the wall.

I sat with the painting resting on my knees and my friend beside me. Together, we looked at the scene again, closer now than any museum or print would allow. I was thinking of landscapes, of lakes and ravines, and I focused into my own cavity to hear my heart beat. It was already running with anticipation. I would not be needing the brakes.

It takes less effort to accelerate the heart than it does to slow it. It starts healthy and all I have to do is listen to the athletic footfall, like a horse's trot, and it starts to encourage itself. I am

still controlling the contractions, tensing to stop and pull the blood through, but it's so easy to run it like that, as I was then, on its own goodwill.

My friend knew what I was doing, and had placed her fingers on my wrist to monitor. This, too, helped me elevate, for now an unusual shame was available for motivation. With my heart watched, I felt completely aware to a public emotion, as though I'd swallowed a string of lights.

Intubated and heart racing, I began again to study the painting.

I could not focus on the figures. They were small, even smaller up close, and the few brushstrokes that posed their limbs and lips now seemed too vague to carry anything meaningful. Instead, I looked, closely, at the general shape. The stone, which was only slightly inclined from near to far edge, appeared to be touching the ground on all sides. It was definitely inclined, so the back edge where the golden cage was came ten or so feet off the ground, but towards the front sides the lip began to touch the forest floor directly. Whatever happened at the nearest edge, the initial ramp, was obscured by the trees at that edge of the clearing, since the perspective came from the monumental angle, pyramid to workers, with all the plane-window tilt-shift that a high angle implies about the ground. I let the mystery of the close end of the stone ramp demand something of me, and my heart worked harder to answer it.

In my frustration, which I was watching tie itself through drawer-handles in my head, I examined for the first time the trees. There was limited undergrowth, only a few finger-bushes here and there, and the ground was covered by soft needles. The trees, though not young, were neither tightly spaced nor thick, so the forest would have been easily navigable and difficult to hide in were it not for the shade from the canopy.

For the canopy was dense. The painting had it as one variegated surface, above which nothing existed, and had anything existed above the trees, it would have seen nothing through them. My heart chased it again, riding a flush behind my skin. Only birds would have known to move through the trees, from the dry world to the other one, where the figures were.

There was now speed in my thoughts. I could not observe them, for they had taken into the observational layer—or, what I mean to say is that I could no longer see past their teeming mass. The present pace of the act kept up blur at the high level, so that nothing internal could be seen. They therefore appeared completely cohesive, more like natural speech than the actual clutter of thought. I would think of something by looking at it, and could no longer separate the one from the other, as though conjuring examples from type. I could not see the factory floor of

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my mind; it had swarmed over with sliding scales. Disfigured caricatures, like a portrait from a silhouette, so that a palm is a hand with no fingers.

Now that I could not look at the figures, who no longer seemed living—or lively, at least—I kept looking at the landscape. There was no water here, but it was wet below, for the people that lived there—or who were lively there—took the dust into their mouths and cells and breathed out vapor. The vapor climbed within the canopy and collected on the underside of leaves and branches, and the creatures fought this loss until they died as shrunken as raisins. Deep, cabbage grooves folded the world's skin into a compressed form: the brain the next children grew off.

A group of people are out ice fishing on a frozen lake, but the lake is shallow. They work great augers into the ice and, without realizing it, tunnel into the bedrock. The rock, they did not know it, was soft as clay. The stone gives easily at a confident touch, following the mutual pleasure that binds wrists together. A strong force between the self-same things and the inside of a hole makes flat to the rim.

I knew then that there was no transaction. There is the photograph of money changing hands, it is still with me, but look at it for as long as you like. Show me when the money changes hands! I see two people who have decided to hold onto the same paper, hold onto it until it becomes comical and loses its original ownership. Here, as the oversize check goes void, I saw the single surface as a covering, finally and again, everything knit into a tapestry tighter than quickness, and I was under the tapestry with my friend.

No longer could I differentiate heart beats; there was just an even roll. One could listen altered moments into the sequence until the whole beginning shifted, like staring at bathroom tile until a new dominant, super-tile emerged. (Even in the basest human moments, there go the empires, rise and fall on the accidental chest. So grandiose! the monarchs beat their wings against the porcelain and the private chamber rises, oh, to a minaret. Look: the stylite passes down a stinking pail and notices how it swings above the acolytes. The rope looks broken from up here.)

Beats elided and disconnected in a kaleidoscopic fervor, and I could not look away from myself. I still felt love, but now it had split, atomized into medusilac wave-rays—I was an emitter, constant, and I knew the accident to be harmless, finally harmless, and wherever there were walls, wherever anyone had built walls, I would be able to return to myself, and that if I cast a stone over a river, it would cross at the universal speed.

There, I was sustained by a bridge of collisions, when near touches near, and I was looking at the golden cage, a bird-cage of bent light, lines that couldn't stay parallel, that finally arced into the other's terminal, and inside there was no figure and there was no hole. The only bird, captured by a festival, was a bucket, essentially, glinting through the bars. I must have had the light in my hands, for they were burning like a neck in the sun, observed from above—was I holding the bars in my hands? To bend them back away from each other, to mutually unsheath these ingrown reeds, I am trying to pull the hands apart, so that one is taking and one is giving, Oh! but I no longer feel I can look at the neck of anything. Here, (or there, I lose my tenses which make place) I am back in the ravine, but deeper. My type-examples, generated degenerates, they have led me down the grade to a nadir. Never again will I survey. Why, not

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even the lowest table; the vibration that defaults to lower frequencies will become inaudible then senseless, and I—and I—I heard a door unlock.

I looked up from the painting and let my heart rate fall away from it. My arms and chest, especially at the joints, throbbed like purple bruises. But the front door opened. My friend let go of my wrist and we listened. Someone was moving about in the front room. I stood up, legs aching, and put the painting down on the floor, propped against the wall. My friend stood next to me. There were more footsteps from the front hall, then the shutting of the front door—even the lock!

We walked along the floorboard joins to the doorway, and cracked it.

The dining room was off of the central hallway, so I couldn't see the intruder, and neither they me. Staying close to the wall, I was able to see down the hall at a sharp angle, so that only a little section of the foyer was visible to me.

I had been looking at the painting for too long, and my eyes couldn't manage to readjust completely. There was a shape, moving to the window boxes left of the front door. As it moved, the same few lights struck different parts of the form until the entire human shape had been established in my immediate visual memory. The figure, silhouetted against a less-touched black, was not that of my host. It loped between areas of the front room and something by the door—a bag! The artworks and valuables that decorated the windowsills and cabinet heads were being stolen and we watched this burglary as an inconvenience. It felt like a reprimand, a cruel one, and the defensive anger of the chastised was fast joining my blurred momentum.

I do not remember thinking anything. My heart, although it had come down slightly, still drove like a wild motor. Thoughts present themselves for observation and interpretation, like passing clouds; these ran at a full bypass: this was chemical knowledge. My heart, my friend, we all agreed with the natural charge, and so obeyed as much as any casualties obey their casualty.

So, taking up the iron doorstopper, I crept into the hallway with my friend at my left shoulder. We advanced into the front room slowly. The thief was too absorbed in his work to notice us. I stood for a moment under of the final doorway and watched him pass by a few times, well within striking distance. I controlled my breath and he swung, back and forth, in his work.

And I was almost thinking, when the pendulum crossed my path; and what I was almost thinking, what I was trying to think, I cracked open across the thief's head. It gave easily and crumpled to the floor, already reduced to a simple sack, detained in transit. It slumped theatrically into the light, but I did not need to see the face to know, so I did not look. When I had almost thought it, I did, but it was only ever the neck below.

We acted quickly. My friend wrapped a white bath towel around the dead man's head before any blood had reached the carpet while I gathered the instruments strewn across the front rooms and put them back in his bag. Watering cans and shears, bottles of fertilizer and special gravel. Once everything had been collected, I led my friend outside. She dragged the body through the door by the legs. Once it was clear onto the porch, I locked the door and took up the other end of the gardener by the hands.

We walked, made the awkward long turn around the side of the house as though carrying a pane of glass, and stopped just short of the border with the park at the small stone well. She put the legs she was carrying in first so that suddenly the gardener, or the gardener's body, sat on the

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other side of the well. I was still holding his hands, and I looked to him, my bride and already husband, wrapped like a survivor on the news.

I pulled him towards me and let him fall. If there was a sound, I did not hear it. Perhaps he got stuck some ways down.

I was almost thinking, and now I caught something. I would have liked to find a frog, just then, jumping about in the grasses, so that I could drop that frog down the well after him, as company and so that I would not have to go. It would have been good for the gardener to have a frog down there, no matter what it meant for the frog, but the grass here was too dry—perhaps, yes! perhaps, if there were frogs here at all, they would have already taken up residence in the

unused well. Then they might at least crawl in the gardener's shirt pocket, and flick their tongues across his crushed head, and make such damp merriment as suits a confused and willing visitor.

I hissed down into its mouth—to scatter any locals—and I dropped the iron down.