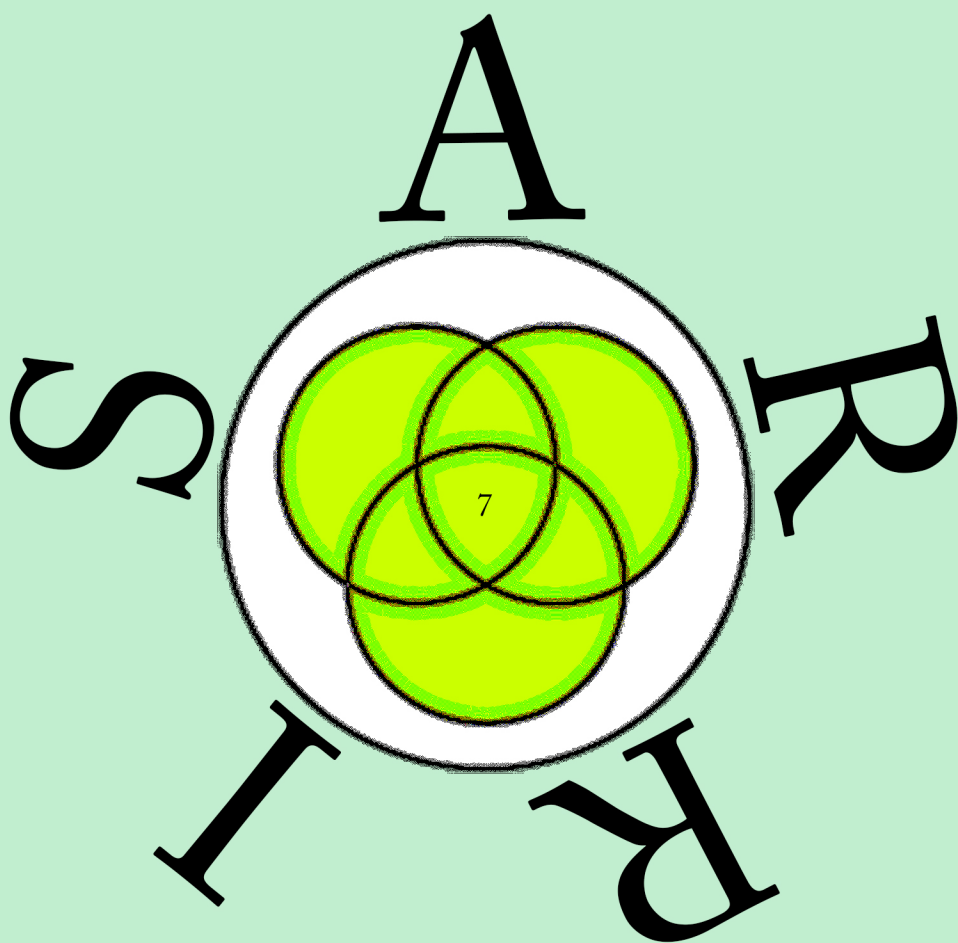


Vernon Howl



our Blue as in sad



I look out my window. The window just seems like a random square cut out of one of the walls in a room in this house. It doesn't seem like a real window, or a window in a considered "window" kind of way. And I see people below, mostly walking on the paths. Crisscrossing on paths or otherwise, these people are, but mostly on paths. Outside this window, I see these people I will never meet. But we are meeting in a way like this, my looking at them. Most of the people are walking on neatly constructed stone paths. Some other people, though, they are walking on the grass. But they are merely finding their way to the same stone paths, even if they just touch a few of the stones on the stone paths on the way to touch more grass on the way to where they are ultimately heading. Most likely this is what these people are doing. They are all heading somewhere. Even if somewhere is nowhere, and that's a trite, mostly meaningless idea.

"Hi my name is," the radio says. This is the rap artist Eminem, which is a pseudonym but also a mangled version of an idea that is so close to an idea that my boyfriend has had that it makes me sick. Why is the radio even on, I wonder. Who turned it on. What is a radio, my future children will scream.

My boyfriend is not here. I am at college. I left him crying by the side of a high school football field in New Jersey, the field where he played high school football. The tears were mine. I gave them to him. He did not seem to want them. He seemed angry that I gave them to him, my tears. He is my ex-boyfriend now. Haha, I think.

**I don't know why we went to the football field
to do that.**

I am at college in upstate New York. I like architecture. I love the buildings here. Walking in and out of the buildings is always such a wonderful thing to do. Wordlessly marveling the architecture in a way that suggest "I like architecture." Honestly, this leaves you so unconsciously appreciative, when you have adapted and fully realized this personality trait. A glaze of wonderment will be plastered on your face without you even knowing. Such a hot glaze, a good look for any season, it will shine a light on all the people who see it. The "not thinking" mode of thinking is a famous brand of thinking, especially here in lovely upstate New York. He is not my boyfriend anymore but he will forever be a person who used to play high school football and is prone to depression.

I have conversations with people. Why not? College students, graduate students, sometimes random adults who live in this town, I will talk to anybody. I don't tell him anything about this. When he calls me, he calls with a worried, wandering mind and a quivering voice. I let him talk, and I listen. I do listen. He asks things. I listen, and then I lie. We sometimes talk for hours. I like pinot grigio. I think, I am smarter than him. I *am* smarter than him. When I hear him whimper on the phone, I hear only a stupid sadness. I once possessed a brain dumb enough to consume and spit out such a sadness. Not that long ago, I possessed this brain. But I destroyed it. The sadness of youth is something I learned how to chew up and to swallow and to digest and to regurgitate it back into all the food being served at the high school cafeteria. To look at that sadness and say, not only did I chew you up and put you down deep in my stomach. But I puked you out in public so that all my classmates could see your deadness and eat you up.

I once whispered my deepest, darkest secret to his best friend. I wonder if he knows about that. I think he knows and maybe he doesn't care. And I feel indifferent about that, his not caring. And also his knowing or not knowing, either way, either/or.

It's the fall. I have conversations with college students. I like getting drunk on pinot grigio and talking to anyone. My grades are good and I like white wine. Autumn at a private college in upstate New York is lovely.

He got mad, really angry. When I left him during the summer to see my bipolar ex-boyfriend. My other ex-boyfriend, that is. The one that isn't him. I visited him for just a few days in a hospital in upstate New York. My bipolar ex-boyfriend has curly hair and a small sports car. We dated my freshman year. He did not have bipolar disorder then, just the small sports car.

I didn't like that he got mad when I left to go see my bipolar ex-boyfriend in a hospital in upstate New York. He yelled at me. Both ex-boyfriends play music. One plays guitar and the other plays piano. People realized the ex-boyfriend with the small sports car had bipolar disorder because he did not sleep for several days. He told me, "I could not go to sleep. I had to write the perfect song." Then he said something about knowing he was going to be famous.

Everything is made of stone in upstate New York.

When he drove the UHaul up here with all my stuff he seemed really happy. We had pancakes in the middle of the day. On my bed with no sheets, surrounded by boxes, we ate at least seventeen pancakes each. The room felt dusty and things hung in the haze, microscopic things that seemed bad in the way things without age do. The bed had no sheets on it. The bed was next to a window. He was worried. He said, "Do you think people can see us?" We could see people walking on the paths below. I was on top of him, feeding him a pancake, when I told him, "No, not in daylight. The sun is reflecting off the glass." He is so stupid.

People can see people outside when it is day.

People can see people inside when it is night.

He tells me that he just spent twenty minutes curled up in a ball inside his closet for no reason. I have no comment or retort for this given piece of information. I have no idea why he would do something like that. Or why he would tell me. I just say his name in a voice I know that he likes.

I think of him in the place where he is and then I try not to think of him at all.

I probably have had three hundred times as many conversations with other people as he has. He is pathetic. I gave him a tattoo once on a trip we took to Boston. I was driving when I did it. He asked me to do it. I didn't mind, but it was hard to concentrate on the road with that hot tattoo needle burning into his skin. It seemed like a good idea but when he vomited from the pain of the needle and the vomit went all over my hand and the cupholder and other parts of the interior of the car, it immediately felt bad and not so much like a good idea at all. I steered the car with my left hand. We did not get in a car crash and die. I thought, that was the first time I've seen you puke. The tattoo was a picture of a man puking all over a woman inside of a car.

When we got to the hotel room, we painted the walls almost immediately. It was our natural imitation of what two people our age are supposed to do naturally. It was the worst hotel paint job ever. We painted the walls jet black. Painting was never that good with him. He never gave me a birthday gift. I told a friend that he never gave me a birthday gift. That friend told a friend who told a friend who told my ex-boyfriend that he never gave me a birthday gift. I'm not sure if he knew that or not. That he had never given me an birthday gift. He never even asked what day my birthday was. I think I hate him.

**He once motioned like he was going to hit me.
I am better than him. He is bitter and sad. He
could never hit anyone. He is so cynical and
somewhat overweight.**



Time passes and the seasons change.

When the next summer begins, I go back home. I leave upstate New York and go back home to New Jersey where I grew up. There is more cement than stone in New Jersey compared to upstate New York, in my opinion. Cement is not stone. Cement is not stone. And gum and fruit flies and fun cocktails and sand are not cement, which is not stone.

When summer comes, we get back together. He has lost a lot of weight. Why the flying fuck not, I think. I feel like I am maybe five pounds heavier. I feel dirty and gray, a vague gray transparent, only thicker than see-through. It feels like I have a sexually transmitted disease that was given to me by a panda bear. But I do not have a sexually transmitted disease that was given to me by a panda bear.

I still think it is pathetic, him getting jealous over my bipolar ex-boyfriend with the small sports car who I visited in the hospital. Among other things I find pathetic about him, so many things, a ton of things, like a football field worth of things if every single blade of grass were a thing. But he has lost a lot of weight, this is true. He is familiar and occasionally funny. His standup comedy career is going bonkers. We get back together.

He picks at his cuticles relentlessly. Then he rubs them against his lips. He rubs his picked-at cuticles against his lips because of stress and maybe, possibly, depression. Whenever I catch him with his hands at his face, I swat them away. It's an unconscious act, this thing, the picking. Not my swatting, my swatting is intentional and sometimes cruel. It is sad. Life is sad. I hate him and he annoys me. He has a pathology, several of them. He bets on sports and drinks too much.

It is fairly clear that our time together is coming to an end forever.

Before the summer is over, he tells me that my best friend tried to get him to do math equations with her. I don't believe him. But I find out later that it's true.

I find out that he was willing to solve the math equations, but he couldn't help her because he is horrible at math because he is dumb.

He is one of the worst human beings in the world.

Back at school in upstate New York, I meet my future husband. I meet him at a bar, a local college bar. He is from Pennsylvania. He is nice. We have a great time giving dogs haircuts together. He is at least five inches shorter than me. I am in love. We have sex. His grandfather fought in the Revolutionary War. We have anal sex sometimes.



I am a wedding planner now. Years have passed since my own wedding, which was lovely. Being a wedding planner is my job. I don't work much. I have a job though.

People occasionally call me to plan their weddings. Then I plan their weddings. I have a husband. And he wants children. I do not know if I want children. I think, I don't really want children around me. My younger sister ran for President of the United States when she was thirteen and lost to a ten-inch tall ceramic statue of an old west sheriff.

He does not have a social media presence, my ex-boyfriend. I do. I am on all of the social networks and I have a better-than-average amount of followers and friends. Do you know what that number is? That number is probably different for everyone. I seldom wonder if he has children, or a wife, or a girlfriend, or adopted alien kids from outer space, or a headache, or thirty-seven pairs of sneakers. I wonder about these things only sometimes. I wonder about these things because I have no way of knowing these things instantaneously because he has chosen not to have a social media presence. His face is a painful bullseye among the black dots when I close my eyes, or right after I open them.

My husband says, “Let’s take a vacation. Let’s have a child.” We get a divorce.

I am single and only thirty-one. Only thirty-one, I think. My marriage lasted four years. My ex-husband went on to start a chain of dog-grooming establishments. We had a great time giving dogs haircuts together in my memory but in actuality we always cut the dogs pretty badly with scissors and many of the dogs died from loss of blood. Now I go out to bars and look for men to groom dogs with. The memory of the deep red of the dead dogs is on fire within me. My ex-boyfriend liked dogs. I made him stop liking dogs every time he tried to pet a dog. He never gave me a birthday gift. He tried his best. I miss him so much. He got so good at not liking dogs that he eventually replaced his urge to pet them with a violent, closed fist punch to their skulls.

I go to upstate New York with an old friend.
We walk around the campus and see the
stones, each one touching another one. I want
to go out to the woods away from all the
stones. I hate architecture.

I look at the stone paths and I see things
breaking. Broken things and glass. I see blood
not soaking into the ground, but turning
black, black hardened blood all over the
stones from the heads of drunk people who
fell on them.

We go to a bar. We meet undergraduate
males who are all studying to become poets. I
let one recite poetry to me in his dorm room.
He does not wear a condom when he recites
the poetry. There is a poster on the wall of a
band I have never heard of.

I am glad I did not have kids with my
ex-husband.

**The poems of the undergraduate male which
he put inside my body do not result in my
giving birth to a pancake machine, or twin
pancake machines, or quintuplet pancake
machines, or a litter of things and stuff I will
only grow to resent.**

**We leave the stones and they are touching
and fondling and fucking all the other stones
in upstate New York. Most likely this is the
case and the true life of all stones. It's gross,
but also true.**



Life is getting tricky. I have never been depressed because I have the amazing ability to always feel happiness. It's genetic, I think. My ex-husband is so short, maybe three-feet tall. He has an average-sized SUV. He has this SUV still unless something horrible happened to it in the years since our divorce, like being involved in a car crash or teenagers spray-painting swastikas on it. I wonder if I have a pathology that will strike me down dead one day, like the thing with his cuticles, like people who cannot sleep because they are famous musicians but only inside their minds and not in reality. People who think like that should just be in jail or just go out into the woods to die.

Go die out in the woods, I think. Away from any buildings, die. Away from all of the stone, and cement, and wrecked metal and other stuff, die. I don't know.

What is my pathology, I wonder.



When I finally see him again, nearly a decade has passed. He does not look thirty-three. He looks younger than I do. "No," he says. "I don't think about suicide. Not anymore. I maintain stability through a series of secret practices I can never divulge."

We are eating dinner at Ruby Tuesday. We both order cheeseburgers. "I have an eight-year old kid," he says. I lean over and kiss him. "But it isn't biologically mine." We kiss again. We are still waiting for our burgers. It is not a crowded Ruby Tuesday.

This Ruby Tuesday is only marginally crowded.

**But it is a good amount of people inside a
Ruby Tuesday for a weekday lunch, I think.**

I feel that thing that I know is great. I feel so many things. I cried when he licked a mouse we found in the kitchen one night, long ago. He didn't stop licking the mouse when I cried, but the licking didn't last too long.

I am getting drunk on wine at a Ruby Tuesday in New Jersey in the middle of the day.

"My son's name is Macco," he says. "He's blue."

"He's blue?"

"Yeah." He takes a large bite of his cheeseburger. "Methemoglobinemia. It's a blood disorder. And so his skin looks blue."

"Oh. I didn't think you meant *sad*, like blue as in sad." I didn't think he meant that. I don't think he believes me when I tell him I didn't think he meant that, but I say it just the same. I actually did think he meant blue as in sad. I'm a liar.

The thing between us that is great is not really love. But it is big enough to move us and it does. It moves us outside of the Ruby Tuesday and into his Honda Accord. We drive to a wine factory and make wine by stomping on the grapes. Is this why I wore a skirt, I think. I never wear skirts but I instinctively knew we would be making wine by stomping on grapes like Lucy. The wine is not very good. It tastes like feet. It tastes great. I laugh awkwardly. This is so great.

We drive back to the Ruby Tuesday and our food is waiting for us. We eat every bite. Our waitress has a knowing, peculiar look, which we ignore. She turns into a bird of prey when her shift ends and hunts mice. One of the mice has a disease inside and she dies after eating it. That particular Ruby Tuesday will close due to lack of business in nine months.

He tells me about his girlfriend, about how she was murdered. They were together for five years, he says. He says he doesn't know why they never got married but he does know why she was murdered. His brain seems stupid, like when I knew him before. When he talks about his murdered girlfriend he is like a pool without any water in it. This pool is trying to convince me to dive into it, to swan dive right in, to use the diving board and shatter my skull. Nothing bad will happen, the pool says. He genuinely does not know a thing. I think, it can't be that complicated. His girlfriend was killed by a psychopath who used her body for sex after she was dead.

My family got a pool right after we broke up the first time. He never swam in it. I have never met a person who ended up dead because they were murdered by a psychopath, or a person who knew a person like that. And I have never met a person who didn't love taking a nice dip in a pool, more importantly.

"Two years before she died, we were *awarded* Macco," he says. He says the word "awarded" with air quotes. He puts his two hands out in front of his body and with two fingers on each hand, he makes that gesture when he says the word "awarded."

"A few years before that, she had signed some papers. Her aunt and uncle had a bunch of foster children. Some of which they adopted. This one, Macco, had no chance of going back with his real parents. Crackheads, really bad crackheads. Or good ones, I suppose. Big time crack addicts" He laughs. Haha. "Good at doing crack," he says. "Imagine that."

"Yeah."

I get it. I get everything.

"So my girlfriend signed on to be his guardian in case anything ever happened to her aunt and uncle."

"What happened to her aunt and uncle," I ask.

"Car crash. Died instantly."

We take Macco to a park a few weeks later. It is October. It is the first real autumn day of the fall. The autumn days in upstate New York are probably laughing at our autumn day here in New Jersey. Oh well, they can eat shit, those autumn days. I'm here now. Fuck them.

"We would have been good in the fall," he says. "You always seemed to escape me then." Is this real? Is this a real conversation? Is this is how he really talks to other people? Upstate New York, I think. Autumn days, I think.

People murder people, sometimes.

**People say the wrong things in conversation
nearly all the time.**

**Some people have pools and other people do
not have pools.**



"Are you his girlfriend?" Macco asks me. I don't know what to say. I end up saying, "He doesn't call you Dad?" I don't even address the kid, or I can't bring myself to. I pretend he isn't even there. I can't even look at him. His blue face is horrifying.

"He doesn't call me anything come to think of."

Macco runs off towards the giant red slide and tire swings. My vision blurs when he gets five yards away. His little odd-colored self is like an animal you think you see in the woods but is really just a tree or a plant. I lack object permanence with this human, this little Macco thing. A Macco is not a person, I decide. Blue but not really sad, not real and not really anything. Still blue, though, I think, always and forever blue.

Go around to the other side of that jungle gym, I think, trying to summon some sorcery. Yes, you are dead. You are dead now. I am a child as well. You are gone forever. Forever young, that's me. I'm very carefree but I can think serious thoughts and compel people and children alike to do things with my mind.



I hold his hand. I hug him. He watches me. Macco watches his fake father and I. It is the same park, a month or so on. I hug my ex-boyfriend who is now my boyfriend again, and I also hug his son. I hug his blue son. I really do adore him. I mean, them. Them, Macco, me and him, us. I hug little Macco's blue body until it bursts a blue goo. Sometimes I do, sure.

Later, we are at the mall. It is white. Mostly all white and logos, the white mall with logos is. And Macco's blueness sticks out something fierce.

"Do you remember when I drove you to the airport. When you left to meet your parents in Italy," he asks me.

"Yes," I say. "I think it was France, but yes."

"You were crying so much."

I was. I remember crying, in the airport like we were inside a movie. I think about my tears, my tears in the airport. I think about my airport tears at the mall. I was all fantastic, movie tears back then. When I wanted them. When I wanted them to be. When I wanted them to be for him.

"It made me smarter when you cried," he says. "The more you cried, the smarter I got. Isn't that fucked up?"

"Not really. Maybe a little. I think I knew, actually. I could see you getting smarter."

“Yeah.”

We get food at the mall food court. He gets a hot dog and so does Macco. I get a salad at a different mall food court restaurant. The mall is all white light and fake smiles and logos. So white and perfect in tiny flickers, the mall exists and there has never been a better building. Macco isn't a blight against the white. He's a highlight.

We are a couple. The food we eat together is fine. Not bad at all, I think. At some point he tells me a story. I am drunk off wine when he does.

“You were away for a week. I think you were in France. When you got home, I came over. I parked the minivan at the bottom of your driveway. We started to brush each other’s teeth in the minivan. You wanted to brush your own teeth, but I persuaded you to let us brush each other’s teeth. The whole week you were gone I didn’t brush my teeth at all. I wanted to save up all my dirty teeth and bad breath and then make you brush them back to normal, back to clean. Isn’t that fucked up? I don’t know why I wanted to do that. It seems so mean now. I don’t know why I’m telling you this, either.”

“It doesn’t seem mean.” All I feel for him is the thing that isn’t love. I feel it in my toenails and it is gigantic, the biggest size it’s ever been.



Later on, he kills himself. He jumps into a freezing river and his body is never found. The suicide note in his car is a bore, a real doozy of a snoozer, I think. I actually think those words, that phrase:

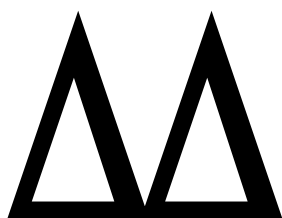
The image shows the phrase "A Real Doozy of a Snoozer" written in a highly decorative, cursive script. The letters are large and ornate, with many loops and flourishes, particularly in the 'D' and 'S'. The text is centered on a plain, light-colored background.

That phrase is so dumb. His dumbness has worn off on me and now he is dead. They said the suicide note was propped up against the interior of the windshield of his Honda Accord, like a paid-for-parking receipt. I read it over a third time.

I'm so sorry. I'm not sure if I seemed good or not. But I have to do this. I don't think I have anything else to give. Please do whatever you think best about Macco. My parents could take him. I really do love you. Goodbye.

The suicide note is his life. A perfect representation, or consolidation of everything he ever did, everything he ever stood for. He printed it out on a slightly heavier stock of paper than normal. Helvetica, I think, is the font he chose to use. It's set in a normal-sized font, probably twelve-point.

I crumple it up but not so much. Not so much because who cares. But also because of the paper stock. It has a weight to it, and I am weak right now. I just walk over to the trash and drop it in. That's what I do with his suicide note. It's a thoughtless act. I think nothing.



Macco is thirteen and confused, confused and confusing and still all blaring color with his blue pelt. It seems almost purple now, purple with age. Like a fine wine, Macco grows into his color. Among all the white in this life, he especially shines. He screams with it in a beautiful, shy silence. Like an old person trying to listen to an oldies radio station with a crackling, hissing, fucked up speaker. Not being able to understand technology, or how cheap and easy it would be to fix the problem, to make it sound better, Macco is like that.

His sad eyes are pretty though. What do I do with you, I think. Macco, oh no. Macco, why? I keep him around, like a dog. And I feed him for many years.



After high school, he goes to the same college that I did. I have family money, one might say. He doesn't need to take out student loans or to become a hitman to pay for college. He is smarter than I am, and he is smarter than I ever was or will be. Upstate New York is kind to him, it seems, and he paints his toenails red in celebration. The kindness he receives makes *me* happy in turn. He is a math whiz, a genius maybe. Who knew?

**But then there is a scandal, an expulsion. He
is expelled because of a scandal involving sex.
He comes back home.**

I think, you are a sex fiend, Macco. But I never say, “you are a sex fiend, Macco.”

I look into his eyes and I think about sex. We end up having sex with each other. We become lovers. It is unfathomably wrong, my last act of survival. It seems so right. When we are vacationing in a five-star, all-inclusive Mexican resort, it feels this way.

His long blue fingers are a thing of beauty. They are not so blue compared to the rest of his body but maybe it is the same amount of blue. Either way, he has taken to painting his fingernails red as well.

When I grocery shop, I only think of him I am forty-one and I have only recently taken up grocery shopping. What fun it is. What fun I have been missing, seeing my Macco's face on the faces of all the labels of the various products on the shelves at the store. "Why are your hands a different blue than the rest of your body?" I ask him. He just grunts and rolls over. I go to the grocery store. I really enjoy it. He is so blue, I think.

I find out later that he was expelled for making threats and delivering a fake bomb to a classmate, a girl. It had nothing to do with sex. Well, not on the surface at least. They said the bomb was real and functional except for the explosive elements. Aren't we all, I think.

**He cries and tells me he's a virgin. Which is a
confusing thing to hear him say.**



I weed the cobblestone path outside our home until my fingers bleed. I trim the vines darting in and out of the lattice. A bird makes a loud and very annoying sound and I zone out. Perhaps I am a little drunk. What time is it? The landscapers gawk. I see their blurry, matching shirts and brown faces. I have removed my own shirt on the driveway. My middle-aged breasts flop and then hit the black pavement and burn in the sun. The landscapers are a giant caterpillar. Standing in a line, they make a giant caterpillar. The line is shifting, red and blurry and spotted brown. I see you, I think. I see you, caterpillar. They are curling around me, saying words. I will squash you under my foot, giant caterpillar, watch out. Macco comes to get me after a little while.

"I'm moving out," he says.

"Goodbye," I say.

I sell the house. And I move to upstate New York, a part of upstate New York that is not near any colleges. It isn't easy to find a part of upstate New York like that.

There is very little stone, or interesting architecture. Most of the stuff is made out of wood and some of it is crumbling around me. Like stone, it is crumbling, only much faster. Decaying is the better word. Life is full of decay. My life is full of earth now, and ruined wood. I do not know what to make of all this dirt, grass and wood. Earth is decay and it is so beautiful. What to do about my lawn, I think. My lawn is a disaster. It seems like decay but it's really just life that won't stop.

I drive into Syracuse one day to go to the mall. For no reason, I go to the mall. I don't need or plan on buying anything. My ex-boyfriend and I went to this mall once. We went to the Hooya Bang Bang's restaurant chain inside the mall. The Hooya Bang Bang's is not here anymore. He acted very shy with our large-breasted waitress, in her tight Hooya Bang Bang's uniform. It was so very typical of him to act that way. It was adorable in its sad way. But was it so sad? The plight of modern man, I think. I think, perhaps, and then I sigh. I think that now, right now. I am sighing and thinking right now. What did I think of it then? I am thinking about what I thought of it then.

Our thoughts will change. And so too the moments we have already lived. It's all an inevitable parade, beyond consciousness, and infinitely sad.

I am surprised the record store is still here inside this mall. It was once a Sam Goody but is now something with a flashier, brighter logo. He bought a used CD that one time we came here, for a dollar. He bought it because the guy on the cover looked ridiculous. We played it on the ride home and it wasn't bad. It was 80s pop rock and he loved it. He had a deep and meaningful experience listening to that music. I could just tell, and I tried to feel it too. But then he tried to explain what was so beautiful about it and he ruined it. He ruined everything.

Only now do I realize that his talking about why the CD was good was actually perfect and necessary. He didn't ruin anything. His words were simply leaving his mouth like air, and he could just talk and not care about my silence as I drove the car. He wasn't thinking about what I was thinking, or if I was listening. I was just driving the car. I always drove. I drove without really listening, to him or to the music or the ambient sound. Without my hand on a tattoo needle, I drove. Without being the adoptive mother of a teenager with methemoglobinemia who I would eventually take as a lover, I drove. I drove into a pure nothingness and a voice, his voice, just happened to be fluttering above it.

A beautiful day is nothing unless you say to another human being something like, "This is really a beautiful day, isn't it?" The other person can respond or not respond. It's up to them.

A beautiful building? Just a bunch of rocks and steel and drywall and solid planning and really expensive educations.

Only when I moved back up here did I realize that a lot of the buildings in upstate New York are not made out of stone. They are not connected by stone passageways. They are not surrounded by stone paths with people on them, or people wanting to be on them. In fact, a majority of the buildings are like this.

Everything is still gray, though. Stone or no stone, the days are the biggest gray thing of all.

Except today.

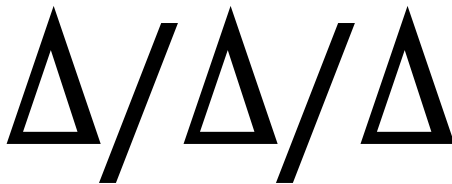
A light is shining into this mall. All the white is nearly orange.

Then I see my ex-boyfriend wandering somewhat aimlessly toward the medium-sized water fountain in the center of the mall.

He moves with his hands by his face. He flips a coin into the water fountain after thinking about something for a long time. I tap his shoulder. The first shoulder I've tapped like that in a quarter century, maybe more. People always know when I'm coming up behind them to engage in what's sure to be a great conversation. They can feel it in their bones.

"You're alive," I say.

He smiles and the smile is very dumb. "Yes," he says. "I'm sorry. I am."



“What happened?”

I’m shocked at his ability to describe it with such restraint. “So why are you here?”

“Syracuse men’s basketball. We have tickets to the game tonight.” He always loved sports. “But also for a funeral,” he adds.

We decide to get food at the generic sports bar that has replaced Hooya Bang Bang’s. Since faking his death, his walk seems to have acquired a new bounce. There must be a freedom in that, faking one’s death. It instills a confidence that most will never know. I can’t believe how good he looks. He seems to be aging in half-time, or perhaps even backwards like Brad Pitt in that movie.

“Nothing seemed real,” he says. We are walking slowly, almost not moving. “I didn’t think you’d mind. I never thought you really liked me, to be honest.” We are just gliding effortlessly, the pace of dead snails on a slick, steep hill still secreting. The sunlight is fighting us. Through every crack in these giant windows it pushes its way in and tries

to bash our heads in. Malls are a time warp. On hot, sunny days this is especially so. I will either die tomorrow or live forever.

“I didn’t really,” I say. I did though, maybe. He does the thing with his cuticles up against his lips when I am talking. But he is listening. I can feel myself inside his cuticles kissing him. “It was just like anything that happens. You get a new mailman or trash collector. You go shopping. Find a deceased bird in the yard and decide to cook it for breakfast.” My god, I sound like him.

In this new restaurant which doesn't have a name, only a wordless symbol that looks like



the girls have more clothes on than they did at Hooya Bang Bang's. And they aren't all girls like at Hooya Bang Bang's. Our waiter is a boy, maybe seventeen. "I wonder," he says, after sucking down a third of his beer in one gulp, "Why that kid isn't in school."

I am drinking wine, pinot grigio. I wonder if the waiter's name is Doug. We talk and the talk is all pretty boring. We catch up with each other as if *each other* was even a concept that existed before twenty minutes ago and it feels nice. I am oblivious to thoughts like "fake suicide" but that is the way I am. That is the way I was raised.

The sun can't get in here. There are no windows in this restaurant inside the mall. My ex-boyfriend eyes the arcade games in the corner. He does it subtly, but with great interest. It is a natural glance. I love him. All over again, fake death or not, I love him. We talk and as the talk gets smaller, the love gets bigger. I drink more wine. I think about Macco. He was a pretty good dad before he tricked everyone into thinking he was a dead one.

"How is it? Being vegan?"

"One of the perks of being dead, actually. No one to make that face when you say, 'Sorry. I'm vegan' when you're visiting friends or whatever." He stabs a cheese fry with his fork. "No one to say 'sorry' to at all, for that matter, for any reason."

"You know, I don't think real vegans can eat cheese," I say, stabbing a cheese fry myself. They are delicious.

"Oh, I know. But I'm not a real anything. Life is too short." He is wearing a Hawaiian shirt.

It's later than the middle of the afternoon but it's not yet nighttime. We're the only patrons in here. Our eager waiter is watching us as he drinks a fountain soda over in the corner.

"Should we tell him to run now," I say. Nodding towards the kid waiter. "Get it over with. Get outta here. Scram, Doug."

"Nah." He finishes another beer. "Let him figure it out. There's fun in that. Maybe there is." He looks unsure. He looks again over at the old arcade games with slightly more desire in his eyes. "It's fun, right?"

Later, we sit by the fountain. This mall is playing classical music for some reason. Does he still play piano, I wonder. A child drives past us in a small plastic car holding an extremely realistic toy gun. The child points the gun at us and laughs. Haha.

Everything is not made of stone in upstate New York. There are miniature vehicles inside of malls that are carved out of hard, bright plastic. And they are driven by children wielding realistic toy guns who may or may not grow up to become college students or psychopaths.

“She’s an alcoholic,” he tells me. “She’s probably drunk at her grandmother’s house right now.” I ask him what they do in Florida. He says that they drink. He tells me they are very poor.

"I almost died in that river. Like, *for real*."

"You actually went in the river?"

"Oh, yes," he says. Rubbing a thumb with mangled cuticles against his lips. "I felt that was important. To actually get wet. You know, *Fugitive* style." To actually get wet, I think, and then I think about Harrison Ford in that movie he's referring to. "She was set up about a mile down the river." He rubs a mangled cuticle against his lips and continues, "I thought, because of the current, that it wouldn't be so bad. But it was so cold. I almost passed out. I could have easily died."

I picture my ex-boyfriend floating in a river in New Jersey, freezing, faking a suicide, really going for it. Dying but not dying, now that's taking some initiative!

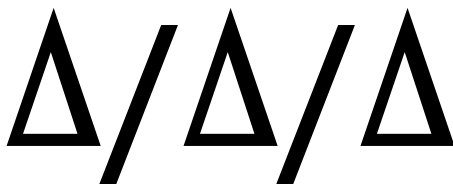
"And then I overshot the spot. By at least five hundred yards. When I finally pulled myself out of the water, I was so disorientated. It took me like two hours to find her. I was lost in the woods. Wet and freezing. She thought I really did it. She hit me so hard."

“She hit you?”

“She hit me.” She didn’t really hit him, I think. She hit him in the way that girls can hit boys that is more like a hug that says, “I love you so much” but that really means, “I love you so much but life is really confusing and we’re all gonna die.”

He once made a motion like he was going to hit me in the complete opposite way.

“I don’t think she’s coming.” He slides his cellphone back into his pocket.



"I don't wear my seatbelt on days when I feel like dying," he says. I am driving to the dome where the Syracuse men's basketball team plays. Both hands on the wheel, I say, "So you still think about killing yourself?"

"No. I only think about suicide when I'm planning to fake one. But I think about death constantly."

We watch a basketball game. One team loses. The other one wins. I love him. Now, right here, right this very second, for the first time. It is smaller than thing that is not love, love. But it can hold its own against anything. It is the underdog in every contest that has ever transpired in the whole world throughout all of human history. I feel it for the first time watching college basketball at the Carrier Dome in Syracuse, New York. The Orangemen have been defeated by the Blue Devils.

"Goodnight. It was good seeing you," he says when I drop him off at his wife's grandmother's house. I don't really want him to go. I am lonely. "Hey, remember that CD you bought at the mall?"

He says that he does. Richard X. Heyman was the name of the funny-looking artist on the cover.

"I can't believe that record store is still there," I say with a contorted face. "Well it's not the same record store but--" Then I am sobbing. Crying hard over the steering wheel. I am crying real tears. He reaches in the driver's side window and puts a hand on my back. He rubs my back. I am crying. "Are you getting any smarter?"

"No," he says. But there's no way of knowing if he is lying or not. He looks the same. There's too much metal and whatever else a car is made of between us to really feel it. I drive away.

(Δ)

“Everything seems to be traveling on a nice little arc,” I say, smiling. “Although I didn’t get with my ex-husband after I fucked my blue son, so there are some inconsistencies in how the story should have gone. But otherwise, this is the circle, the one I am drawing right now. This is it closing.” I am talking to my ex-boyfriend, the one with bipolar disorder and the small sports car. We reconnected on social media via my prompting.

“What’s that, babe?” He is at least one hundred and fifty pounds overweight and perpetually drunk on cheap beer. I asked him to switch to hard liquor to see if that would help shed some of his mass, but I don’t think he heard me say that. That was maybe two months ago.

We have breakfast only one way, with me on top of him on our bed, dropping pound after pound of wriggling worms into his mouth. Then he puts the worms that escape his gaping, fat face inside of my mouth. And I think about Macco and Macco’s dad as I chew the worms.

I think about losing my virginity on a tennis court when I was seventeen in Turks and Caicos on a family vacation. The large boy who did it was a busboy, and my back was severely scratched. Injured might be the better word.

I feel totally elderly at age fifty-five. I am a woman of affairs, whatever that means. It seems odd to think of myself like that, at this age, at this place, which is Connecticut, but it's the only truth I can muster. I live alone in a fairly modest home in an expensive neighborhood in Connecticut. I have had more sex than the average person, I think. I'm casually dating a man named Doug.

I think about that, and then I think about other things.