

OUT OF THE BODY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contains four original pieces of short fiction and one short essay on the craft of writing fiction. The short stories range in topics from a young man who doesn't want to work in his father's business to a writer who comes face to face – and often shares bodies – with his own characters. Two of the stories are literary fiction, one is metafiction, and one is science-fiction. All four stories are written in the first-person point of view.

The craft essay examines the prevalence and implications of the self-aware first-person narrator in fiction. This particular narrative style was found to be intrinsic to many stories written in the first-person, and this discovery led to the incorporation of self-aware elements to the narrators of the original stories presented in this collection.

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CRAFT ESSAY – I, NARRATOR

Point of view is by far one of the most interesting aspects of fiction. David Jauss suggests that it's the most important aspect and the least understood; Janet Burroway is content to say that it's the most complicated. When I began to compile this thesis, I chose to write all of my stories in the first-person. It was my intent to demonstrate that the first-person point of view was the most effective form of storytelling, but as the thesis progressed that desire was replaced by an interest in a particular form of first-person: the self-aware narrator.

To begin, I'd like to examine the self-aware narrator as presented in popular works on craft. Jauss, in the second chapter of *Alone With All That Could Happen*, provides one of the clearer definitions of point of view, which he says should "refer not only to person but also to the various techniques that allow fiction writers to manipulate the degree of distance between characters and readers" (36). This is fair; Jauss is persuasive in his belief in the importance of narrative distance and the bearing it has on readers. But when it comes to the different persons utilized in point of view itself, Jauss adopts a cosmopolitan approach: "Defining point of view in terms of person also ignores the fact that first-person narrators, when they talk about other characters, use *third* person. And it ignores the fact that sometimes a first-person narrator uses third person to talk about *himself*" (36).

I'll return to that final point in a moment, but for now it's important to address the essence of what Jauss is saying. Jauss shares with Booth the opinion that all narrative techniques

are available to all narrative persons. This strikes me as willful ignorance. It's equivalent to saying that basketball, football, and baseball players all have the same techniques at their disposal because all three sports are played by putting a ball in a goal. Whether or not first-person narrators use third person, the fact is that all three narrative persons are distinct and have unique effects on readers. Jauss may be correct in that all narrative techniques are available, but to imply – as I believe he is – that all techniques are equally applicable to all three narrative persons is simply untrue.

I turn to Janet Burroway, who notes in *Writing Fiction* that: “Form is important to point of view because the form in which a story is told indicates the degree of self-consciousness on the part of the teller” (312). I expand “form” in this sense to mean not only narrative technique but also person. Recall Jauss's point that sometimes a first-person narrator uses third person to refer to themselves. This may be the case, but what should be apparent is that the narrator that does this is only creating an illusion. To say: “This sentence was written by Ben Duvall” is to say: “I am Ben Duvall.” If a writer says: “He walked down the street,” and the reader is aware that “he” means “I,” the story assumes a different psychic distance than it would if “he” meant “not I.”

Burroway again: “An account that purports to be a character's thought will imply more spontaneity than a spoken one, which in turn will seem more spontaneous than one deliberately written down” (312). She gives no mention of person, but I would suggest, given my logic above, that only the first person allows for accounts “deliberately written down.” That is, if a story makes it apparent that the narration was deliberately written by someone, that narration cannot be completely removed from the “I” that is the narrator.

Next I'd like to examine a quote from John Gardner's *The Art of Fiction*. Gardner, for all of his extensive knowledge on writing, is oddly dismissive of the first-person: "It is often said, mainly by non-writers, that the first-person point of view...is the most natural. This is doubtful. The third person point of view...is more common in both folk and sophisticated narrative" (155). I must wonder if Gardner scrutinized his own words. First, the fact that third person is more prevalent in literature doesn't mean it's more natural. Second, does Gardner consider the reason that non-writers consider the first-person point of view most natural? Could it be that, while third person is the most common form in which to tell a story, the first person is the most natural form in which to hear one?

Robin Hemley, in *Turning Life into Fiction*, is similarly dismissive of the techniques of first-person: "Often, the worst strategy for writing a story is to have one character telling another character or characters the story of her life. It's a rather bald device...a little too familiar to capture most readers' attention these days. Of course, if you can twist this idea around and make it fresh, you might succeed" (56). I say that this quote refers to the first person because, as I will show later in Isaac Asimov's story "One Night of Song," the most common form this "bald device" takes is first-person narration.

While I understand the principle of what Hemley is saying, I'm not sure on what he bases his claim. He does not specify what he means by "characters telling another character." Does this category only include the most explicit examples, where one visible character is narrating to another visible character? Does it include examples like David Foster Wallace's "Brief Interviews With Hideous Men," in which there is no exposition except through dialogue and the listener has no lines? Most importantly for me, does this category include more implicit examples, such as the epistolary style? The titular Robinson Crusoe may not be addressing a

specific character in his narration, but he is clearly addressing someone. Hemley's comment seems to ignore the fact that the reader, while not a character *per se*, is still a participant in a story.

Rust Hills address this fact in *Writing In General And The Short Story In Particular* when he notes that one of the most important aspects of successful fiction is the involvement of the reader. That is, when the reader becomes lost in the fiction and forgets – to varying degrees – the outside world. Hills takes Gardner's view that one of the most effective ways to getting the reader involved is to get the POV right, and he notes: "Correct use of point of view may not be all it takes to bounce a reader into believing a story, but it won't bounce him out of it either" (137).

Hills also notes that modern fiction tends not to conform to this idea and that it may not be the most desirable one. This is the view I take. Good fiction should always have an element of distraction; if the reader can't become involved in a story, why should they keep reading? But to presume that *complete* distraction is appropriate is to ignore reality. The reader is holding a book. Whether it's a paper book or an electronic one, the reading thereof involves mentally processing words and ideas. It's fundamentally different from having an experience yourself. When someone is reading a work of fiction, no matter how much they get lost in it, there is always a degree of mental filtering that must occur. If you read about someone burning their hand, your mind has to first associate those words with their definitions and then simulate – or remember – the experience of getting burned. This level of filtering doesn't occur if you simply put your hand on a hot burner.

Thus, I am of the opinion that a piece of writing can easily maintain its effectiveness while being self-referential. To assume that, in order for a story to be effective, the reader must

be completely fooled into thinking the story is real is to give readers too little credit. This is not to say that the narrator of a story can call himself out without consequence. Booth, in quoting Joseph Warren Beach, notes that if an author conveys his theme effectively, we don't mind when he appears directly in the narrative (25). What bothers readers is when the author uses direct intervention as a substitute for artistic expression. Direct intervention by the author can be equated with self-awareness by the narrator.

On to specific examples from works of fiction. First I would like to touch on my earliest point: the idea that the self-aware narrator written in third person only draws attention to the first-person nature of the narration. An excellent example of this is Tobias Wolff's "Bullet In The Brain," from his collection *The Night in Question*. The story is told explicitly in what's generally called third-person limited, as is evident in the narrative's inability to see into the head of anyone besides Anders: "She sucked in her cheeks but stared past him and said nothing. Anders saw that the other woman, her friend, was looking in the same direction" (201). The narration reveals nothing that Anders himself doesn't know or can't see. But as soon as the bullet enters his head, the narration takes an odd direction. "It is worth noting what Anders did not remember, given what he did remember" (204). The narration then covers a variety of moments that occurred across Anders's life before finally coming to what actually played in his mind as the bullet killed him. One might argue that these moments could only be covered in third person; it is the separation between Anders and the narrator that allows the narrator to describe elements beyond what Anders sees.

But I would argue the opposite. The bits about what he doesn't remember are necessary for the story's success, for they provide the context to understand Anders's behavior in the first part of the story. The narration has already been shown to be first-limited; how can the narrative

thus cover what Anders *doesn't* see without breaking the point of view? The answer is inherent in third-limited narration itself: it's really just first-person narration. What Anders doesn't see or think is as invisible to the third-limited narrator as the thoughts of any other character, but it isn't invisible to the self-aware first-person narrator, who is as free to swim around their own consciousness as the omniscient narrator is to swim around an entire fictional world. In other words, the sudden shift in narration is only consistent if the narration was first-person all along, merely wearing the guise of third.

Wolff is not the only one who has tried to disguise their first-person narrators. Issac Asimov, in his story "One Night of Song" from his collection *The Winds of Change*, opens the story with a brief first-person account of a man getting a story out of a friend at the bar. As soon as the friend's story starts, it becomes the narrative itself; the original narrator is completely dropped. "I was a good deal younger then [said George] and..." (217). George's narrative is a terrific example of the self-aware first-person narrator. He is aware that he is speaking directly to someone, and the narration could easily stand alone. I suspect the only reason Asimov included the opening scene was to establish the context of the conversation, so readers wouldn't be confused.

Ernest Hemingway uses a nearly identical technique in his story "One Reader Writes," from *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. It opens with a brief paragraph of objective third: "She sat at the table in her bedroom...She wrote this letter, writing it steadily with no necessity to cross out or rewrite anything" (320). Hemingway then provides the letter itself – a plea to a doctor for advice regarding the syphilis her husband contracted during the war – followed by a paragraph of close, non-objective third: "Maybe he can tell me what's right to do, she said to herself...Oh, I wish to Christ he wouldn't have got it" (321). By the end of the

paragraph, the narration has become entirely first-person. This is Hemingway being clever; the objective opening reveals her self-control in the composition of the letter, the letter itself reveals the subject of her worries, and the closing paragraph reveals her inner turmoil. Like Asimov's story, the heart of this story is the first-person narrative, and the moments of third person are only a tool to carry context.

But it seems to me that context for self-aware first-person narration need not be provided by disguises. Perhaps the best place to highlight this is in the works of postmodern authors such as Donald Barthelme. In his story "The School" from his collection *Sixty Stories*, Barthelme covers context without ever dipping into third person. Not only that, the narrator is clearly aware that he is speaking to the readers. "You know what I mean...I don't know why they died, they just died" (304). Later in the story, he notes: "I forgot to mention Billy Brandt's father, who was knifed fatally when he grappled with a masked intruder in his home" (306). It's that phrase, "I forgot to mention," that indicates he's speaking to someone; otherwise it would be "Then there was" or the like. But Barthelme knew, quite rightly, that the context of the narrator's awareness is irrelevant. He doesn't need to disguise the conversation with third-person because readers know that the narrator is talking to them; they knew this as soon as they picked up the book. Stephen King, in *On Writing*, notes: "Someone...once wrote that all novels are really letters aimed at one person" (216). King expanded on this to suggest that every writer should have a single person who is their Ideal Reader. I don't agree on that point, but the sentiment – that all stories are, or should be, written to the reader – is something I can get behind.

Consider Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Like the narrators of many novels of the time, Crusoe – and in turn, Defoe himself – is not shy about addressing his readers. The narrative is peppered with little comments that reveal this: "Now I began to construe the words

mentioned above” (86). “This is my only voyage which I may say was successful” (14). But one of the most obvious examples comes near the end of the novel: “As I have troubled you with none of my sea journals, so I shall trouble you now with none of my land journal; but some adventures that happened to us in this tedious and difficult journey I must not omit” (260). Such comments don’t hinder the effectiveness of the novel because the narrative is carried by the tale itself; as I referenced before, readers do not mind when a narrator pokes their head out of the narrative as long as they don’t do so in place of real artistic expression.

Of course, sometimes writers *do* poke their heads out in place of proper narrative technique. Take “A Vision of the World” by John Cheever, from his collection *The Stories of John Cheever*, which begins: “This is being written in another seaside cottage on another coast” (604). This is the only instance in the entire story where the author makes himself apparent; the rest of the narrative is firmly unaware first-person. Therefore, this opening line is simply a substitute for a real opening; it doesn’t appear to have any other purpose.

Cheever is not alone; Rabindranath Tagore uses the same technique. In “The Editor,” from his collection *Selected Short Stories*, the first-person narrator is consistent for all except a single line: “Probably the girl’s face darkened like a lamp suddenly blown out; but I never even noticed her silent, pained withdrawal from the room” (122). But if he didn’t notice her withdrawal, how did he know it was pained? Tagore tempers the line with the word “probably,” but the fact is that this line breaks the point of view by providing information that only the author, not the narrator, can know. Tagore chose to trade the consistency of point of view for the image of the girl’s face going dark, and it’s jarring to read.

I’d like to finish with a quote from Booth that I believe needs expansion. In reference to Cid Hamete from *Don Quixote*, Booth says: “The narrator has made of himself a dramatized

character to whom we react as we react to other characters” (212). This point forms the foundation of Booth’s discussion on the self-aware narrator. However, Booth makes no distinction between the narrator who is also a character and the character who is also a narrator. It’s a very fine line, the difference being that in the former the character cannot be separated from the narrative style without losing the effect of the story. I’ll provide two examples of each.

For the first – the narrator who is also a character – there is perhaps no better example than the titular stories of David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men*. These stories work precisely because they are one-sided conversations; the person doing the interviews has lines, but they are marked simply with a “Q” (17). The narratives are marked by gradual, self-betraying monologues which are only possible through the self-aware first-person narrator. It is the narrative form itself which reveals character.

Next is *Portnoy’s Complaint*, by Phillip Roth. Like *Brief Interviews*, the narrative of this novel is a one-sided confession. Indeed, the only time this breaks in the entire novel is the punch line at the end, which gets a pass because of its humor: “So [said the doctor]. Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?” (274). The power of the novel comes from the revealing, self-conscious nature of Portnoy’s narrative. The story could be told in third person, but I doubt that it would so beautifully capture Portnoy’s inner turmoil and the workings of his own mind, not to mention the cathartic scream that precedes the punch line.

The second category – the character who is also a narrator – is marked by the fact that the narration itself has no particular bearing on the narrator. The first example is *Middlesex* by Jeffery Eugenides. I should note that the narration here is decidedly self-aware first-person; Cal says so clearly: “If this story is written only for myself, then so be it. But it doesn’t feel that way. I feel you out there, reader” (319). But the novel, unlike the two examples above, is not

hinged on the confessional nature of its narrative. Much of the novel is devoted to the stories of characters other than the narrator, which, as Jauss says, are told in third. It isn't the narrative that informs our understanding of the character, but the other way around.

The second example is *The Blind Assassin* by Margret Atwood. This one is more complicated because the narrative switches between two different forms, one self-aware first-person and the other close third. Iris is confident in her awareness, even to the end: "By the time you read this last page, that – if anywhere – is the only place I will be" (521). The "you" refers to the character of Myra and not explicitly the reader, but for all intents and purposes they are the same thing. But like *Middlesex*, the power of the story and characters are not dependent on this narrative style. In fact, one of the strongest points in the novel is the realization of Iris and Laura's true romantic interests – Alex Thomas for Iris and Richard for Laura – which comes about entirely through conventional narration. The self-aware aspect of the narration does not make the story, it only enhances it.

It's my hope that contemporary authors will continue to utilize and experiment with the self-aware narrator. Perhaps just as important is the hope that authors on the craft of writing will give this narrative style the attention that it deserves. In choosing the sources for this essay, I picked stories that would provide a swath of takes on first-person narration: *Robinson Crusoe* for its historical and epistolary perspective, Barthelme and Wallace for postmodernism, Asimov for his dialogue-centric style, Tagore for the vivacity of Indian literature, Hemingway for objectivism, etc. What I found, to my surprise, was that the essence of the self-aware narrator ran through almost all of the stories I examined. It seems to be an intrinsic – though not unavoidable – aspect of first-person narration itself.

This realization gave me the freedom to let the narrators of my own stories speak directly to my audience. In early versions of “Bristlecone,” for example, I experimented with narrators who spoke directly to another character in the story, but I was not comfortable having them speak directly to the reader. Once I realized the prevalence of the self-aware narrator, that discomfort disappeared. Thus, the narration of “Bristlecone” includes a brief moment when Michael reveals his self-awareness: “Were I a month older, I might have succumbed right then and there.” This line contrasts the rest of the narration, which is grounded in the thoughts Michael had during the events of the story; the fact that Michael knows how he would have acted a month after the story happened is evidence that he is reflecting on the events from a later date.

Similarly, “Voice in a Crowd” began with a narrator talking to another character who was never heard. The result was interesting but lacking; it was difficult to keep readers engaged because they were only getting half of the conversation. Once I realized that it was alright to have the narrator speak to the reader directly, the current form of the story fell together organically. The narrator in “Mailmen” is also self-aware, but this is only apparent at the beginning of the story; in this case his awareness is a tool to make the reader feel involved from the start. It’s my hope that I have demonstrated, both in my own stories and those of others, that the self-aware narrator, when he isn’t strutting around in full view, is often just under the surface, ready to make himself known.

BRISTLECONE

I'd been thinking about it for a few months, but when those last couple days rolled around I had to actually make the decision and I couldn't do it, so Mrs. Miller did it for me. She caught me in front of Lowe's with a new axe in my hand. I'd busted up my old one getting revenge on a tree root. It was only after I bought it that I started to imagine putting it to more enjoyable uses.

"Are you coming to the ceremony this year," she asked me. "You're not feeling sick again are you?" She gave me that look people use where they smile at you, but they're also trying to look through the backs of your eyes. I had a history teacher in tenth grade that used it on kids who didn't pay attention. Sometimes I would stare out the window just to draw the look, and then I would pretend I was on his end of it, or I would think about pussy or joints or something and see if he could tell.

I said, "Yes, ma'am. I'll be there this time." And that was it. I couldn't say no, because she would tell everyone in town that Michael Berkowitz's got no respect for his dear departed daddy, and didn't that boy feel any shame, and wasn't he past due on getting his act together? But I couldn't go to the ceremony; even the sight of the date on a calendar was enough to make me ill. The anxiety would kill me before I ever took the mic.

There was only one way out; I'd been building up to it for years. When they planted the tree after my father's funeral, I hardly even noticed the thing. I put my blinders on. But the

town wouldn't let me have my ignorance. They asked me to speak at the first anniversary. I saw that tree alive and growing and imagined my father rotting in the ground and it about killed me. It was so painful and awkward and frustrating that I just played sick from then on. In seven years the tree had put on twenty feet, and the annual remembrance had turned into a ceremony celebrating my father and the prosperity he'd brought the town. Everyone gathered around the tree and said prayers. But not this year. I was going to cut it down.

As Mrs. Miller shuffled off, I wondered how she looked when she was younger, and that led me to the way Norwash had looked when I was a boy. This side of town – now a thriving shopping district – used to be nothing but dirt and mud and homeless men sniffing for a fix. After school when I didn't want to join my father at work, I would come out here to an old shack by the ridge, where there was an old Vietnam vet named Howard who sold ganja. He would sit on the steps and puff and tell me stories from his time hopping trains around the country.

I looked across the street at the Walmart, where the lumber mill had been. The mill shut down in the eighties and the area just sunk. The guy who ran it was sitting on a few million dollars in debt. A lot of it was from gambling, but he was also paying off the city legislature, and he had a habit of buying old equipment that needed replacement. My father, in the process of turning his landscaping hobby into a business, picked up four of the men that had been laid off. With five years and no rest, they turned significant chunks of Norwash from brown to green.

That was when the investors came through. Some corporate folks started poking around and decided that we were an untapped resource. They started laying down foundation and my father, who had a respectable little company by then, got some nice contracts. Now the strips were built, the big box stores were here, and my father was dead. Was it worth it? For seven

years I had tried to balance the odds, the town on one side and his health on the other. They never came out even. They didn't even seem to be on the same scale.

I took the way home that led me through some of the older residential neighborhoods. It was on such streets that my father had started his business. There was a house with blue magnolias that held my first memory of work. I was five; the house was unpainted and the yard didn't have sod down yet. It was just dirt and straw. I wanted to go home and watch TV, but my father wanted me there to learn the trade, so I played in the dirt with my toy trucks.

As I walked I made a note of all of the yards that needed work. Then I called Robert. Robert had been my father's second-hand-man, and the company had been his since the day my father died. It was in my father's will.

"How are things going at the Carsen's?" I asked.

"You should come and see for yourself," he said. "Maybe move some earth for bit."

"That storm on Saturday made a mess of the Lee's flower beds. You should go talk to them."

"I'm a little busy, you know," he said, and banged a shovel on a rock. "Really, you should talk to them."

"I can't do that," I said. "You know that."

"No, not really."

"Well, go talk to them."

"No," he said. "You just walked past their house, didn't you? You can't walk up and knock on the goddamn door?"

"I don't want to deal with them," I said, and thought about hanging up. "You know I don't like dealing with people."

“Tough shit. Look, Mike, you can’t keep this up. If you want to be taken seriously, you need to do some work. You’re twenty-five; start acting like it.”

“But I—“

“Don’t whine at me. I’ve been nice for too long. You should be prepared to take responsibility by now. If you’re not, then maybe I’m going to have to let you go.”

My legs had stopped working. “You can’t do that.”

“You know full well that I can. It’s my company. I’ve kept you around because David wanted you to take over one day. I’d still like to see that happen. But you know what, you’ve been—“

I hung up. It wasn’t the first time Robert had gone off on me. He got sentimental around the anniversary of my father’s death. His threat of termination had already passed out of me; I was deciding on which night I should do the chopping. I balanced my new axe across my shoulders and kept on towards home.

At around five-thirty, Robert rang the doorbell. I spied him from an upstairs window, and I considered not answering the door. But I’d had time to settle down and smoke a bowl, and my legs carried me downstairs on their own initiative.

“Come I come in?” he asked. He was rushing through a cigarette.

“I thought you gave those up,” I said.

“Depends on the mood. Look, never mind about coming in. Are you hungry? Julia’s making chicken pot pie.” He paused to puff and check my eyes. “Be real good right now, I’ll bet.”

I knew Robert never planned his snares. He didn't prep the world every morning, carefully planting the events and circumstances that would offer him perfect leverage over me. But it sure felt that way. I just nodded and followed him to his truck. He started down the road and jammed the butt of his cigarette into a Styrofoam cup he'd been using as an ashtray.

"What have you been up to?" he asked, and lit up another one. "You haven't come over in a couple weeks. Julia is starting to worry about you."

"I expanded the flower bed in the backyard," I said. "And rerouted a drainage pipe."

"Great. I've got plenty more work like that if you want it."

"Don't do this to me."

"You did this to yourself, Mikey. No more avoiding it." Suddenly the creases of middle age were sharp on his face. His eyes were ragged and dark.

We rode the rest of the way in silence. As soon as we were inside his apartment, Julia emerged from the kitchen to hug the breath out of me.

"You need to call more," she said.

Wrapped up in her bony arms, I almost forgot about the tree. Julia was the closest thing I had to a mother. She had assumed that duty on the day she found out my mother had died in childbirth, about two days after my father hired Robert. She and Robert had been part of my life since I was a toddler. He was infertile, and as soon as my father died they seriously considered adopting me. They never legally went through with it, but in practice the whole thing was signed and certified.

Robert planted himself at the kitchen table. "Sit down. It's time we had this talk."

"I don't want to," I said, and sat down.

"That's exactly why we're having it."

Julia rubbed my shoulders. “Why don’t you want to work? You know the business so well.”

I tried to hold onto my tension so I could have something to put behind my voice, but it fell away. “I don’t know why I have to take over.”

“You don’t have to,” Robert said. “I’ve got a proposition. We’re got more business than ever and I can’t keep up with it. I’m thinking about splitting into two crews, but I’d need another site manager. You’re the only one I’ve got with the experience.”

“I’m not qualified. I never got my certification.”

“So get it. You’re more than qualified. Look, when you were ten you’d already picked up more about the business than I had. We need a quick thinker like you. You have good insight.”

I looked at the table. “The men will never accept me. I wouldn’t feel right bossing them around anyway.”

Relief softened Robert’s face. “I’m glad you recognize that.”

Julia chuckled. “See, you don’t give him enough credit.”

“All you have to do is work with them for a while,” Robert said. “And I don’t mean one or two days a week. I mean you get out there and sweat with us every day and show them that you’re up to it. Most of them already know what you can do; they just don’t think you have the guts or the stamina to actually do it.”

“And what if I don’t?” I asked.

“Then what do you want to do? If not this, then what? And when are you going to make up your mind?”

Julia began to set the table. “You don’t know how lucky you are. Not many people get to be raised in a family business anymore.”

“But that’s just it,” I said. “I didn’t want to be raised in the business. I didn’t ask for it.”

“Life’s not about what you ask for,” Robert said. “I wish it were.”

I found my passion again. “He never cared about what I wanted. It was always his dreams. He didn’t believe me about the other kids.”

That caught Julia’s attention. “What about the other kids? What did they do?”

“They went off to college,” I said. “And none of them wanted to. They wanted my life. They thought I’d been handed my future on a silver plate.”

“You had,” Robert said.

“You know what Kyle Bennet said? Said I was born with a shovel in my hand.”

“You were.”

Julia shushed him. “Why haven’t you told us this before?” she asked me. “We would have helped you raise the money for college, if that’s what you wanted to do.”

My legs wanted to run, but the smell of pot pie was keeping me in place. “But I couldn’t do college,” I said. “I hated school. I liked…” Now the truth had a hand on my throat.

“You liked working in the yard,” Robert finished for me. Calm had settled over him, and he squeezed my shoulder. “You should have told us all this sooner.”

Julia set a glass of tea in front of me. “I know it hurts, sweetie. We all want to stay with our friends. But it sounds like you already know what the right answer is.”

Were I a month older, I might have succumbed right then and there. But the stubborn pride of youth still had a hold on me. I perceived not sympathy and understanding but pity and ridicule. Faced with the truth, I did what I always did. I ran. But I stayed for pot pie first.

The tree was planted on the edge of town, in a clearing just off of the main road. They had planted it there so it would be one of the first things people saw when they drove through. But now that the highway had been rerouted hardly anyone used the main road anymore, and what had once clearly been the outskirts of town was now being steadily consumed by civilization. The forest that used to frame the town was getting thinner by the day.

It was the night before the ceremony, and a storm was rolling in. There was a great anvil head looming over the city, grey with deep swirls of black, and I could see fingers of lightning groping across the clouds. I hadn't given Robert an answer; I didn't want to think about it. The more I mulled over my life, the more I knew I'd been cheated. My birth had caused my mother's death, and my adulthood my father's. A month after my eighteenth birthday, a heart attack dropped him in the middle of a haircut. Nearly twenty years of unrelenting work caught up with him in an instant, and his life fled in terror.

The rain started to come down in walls, and I parked my car within walking distance of the tree. It was a Douglas-fir. Robert had picked it, claiming it was my father's favorite type of tree. I'd never heard my father say such a thing; he wasn't the type to pick favorites. He was the type to bend whichever way he had to. Survival was his philosophy; everything else, from politics to personal opinion, was just a luxury. For eighteen years I'd tried to get him to engage me on religion, or social welfare, or whatever concept I was thinking through at the time. But he was interested in results, not debate. No, the Douglas-fir had never been a fit for my father. He was twisted and weather-beaten, like one of those ancient bristlecone pines.

I pulled up the hood on my raincoat, hefted my axe off the passenger's seat, and stomped out into the storm. The tree was rocking back and forth on its own rhythm. Somehow it had

gathered an aura of ambient light, and every drop of rain that touched it sparkled and shone. A web of lightning crossed the clouds overhead, and the reflections lit up that tree from tip to earth.

“Stop that,” I said. The rain had coated my glasses, and I tossed them into the grass. “It won’t save you.”

The first chop felt like justice. The thunk of my axe reverberated through my muscles and made me feel alive. I hadn’t touched weed all day, but I was floating on a high. I swung again. It was better than the first. By the third chop, it was my out of my control. My body was locked into the methodical rhythm of life and death.

I saw my father on my sixth birthday, a child-sized metal shovel in his hands. I remembered the way he poured over the finances every night, trying with all his might to make the numbers come out in his favor. I heard his whoop of joy when the house was officially paid off. I felt the morose weight of his will as he pushed it into my hands. I could smell his hair and his sweat. With every chunk I took out of the tree, a piece of my father’s life embedded itself in my skin and tendons and bones. I felt rough, calloused hands gripping the smooth handle of the axe, and I didn’t know if they were his hands or mine.

The tree hit the ground with a muffled thump, and I heard the last beat of my father’s heart. It was gone. He was dead at last. I sat down against the stump and laughed and wept until the storm passed and the moon coated us with soft, empty light.

THE END

VOICE IN A CROWD

I don't want to write this. I think we should be able to say that at the beginnings of things; commencement speeches, research papers, emails to management. Novels, certainly. Maybe I should go back and amend the opening of *The Azure Wastes*. First page: "Please burn this miserable piece of shit. Wipe your ass with it, anything; just don't read it. I'm so sorry." I've this thing going where you can send me your copy of *The Azure Wastes* with receipt and I'll send you a full refund, plus a handwritten apology. So far only two people have taken me up on the offer: my ex wife – who once insisted she buy her own copy to support me – and a Fifth Circuit appellate judge named Ducard.

I'm afraid that if I put my thoughts to the page, I'll see them for what they really are. The soft contours of my mind will be gone, my insanity crystallized and illuminated for all to read. Normal people don't make such circuses of their own imaginations, or else they know how to hide it. There's only one way I know to cope, and that's writing; I have to get the characters out. But now I'm the character, and I'm not really sure what to do about that. So how about I put this here, and we all pretend it's true:

THIS IS A FICTIONAL WORK OF THE MIND

Or, perhaps I should say

THIS IS THE WORK OF A FICTIONAL MIND

because at this point I'm not convinced there's a distinction. Did I really write any of the things that have my name on them, or did the narrator write them? Are they me, or are they projections, minds simulated for the purpose of simulating minds? To what extent are these characters me, and to what extent am I not them? Tommy Lightner from *Those Who Once Were* has wandered the cemeteries at night, wearing my boots. Dr. Holfatter, who went unnamed in *Yesterday, Below*, liked to pull the pages out of my old anthropology textbooks. If that scene in *The Azure Wastes* where Carlos fucks Maggie in her sleep feels unfinished, it's because my then wife, Julia, woke up before it was through.

Sometimes I'll sit outside at four in the morning, listening to the birds, and my thoughts will run away with themselves. What if the whole world is just something that I've written, something that my mind has constructed to facilitate its own illusions? Or what if it's the opposite? What if nothing I've written is fiction, and I have no autonomy at all? What if I'm merely a device, an apparatus of meat and water and electricity, through which other forces are focused? Instrumentia. It's empowering, and terrifying. I have no answer for either possibility, no recourse except to keep writing.

So that's how I get here, the keyboard, and that's also how I got there, to the meeting at Pappy's. I was looking for diners in Ranson, a woodsy little town about twenty miles out of Seattle. Hank Schnitter, the protagonist of my perpetually unfinished novel *This Greasy Field of Plenty*, was using my body at the time. Whenever I visit a new town, Hank likes to check out the local fare for ideas. In the seven years I've been writing it, he has improved tremendously; I've put on a bit of a belly, and Christiana has even agreed to let me – let Hank – cook for her again. When I got her to agree to the RV and the trip around the country, I didn't tell her I was going to

be cooking along the way. At the end of the first week on the road, she took the skillet from me by force and forbid me to use it until I had learned at thing or two.

The place that Schnitter found was a little blue-and-white dive named Pappy's Bar & Grill. There was a big fake marlin hung above the doorway, and I could smell something smoking out back. The inside was your typical dive bar: deep colors, muted window panes, and neon signs. There was a short hallway from the door to the interior, and the walls were covered in newspaper clippings, mostly of slander stories from conservative elements of the local press. "Subversive protesters traced to local bar" and "They bake the sedition right in" and the like. It was lovely.

There was no one inside except for a man behind the counter. He was short and covered in tattoos, and had a book in his hand. He put it away as I walked in, but not before I got a glance at the cover. It was *Hope and Hydraulics*, one of my first novels. Based on the garish cover design he had one of the first editions, published back in '92.

"Afternoon," he said. "You doing alright?" He was looking hard at me, but he was pretending not to, so I pretended not to notice. They all look at you funny in the small towns if you're an outsider. I used to find it off-putting, but these days it's comforting. It's ingrained; why fault them for something that's wired into them? Might as well fault the tiger for being sneaky, or the eagle for flying so high.

"I'm alright," I said. "Just looking for a bite."

He handed me a menu and offered me a beer, which I accepted graciously. When he asked for my name I gave him Hank's.

"Are you sure?" he asked, and pulled out his copy of *Hope and Hydraulics*. "Because you look an awful lot like Mr. Arnie Bauman here." He opened it up and showed me the picture

in the back, a picture of myself twenty years ago. I stared at it, wondering if my face had ever really been so smooth, and if I had honestly thought that fedora suited me.

“I guess so,” I said. “But doesn’t he live in North Carolina?”

“Yeah, but supposedly he’s travelling around the country right now. They spotted him in El Cajon just a couple of weeks ago.”

“Is he on a book tour?” I asked, pretending to be apathetic. By now I was familiar with my paparazzi; my beard hadn’t stopped them, and neither had my plan to keep to the smaller cities. I suppose I should have been thankful I had paparazzi at all.

“Rumor is he’s run out of things to write, so he’s sneaking around trying to find something new.”

“You believe it?”

“No,” he said. “I think he just doesn’t like publicity. I mean, look at his protagonists. Always outsiders or people on the fringes of things.”

“People that don’t care for authority,” I added.

“Exactly. The man is a loner. He’s been mainstream for almost a decade now; how else is he going to see the country and have any privacy if he doesn’t sneak around?”

I nodded my head, but I didn’t say anything. This man knew too much about me. Better to eat quickly and move on before he decided who I was and the conversation turned to my books. He asked me what I was doing in town, and I gave him Schnitter’s backstory: born in Brooklyn to a pair of poor, second-generation German Jews, destined to be a chef but too broke for cooking school, so he decided to backpack around the country, working in restaurants all over and collecting the distinct flavors of Americana. When Mitchell asked why I didn’t have a Brooklyn accent, I told him my accent changed based on who I was around, which was true.

“Don’t think I caught your name,” I said. “You’re not Pappy, are you?”

He wiped the counter down with a rag, though it wasn’t dirty. “No, I’m Mitchell. Pappy’s was my father. Passed on a couple of years ago. Actually, I’ve been thinking about changing the name. You read *Heaven’s Adrift*?”

“Sure.” It was a convoluted space opera – the first I’d written since my first fumbling attempts at fiction as a teenager – and my first novel with any moderate success. A core constituency of my fans had turned it into a measuring stick, against which to compare anything I put out, which made my nerves coil.

“You remember that restaurant they were always meeting at? Hold Your Nose?”

“Sort of,” I said.

A strange, secret smile crept over his face. “Do you remember why they called it that?”

I shook my head and thought about how many hours I had spent trying to decide on a name.

“Because,” he said, “the government was turning criminals into firewood. Burning them up in a secret plant right underneath the grand subway terminal. And they treated the fumes so that they came out smelling like flowers, and said it was part of a new filtration system.

His intensity built as he spoke and I just nodded along. When someone actually laid out the plot for me, it sounded like someone else had written it. The narrator of *Heaven’s Adrift* – an A/C maintenance robot named Chal – hadn’t come to visit me for years, and his insider knowledge of the story had faded with time.

“So when they say ‘hold your nose,’” Mitchell continued, “they’re talking about the flowery fumes, because they know what the smell really is.”

I continued to feign ignorance. “Didn’t they stage a revolt or something?”

“That’s right. The restaurant was a secret hideout for freedom fighters.” He replenished my beer, though I hadn’t asked him to. “Now, you read the way he describes the whole thing, the secret meetings and the fear and the hope and the deserters and the snitches and all that, and tell me that man hasn’t had personal experience. Tell me he hasn’t sat in on his share of secret meetings.”

“Well, I think that’s pushing it a bit,” I said. “He’s a writer, you know; they take liberties.”

“You don’t think he’s an anarchist?” Mitchell asked. He was watching my reactions while pretending to tidy up. “Almost all of his heroes are. You read *Thunder in the Grass*? That one was about tigers and he still worked a revolution in there.”

“Well, sure,” I said. “But there’s a difference between having thoughts and following through on them. Just because a man thinks about anarchy doesn’t make him an anarchist. And just because a man is an anarchist, that doesn’t mean he goes to secret meetings to overthrow the government.”

Mitchell’s eyes had gone thin with curiosity. “You don’t think he followed through? I think the fact that he published books on the subject is plenty of following through. Let’s say he hasn’t gone to any secret meetings. He still went to the ones that he wrote. Every meeting in *Heaven’s Adrift* is one that Bauman personally attended, whether he realized it or not.”

“He wrote the parts about the government incinerating people too. Does that mean he personally attended those events? When the guard hit the switch to start the flames, does that mean that Bauman hit the switch too?”

“Of course he did.”

I was starting to like this man. “So what about the people who died? Did Bauman personally kill them?”

Mitchell’s smile was full of victory. “Sure did. But he gave them life, so that’s okay.”

My stomach grumbled at me, so I ordered a cheesesteak. He disappeared back into the kitchen and emerged in short time with a mountain of a sandwich.

“You always serve them this big?” I asked. “Almost need another hoagie to hold all this.”

“I serve them like that to the people I like,” he said.

“How do you serve them to the people you don’t like?”

“I don’t,” he said. “I get my policies straight from the government. Bonuses for my friends and to hell with everybody else.”

I smiled, but I didn’t acknowledge the line. It was from *Bury the Moon*, one of my earliest and most obscure short stories, and calling him on it would have revealed my identity better than flashing my driver’s license.

“Did you say you were looking for a job?” he asked.

I took a mouthful of cheesesteak to delay. This was typically where I parted ways with Hank Schnitter. “That’s alright,” I might say, “I’m going to hold out until I get to Seattle,” or something like that. The odd jobs part of the backstory was just to flesh it out; I hadn’t actually taken any jobs in restaurant kitchens, though I’d worked as a busboy once as a teenager. But now I was thinking about what Mitchell had said, and I wondered if I hadn’t worked those jobs after all. I thought about the barbecue place in Charlotte, and the po’ boy shack in New Orleans, and the steakhouse in Austin, and Schnitter started to creep in. Before long he had control of my vocal cords.

“Sure,” he said. “I could use the work.” His voice was deeper than mine, and resonant. Christiana says that my characters use my voice when they speak, but I don’t hear it that way. All of them are different. Tommy Lightner has a lisp, and Dr. Holfatter a faint German accent, leftover from his youth. Hank Schnitter has a foghorn instead of a larynx.

“I’m a little short on staff tonight,” he said. “But it wouldn’t be grill work. I just need someone to help close up. Take about an hour if you can keep up with me.”

“How much?” Schnitter asked. I almost reined him in and said no, but by then the curiosity was thick in my chest. I’d been plodding circles through the narrative of *This Greasy Field of Plenty* for a couple months, avoiding direct eye contact with the lack of climax or resolution. Maybe actually cleaning the griddles would help me along.

“Let’s start at ten, and if you really want to do some scrubbing, I’ll give you fifteen.”

Schnitter agreed, and Mitchell told me to swing by at eleven. I ate and paid and made my way back to the RV, which was squared away in a remote corner of a Walmart parking lot. If I was going to work that late, I would have to get a nap in. Catherine was in the bedroom, enjoying the afternoon sun and her kindle. When I told her what I – what Schnitter – had agreed to, she looked up at me.

“What shoes are you going to wear?” she asked.

This is why I love her. I can coordinate the metabolism of an entire fictional world, but the fact that I don’t own a good pair of work shoes slips right through me. She can see my blind spots, and she won’t hesitate to fill them in. Ten years ago I was still convinced that relationships were built on lust and romance, and what did it get me? A divorce and *The Azure Wastes*. When I look at Catherine I don’t see a lover, or a girlfriend, or even a woman sometimes. I see gears slotting together.

I bought the cheapest pair of tennis shoes that Walmart had and settled in for nap. By the time 10 pm rolled around, Catherine wasn't comfortable with me walking alone through town. She wanted to drive the RV right up to the restaurant, but I told her to stay put.

"Schnitter doesn't have an RV," I said.

Eventually she let me go, and I strolled my way back to Pappy's. The night air was beginning to take on the sharp, woody smell of winter, and I reveled in it. Schnitter shivered and grumbled about the cold; he was a southern boy, used to forty degree winters and summers like a pressure cooker. He pulled at my jacket and rubbed my ears longed for the warm hills of Tennessee. But he was young, and he didn't have any insulation besides. Like me in my youth, he was incurably lean. When he told people it was a problem, they looked at him like he was ungrateful or insane or both. But they didn't know. If they missed a meal, or even went too long without a snack, their bodies didn't suddenly become weak and cold. They didn't realize that a high metabolism, for all of its benefits, meant you were always on the edge of wasting away.

When I got to Pappy's, the lot was full of cars. I tried the front door, but it was locked. The lights were off, and the sign said "Closed." I glanced around the lot and up at the fake marlin, to make sure I was at the right place, and then walked around to the back. Had I stayed a moment longer and really inspected the cars, I might have recognized the silver Impala, or the day-glow yellow CR-V, or the jacked-up Jeep. I might have felt the stirrings in my gut. But it wasn't my gut at the time; it was Schnitter's, and he was determined to do some work.

Mitchell was waiting for me around back. "Wasn't sure you were coming," he said. He was smoking a cigarette, and he didn't look like he had just finished a shift. His hair and face were clean and he smelled like he had just gotten out of the shower. As I walked up, I suddenly saw myself through his eyes. But it wasn't me; it was Schnitter. I felt Mitchell finger a mask,

tucked into the back of his jeans, and he extended a hand. I shook Schnitter's hand, and then I was back in my body again. Mitchell opened the back door for me and followed me in.

The back of the restaurant was already clean. The griddle was shiny and the sink was empty the floor was still wet from the mop. I looked back at Mitchell, but my head had barely turned before my eyes were in his head again, and I saw Schnitter look at me with confusion.

"It's alright," Mitchell said. "There's work to do out front."

I joined Schnitter again, and we walked into the front of the restaurant, where a crowd of about twenty people were waiting for us. At first I was afraid that Mitchell had decided on my identity after all and summoned a group of eager fans, but then I saw that they were all wearing Guy Fawkes masks. They watched us quietly as we came in, but otherwise they didn't as much as shift in their seats. Mitchell, who had pulled his own mask on, placed himself behind the bar.

"Oy," I said. "What is this? I'm not interested."

"Sit and listen a while," Mitchell said. He pulled a spare mask from under the bar and handed it to me.

There was a booth next to me with a lone woman in it. "You're part of this too," she said. She was foggy, like someone had covered her with a blurry filter. Only the mask came through clearly. Her voice was deep and rich like molasses, and it tugged at me until I found myself in the booth.

Mitchell nodded and then addressed the room, but I couldn't hear anything he said. It was just warbles, like the adults in Charlie Brown. I was trying, fruitlessly, to put myself back in Mitchell's body. Schnitter had fled and my mind was searching for characters, but there weren't any. No backstories, no voices, no answers. My head was empty, and I was expressly,

helplessly Arnold Franklin Bauman. There was a hand on mine; the woman in the booth with me. She put the mask on my face.

“People are getting distracted,” Mitchell was saying. “In seeking the truth, they come across websites and radio stations and news channels that say things they like, and they get trapped there. They trade truth for comfort, and familiarity, and self-validation.”

“Can you blame them?” I asked, but it wasn’t me. It was a man near the back of the room. I saw his mask floating above the others, and then I saw him through Mitchell’s eyes: a tall, middle-aged man with a futuristic military uniform and a scar through one of his eyes. This was Sergeant Messer, from *Just Trajectory*. That eye was cybernetic, as was everything below the waist. When he spoke, it was with the quiet and sharp tone he’d perfected over his military career.

“Why should I expose myself to something I don’t agree with?” he asked. “I didn’t go to Dralcon and get my legs blown off by the fucking scalers just so I could come home and hear their ideas on Terran radio, for God’s sake.”

“Of course you did.”

This was Dr. Holfatter, German accent and bald head and all.

“Didn’t your government stage the attack by those ‘scalers,’ as you call them, as an excuse to invade and colonize?”

“That’s right,” the woman in my booth said. “People like you are the problem in the first place. You hide behind your gun and your uniform and your country because you’re a coward.”

She was Yyslda Macha, the leader of the revolutionaries in *Heaven’s Adrift* and the owner of Hold Your Nose. “You’re terrified of change, so you cling to bullets and patriotism and religion.”

There was a robot sitting at the bar, and he spoke up.

“But those are the values and social functions that he was brought up with. Humans are ever striving to regain the perceived stability of their youths because when they were children their minds were simple and couldn’t see the complexities of the world. It’s written into their genetic code; why fault them for this?” Here was Arcalus, from *Hope and Hydraulics*.

“That’s just an excuse,” Yyslda said. “My father raised me to be racist, but I didn’t listen to him.”

I put my hands on the table. “Alright, that’s enough. You guys are all over the place, and you keep putting words in each other’s mouths. I didn’t write you like this.”

“Then who did?” a voice asked, and then another and another, until the whole room was asking it. I put my hands to my ears and tried to leave, but hands grasped at me and held me back. Then I was in Mitchell’s body again, and I saw the crowd pulling and tearing at someone. The victim had a mask on, but he was only one; all of the others had my face. Arnold Bauman’s face. I walked out from behind the bar, and the crowd parted before my hand like magnets meeting their own polarity. When I got to the victim, he was curled into a ball on the floor. I reached down and pulled his mask off. It was Hank Schnitter.

“Sorry about that,” Mitchell said, and I pulled Hank off of the floor. “We were slow tonight so I closed early. Forgot to ask for your number or I’d of called and let you know.”

“Well, that’s okay,” Schnitter said. I looked around the empty bar, and then back at Mitchell. “I’m not very good at cleanup anyway.”

Mitchell nodded, and I led Schnitter back out of the restaurant. “I could use some help tomorrow night, if you’re interested,” Mitchell said.

I shook his hand. “No, that’s alright,” Schnitter said. “I need to be moving on.”

“I’ll be here if you change your mind,” Mitchell said.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes you will.”

THE END

MAILMEN

It starts with the smell of pancakes, and then I'm at the bottom of the stairs with my face at the window. I might be awake at that point, but with me it's hard to know; sometimes I get to the table before I leave the bed. So I look out the window and it's raining. You know that persistent stuff, that's not heavy enough to burn out quickly but too heavy to go out in? It's steady and the front yard is a lake, and there are the dogs, muddy and soaked and free.

"Do you know the dogs are out?" I ask.

"They won't come back in," Adeline says. "Come and eat."

There's a newspaper on the kitchen table, still bound in its plastic sleeve. "I thought we weren't getting these anymore," I said. "Didn't you call and cancel last week?"

"Yes, I called on Thursday. We've still got another week of deliveries paid for."

"They can't just cancel it and give us a refund?"

"Apparently not." She drops a plate of pancakes in front of me. "Put it in the recycling if you don't want it."

I almost say something snarky, but I decide to bury it with a bite of pancake. Against my better judgment, I unfold the paper and read the headline. *House Approves Bill To Dismantle Postal Service, Senate Votes Tuesday*. The pancake doesn't go down right. I read it again and choke and pound on the table. Then Adeline takes the paper from me and the pancake hits the right tube and I'm alright again.

“You see,” she says, “this is why I don’t like news at the table. I’m going to put it in the recycling.”

“Hang on,” I say, and snatch it back from her. “This is important. Those miserable bastards in Washington are out to get me again.”

The baby looks at me with big eyes and what is clearly awe, but Adeline takes it as fear and shushes me. “If you’re going to yell,” she says, “take it outside.”

“But they’re trying to—“

“No. I don’t want to hear it. Save your anger for the bar. I won’t have it at breakfast.”

So I put my face to my plate and scowl my way through the front page of the paper. My eyes skim the lines, but I don’t see a word. I’m thinking about business. Who will want novelty mailboxes now? Even if people write more letters, there’ll be no one to deliver them. The issue had been creeping up on me for years, but I’d hoped that I could avoid it for a little while longer.

“When you’re done eating,” Adeline says, “could you put the mail out?”

“The mail doesn’t run anymore,” I say.

“I’m not going out there. I took the girls to the vet for you yesterday; you can take the mail out for me.”

“Won’t do any good,” I say. “Says right here: All mailmen fired effective immediately. Mail trucks to be turned into ice cream trucks.”

“The dogs will be sad,” she says.

There are two dogs: a Whiner and a Yelper. They’re under the mailbox, cooing mournfully at the rain. At this point the baby is starting to whine, but we’re neck deep in pancakes and try to ignore him.

“The mail needs to be out by two,” Adeline says.

I flip through the newspaper. “They’re saying they might execute them. The mailmen. Not their fault really. No use for them anymore.” I want to be serious about it, but she’ll never let me have my rage before sundown, so I distract myself with the pancakes. “These are delicious.”

“Thank you,” she says. “Do something about the baby, would you?”

“He wants the dogs.”

Both animals look up, weeping rain. Dogs know when they’re being talked about. My childhood boxer knew if he was going to get beat by the way my father smelled when he came home.

“The dogs stink like the bottom of the drain,” she says, and makes sure the pet door is locked.

“I’ll just hose them off and let them dry in the garage.”

Adeline settles back down at the table. “Tell your mother to stop texting me.”

“Stop texting her back.”

“It doesn’t matter what I do,” she says, and picks at her food. “You can do something. I can’t take it anymore.”

I can see the dogs through one of the side lights on the front door. The big one, the Whiner, she’s chewed a nice shard of wood out of the mailbox post and is gnawing it to splinters. It’s windy and the post is leaning at an ugly angle. The box itself is one of my more popular designs. It’s shaped like a mail truck. The back of the truck has a rolling door where you put the mail in.

“She has a whole routine now,” Adeline says. “She texts me in the morning to ask how the baby slept, and after breakfast to see how that went, and then lunch, and how was the *nap*, and I just—“

“Breathe,” I tell her.

She stops to catch herself. “If I ignore her, she calls. If I ignore those, she comes banging on the door.”

“She’s remembers when I was a baby,” I say. “It’s nostalgic.”

“She regrets having your father tied,” Adeline says. “I won’t do that.”

“What if I do it myself?”

“I don’t want you to.”

“These are really good,” I say. “You should make them like this every time.”

“I do,” she says. “Usually the dogs are in here. Everything tastes different with dog hair.” She’s got a view of the mutts too. “Maybe the mailman will take them. They like him so much.”

“They hanged him,” I say. “I tied the noose myself.”

“You don’t remember how to tie your shoes properly,” she says. It’s true. A consequence of prolonged exposure to loafers.

Now the baby catches sight of the dogs. He stretches and gurgles and pulls at my robe, so I unlock the door and take him outside. The dogs jump and dance around us. The baby laughs and spits at the rain.

“Stop that,” Adeline tells me from the doorway. “You’re getting him wet.”

That night, I go over to the mayor's house. He's got a red brick house on Quarter Street, with white shutters and a black roof and "Re-Elect Barton!" signs all over the lawn. By the street is one of my mailboxes; it's shaped like a giant cigar. The mayor and I went to community college together. Class of '95. I go up and ring the bell and he's already there at the door.

"You shouldn't have come, George," he says.

"You've got time," I say.

"I don't want to deal with it. Every year I've got to deal with it."

"So get out of the game," I say.

"But then I don't get the perks," he says. A woman comes to the door and asks who it is. It isn't his wife.

"A colleague," he says. "Go back to the bedroom."

"I'm bored," she says.

"There's a box under the nightstand," he says. "And some rolling papers in the desk. Go keep yourself busy. I'll be there in a bit."

She gives him that look, the one Adeline used to give me when we were dating and she still thought I was someone else. What is the life of this girl like, I wonder, in her purple negligee and her glossed lips and the perfect tones and rises on the backs of her thighs. Is this the highpoint of her year? Does she have a mailbox? Would she, by chance, like to buy a new one?

"The cheap ones never know what to do with themselves," the mayor says. "Come in. Brandy?"

"Whiskey," I say.

"Good. I ran out of brandy last night."

“Is that so?”

“Well, all the glasses are dirty. Can’t drink brandy from the bottle.” He leads me into his liquor study and opens one of the walls. “Take your pick,” he says. “Closer to the ceiling are better brands.”

I pick a moderately priced bottle of whiskey and unscrew the cap. The mayor’s got a half-empty bottle of vodka on the desk and he goes with that.

“This is about the election, isn’t it,” he asks.

“No, sir.”

“Don’t sir me.”

“Apologies,” I say. “It’s the sobriety.”

He raises his bottle. “Here’s to medication.”

I nearly break my bottle toasting. The vibrations run up my arm and through my heart and get to my brain and make me thirsty.

“Have you been reading the news,” I ask him.

“Which news?”

“There’s only one,” I say.

He sits down at his desk so he can stand in protest. “There’s the public news, private news, local news, national news, subnational news, extranational news, multinational news, space news, galactic news—“

I take a long drink from my bottle. “It’s about the mailmen,” I say, and wipe the fire from my lips.

He sits down and puts his feet up. “You don’t like it? There’s always newspapers and packages.”

“They leave newspapers on the driveway and packages on the porch. No letters, no mailboxes.”

“You can sell them as collector’s items. Or make novelty doghouses. Same thing, right? Just have to make them bigger.”

I sink into an armchair. “It’s not that easy.”

“So why don’t you send Washington a letter?”

“They don’t read my letters,” I say. “They go through screening and when they see my name they gather around and laugh and then they open the letter and laugh again and then they burn it.”

“What makes you think they read mine?”

“Please, Bill. Your boy liked that space shuttle box, didn’t he?”

The mayor sits very still and works his bottle methodically. “Are you going to contribute to the campaign fund?”

“I’ll make you another mailbox,” I say.

“I already have one,” he says.

“You can’t be reelected, you know.”

“Don’t count me out.”

“You’ve already served your terms,” I say. “Legally, you can’t.”

“That hasn’t stopped me before,” he said, and finished his vodka.

That’s true. He’s been our mayor for about twenty years. He boozes up everyone that comes to see him and then talks them around to his side. This is why I want him to talk to congress. Our congressmen look like they haven’t had a drink since they were fifteen. I want them to get drunk and see the importance of mailboxes.

“Funds are tight this year,” the mayor says. “Will you be contributing?”

I look at him. “Would you like some dogs?”

THE END

OUT OF THE BODY

“We’ll pay for the entire procedure,” Murphy said. “Top of the line model. I’ll even do the surgery myself. Here, I made a graphic for you.”

He showed me a cg image of the back of my head, x-rayed open to reveal the placement of the exo. It wasn’t the first time I’d seen the new styles of implants – I read ExoDaily.com with some regularity – but the sleekness of it still surprised me. In the mid 2010’s, when I was just a student in Murphy’s Neural Interfaces class at North Carolina State, the current manifestations of exocortices were just wishful thinking. The technology to wire a computer into one’s brain was in its infancy, and required bulky neck implants. Now, fifteen years later, the new versions were just bundles of gray cords that ran along the brainstem. The only external features were two sockets on the back of the neck for wired connections.

“It’s safe?” I asked.

Murphy took off his glasses and cleaned them with his shirt, breathing on each lens in turn. “Nothing is completely safe. For every thousand exos sold in the last quarter, about five had rejections.” He’d lost about fifty pounds in the last couple years, and his face had become gaunt and folded. He looked wispy and impermanent without his glasses to magnify his eyes.

“How do those go?” I asked. This man was only twenty years older than me; why did he look as though he were in his eighties?

“As well as we can hope for.” He reequipped his glasses and was suddenly sixty-two again. “The exos themselves are much better at detecting when a rejection is going to occur and raising an alert so preventive measures can be taken. If the rejection is caught early, the exo can usually be removed before any damage is done.”

“And when it can’t?”

He met my eyes. “There hasn’t been a death for over three years. Things were just starting up back then, Lou. Now we’ve got a whole field of experienced doctors who work with exos all day. It’s safe. You’ll be fine.”

“It’s hard to forget,” I said.

“I know. Do you want some time to think about it?”

I’d been thinking about it for years. “You said you’d pay for all of it?”

“Of course. You deserve that much. It’s time you did this, and I want to make sure that it’s done right.” He turned the blinds down against the afternoon light. “What happened with Sarah was...I mean, I’m not trying to make up for her. I can’t make it even. I just want to do something for you, that’s all.”

All was never all with Murphy, but I would have been a fool to say no. The model he was offering me was high end, easily worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. I almost asked about the price, but I thought better of it. The man made eight figures and had never married, so he had the money to spare. He was one of the world’s leading exologists; who was I to refuse such a gift?

I told him I would take it, and we set up a date for the surgery. When I went home and told Catherine, she gave me a big hug.

“Oh, Lou, I’m so proud of you,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said, and rubbed her back. That night I dreamt of Sarah. I saw her in her new cybernetic body, putting on a wig made out of her old hair. She smiled, but it didn’t look like her. I saw her in the kitchen, saw myself watching helplessly as she dismantled herself, piece by piece.

The surgery was just like getting my appendix out: mask goes on, they call my name a few times, darkness, then I wake up groggy and I can’t talk. Except this time there was an ache in the back of my neck. There was a nurse nearby; she gave me some sweet words and a cup of ice to suck on. Murphy appeared for long enough to pat me on the shoulder and tell me I had done well, and then he was gone. There was something in the corner of my eye. I swept my eyes around lazily, trying to catch whatever it was, and only made myself tired. By the time the nurse had wheeled me to my room, the grey mists of sleep had returned to claim me.

When I woke again I couldn’t think about anything but food. Catherine was in a chair by the bed and rang for the nurse, who brought me the usual platter of hospital mush. She could have brought me a bowl of baby food, or mashed zucchini, and it wouldn’t have made a difference; I shoveled it down as fast as I could swallow.

“Do you know if they’ll give me any more?” I asked, and took the last spoonful of jello. “Or a cheeseburger?”

Catherine eyed my empty plate. “I don’t know how you’re even hungry. I can’t eat anything after surgery.”

“I want something I can chew on,” I said.

There was a knock on the door, and Murphy poked his head in. “How are you feeling?”

I held up my plate. “Do I get seconds?”

“Sure,” he said, and mentioned it to a nurse in the hallway. He sat down on the other side of the bed from Catherine and took my vitals. “I forgot to mention that your appetite might increase. We’re phasing out battery-powered exos. Yours runs off your latent biochemical energy. Sometimes that means you’ll have a bigger appetite.”

“I find that hard to imagine,” Catherine said. “Have you seen the way he eats?”

“Not recently, but I remember how he ate in college. Every Thursday after class, I would take him and Sarah out to get a burger. Ah, I remember the way he used to look at her when...” He realized who he was talking to and quickly changed gears. “Well, anyway. Some people have enough spare energy running around that they don’t see an appetite increase. Sometimes it stimulates the metabolism and sometimes it doesn’t. Actually, there’s evidence that it causes weight loss in people who are overweight.” He gave a guilty little smile. “I’m living proof, in fact.”

The nurse brought me a new plate of mush, but I was focused on Murphy now. His head was turned towards Catherine, and I could see the dark scars on the back of his neck, proof of the five or six different models of exo he had tried over the last fifteen years. He pulled a cord from his pocket and plugged one end into his neck.

“Here,” he said, “I’m going to make sure everything is running properly. Do you want to plug it in, or should I?”

“I’ll do it,” I said, and took the cord from him. It took a moment to find the socket in my neck and another to find the right angle, but eventually it slid right in. I could hear it inside my own skull, the scrape of gold on gold and the subtle click as it locked into place. There was a

tingling in my skin around the plug, and I wondered if it was energy from the connection or just goose bumps.

Murphy was making small, meaningless gestures with his hands, working on something with his exo that only he could see. “Have you noticed the interface yet? Sometimes it can take up to a day to manifest.”

“I can see it,” I said. Now that I had food in my stomach, the oddities on the edge of my vision had become clear. They weren’t actually in my vision – they didn’t cover up anything in my periphery – but I could see them just the same. As I focused on them, they would blossom into digital screens, floating clearly in the dark space just above my vision. One of them had a full readout of my vital signs, and another was looking for access to the hospital’s wireless.

“It’ll take practice before you’re proficient,” Murphy said. “There are a lot of features you won’t notice for the first couple days.”

“More than this?” I asked. Beyond the screens in my head, my vision was augmented. When I looked at any device in the room, from the television to the phone in Catherine’s lap, I could see an aura, a hum of light illuminating it. From my direct connection with Murphy, I could see his entire exo glowing beneath the skin. There were lines of text floating above his end of the cord, a short list of his exo’s specifications. I could see it clearly now: the new model he had installed a few months ago, an earlier iteration of the one I was wearing. The exo itself was new, but much of the architecture that rooted it to his spine was a mismatch of parts from earlier units. If I looked hard enough I could even see past his exo, into his body itself. I saw nerve damage in his spine, and flutters in his heart, and weakness in his lungs.

He was saying something, but I couldn’t hear him. There were more layers to see if I closed my eyes and looked with just my exo. He had an aura to him; not just the whole of him;

every cell and every hair was alight with energy. But there was something sickly about the light, and there was a set of numbers floating near his chest. A countdown, with only fifty-eight days left.

When Catherine grabbed my arm and called my name, I realized I was crying. I couldn't stop, and for what felt like minutes I was helpless. Then Murphy pulled the cord out of my neck and the numbers disappeared. He quietly excused himself and headed for the door, but by then I had gotten myself under control.

"It's alright," I said. "Don't go anywhere."

Catherine ran her hand through my hair. "And you were doing so well, too. But that one wasn't so bad." Even with my eyes closed, I could see her phone working as she put a new entry in the log she kept of my episodes.

"Are you okay?" I asked Murphy.

"That's what I should be asking you," he said.

"Do you know what you've done to yourself?"

"I'm doing just fine, thank you." For a moment I saw the young Murphy, the fiery and obstinate professor who had lured me into the world of science with his enthusiasm and his pretty little research assistant; the man who had smiled so wide at our wedding and stood so defiantly in the face of her accidents. But it was hollow; just a shell.

"Alan," I said. "You don't have much time left."

"I know," he said. "That's why I'm getting out."

His phone chirped at him and he ducked out of the room, promising to return when he could. As he turned away I thought I saw the counter again, ticking away just above his temple.

That night Sarah snuck into my exo while I was dreaming. I could feel the exo there, hovering just outside of the dream. If I reached for it, I could watch the dream play out across my brain. And then she called my name, and suddenly she was rifling through my head like she was looking for a lost file. I tried to get rid of her, to tell her she was dead, but she wouldn't listen. I should have known that better than anyone. Had she listened when I told her not to do tests on herself, and especially not at home? No more than she had listened on the night she took herself apart. In fact, that was probably why she had come. God had told her to stay put in Heaven, and she had not listened.

I woke up at quarter to seven and found Catherine in the shower. My neck was still sore, but my exo was less distracting than it had been the day before; it was no longer an intrusion. The ethereal glow of electronics was even comforting. I could see the wires running through the walls and the hum of large equipment on nearby floors. I reached for Catherine, but there was nothing there; she was naked and void of anything digital.

In the hallway, walking on just the other side of the wall from her, I could feel two men walking. If I focused on the exo of either one, a list of data would pop into my head. Just by looking at the shades of their auras I could tell one was older, a doctor, and one was younger, a nurse. They both had exos without batteries, like mine, and their auras pulsed in tune with their hearts. Suddenly I understood why the media, in response to the growing popularity of exos in the early 2020s, had raised such a fuss about the death of privacy. But I didn't share their lamentations. Just as people had adapted to the breaches of privacy brought about by the telephone, the video camera, and the internet, so too had they adapted to exos.

I heard Catherine shut off the shower and pick up her towel; she was humming something. It was familiar, but I was too groggy to place it. In a few minutes she stepped out of the bathroom looking suit sharp for the office.

“I’m going home tonight,” she said. “It’s awful sleeping here.”

“What song was that?” I asked.

She blinked at me. “What song?”

“The one you were humming.”

“I wasn’t humming anything.” She laughed. “When do I ever hum?”

I realized that the humming was still going; it was Sarah, inside my own head. I chased after it, even pulled up a reading on my own brainwaves, before I remembered where I was.

“Are you alright?” Catherine asked.

“I’m fine,” I said, and tried to find a way to drown the humming out. My exo had music storage, but I didn’t have any music in there yet.

“Okay, then.” She pulled her heels on, something that never looked comfortable.

“Because I won’t be free until tonight. Unless it’s an emergency, of course, please call me if it’s an emergency. But I really need to put in a good nine hours today.”

She gave me a kiss – on the cheek, she will not kiss me with morning breath – and was gone. I almost called her back, but I didn’t want to seem weak. I had shown too much weakness around her already, and there was no place for that anymore. That weakness was why I had let Sarah destroy herself.

She was still humming, and she kept at it until I fell back to sleep.

“You should get out,” Sarah said. “It’s so much better out here.”

I paged a nurse, and there was a lady at the door immediately. Murphy had given me a room by the nurses' station.

"What is it, sweetie?" She moved in close and wiped the sweat off of my face with a towel. "Been having nightmares? I had nightmares when they put mine in, too."

"Can I talk to Dr. Murphy?" I asked.

She shook her head and checked my IV. "Dr. Murphy is going to be busy until about four o' clock."

My exo said it was two-thirty. "Is he in surgery?"

"Mmhm. He's doing a somatoplasty."

Even after years of exposure, that was still not a word I was comfortable with. The first time I'd heard it was ten years ago, on the night that Sarah crashed her motorcycle. Her spine was broken, her body paralyzed, and Murphy had suggested moving her brain into a robotic body. It wasn't the procedure that had bothered me, but the reduction of it to five syllables. The nurse said it like it was routine. It probably was, but it still made me shiver. There were so many places where something could go wrong, and you could lose that person forever.

"Not forever," Sarah said. She was swimming up and down my exo.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" the nurse asked. "Do you think you're feeling strong enough?"

"I think so," I said, and eased my legs over the side of the bed. Standing was not as hard as it had been when I had my appendix out – I didn't have a gash cut out of my center of gravity this time – but I was still wobbly on my feet, and straightening my back was rough. As the nurse led me out of the room, I began to pick up strength and speed.

A lap around the hallway was enough to get my blood moving properly again. My exo responded to the increase in metabolism, and my senses only grew stronger. I could see different colors to the auras of people; everyone was different, based on the makeup of their exo, what they had loaded on it, what devices they had connected to it, and their profession. Hospital staff were green, the nurses a fainter lime and the doctors a deep and rich emerald. When a group of them stood together, their exos resonated and they made a forest of light. They all had muted highlights of purple, though the shade was more prominent in certain doctors; probably the color of research and science.

Businesspeople were blue, but they varied dramatically in shade. We passed a hospital administrator who was the vibrant blue-green of the sea, and a local restaurateur who had complex swirls of amber and cobalt. There was a woman doing sketches on her artTablet, and she was orange like a flame. I looked down at my hands, but I couldn't see my own aura. Was it orange, or did one have to be a real artist for that? It was hard to imagine that my malnourished collection of watercolors, none of which had drawn attention even at the local independent art gallery, qualified me for the title. More likely it was purple, still caught up in my time working in the lab with Murphy and Sarah.

“Dr. Murphy told me what happened with your wife,” the nurse said, her hand on my arm, “and I think you're very brave. I don't know if I could have done it, if it were me instead of you.”

I looked down at her from the corner of my eye and wondered how much he had actually told her. Had he mentioned her first exo, and how she had tried plugging herself into every device in the house? Did he tell her about the rejection, or just the crash? Had he, in passing, noted how many pieces she was in when she died?

“Four hundred and seventy-two,” Sarah said. “Unless you’re counting screws. Then it’s a lot more.”

I looked into the nurse’s exo. “Were you afraid of getting yours?”

“A little bit,” she said. “But I had to get it to keep the job, and they paid for it anyway, so I didn’t mind.” She sighed. “But now they’re putting them in the little children, and I don’t know about that.”

Her exo had a battery, and I couldn’t see as far into her as I could with the newer models. But I could see her heartbeat clearly, and there was a countdown above her chest. I pulled away before I had a chance to read it, but Sarah wasn’t so finicky. She read it and stuck the number in front of my eyes where I had to see it. Twenty-six years.

“There’s a way to make that number disappear,” she said. “A way to make it like this,” and she drew a symbol in my head. ∞ Infinity.

Curiosity welled in my throat. “Do people have different colors to you?” I asked the nurse.

“You mean the auras? No, honey, they’re all white to me. Some people see colors. My husband does.”

“What about other things? Could my exo show me, say, when someone is going to die?”

“I don’t see how. But nobody sees exactly the same things. It’s all about how your mind interprets the data from your exo.”

My strength started to give and my knees quaked. The nurse, much stronger than I had given her credit for, kept me up and hauled me back to my room, cooing the whole way. Once she had tucked me into bed and gone, I turned on the TV and tried not to pay attention to Sarah. She was wandering the folds of my brain, murmuring.

Murphy came to see me around four-thirty, and I was glad I could talk to him before Catherine returned. I almost said something about Sarah, but I wasn't sure how to broach the subject. To suggest that it was really her voice in my head, that she hadn't died and had returned through my exo, was to admit that I was insane.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. His face was ragged, and he could not hide the faint tremors in his hands. I wondered if they shook during surgery, or if it was only afterwards that he let them do as they would.

"Better than you, I think." I could see into him, as clearly as I had yesterday with a direct connection. "Why don't you tell me what's going on?" If he plugged into my exo again, how much stronger would it be this time?

His face closed up, and for a moment he was going to resist me, and then he melted into one of the chairs. "I think you know what's going on, Lou. I've pushed it too far. Only so much this body can take."

I wanted to tell him about the counter, but I couldn't. I tried to convince myself that it, like Sarah, was just a hallucination. My mind was weak from surgery and oxycodone, and it wasn't accustomed to the input from my exo, so it was handing me falsehoods. That was my hope.

He took off his glasses and rubbed his nose. "I just finished putting a young man into a new body. Was in a car accident, complete paralysis...reminded me of Sarah. I said we should wait to do the surgery, let him stabilize, but the parents wouldn't have it. He's some board man at ConAgra, real pay-his-way-through-it type. They had the money for it; all of it, up front. That

never happens, you know. Plus, there was talk of a donation to the hospital. It was out of my hands.” He said it like he wanted forgiveness, but I didn’t have any for him.

“Are you sure you’re allowed to tell me this?” I asked.

He waved his hand, didn’t even consider the question. “Look, Lou. The longer you have an exo, the more you start to...see things. Hear things, that you aren’t sure are there. Does that sound crazy?”

I smiled. “Sounds alright to me.”

He nodded, but he wasn’t satisfied. “When we were hooking him into the cybod, there was a...jump. The auras, can you see the auras yet?”

“Am I not supposed to see them?” I asked.

“No, you are, but most people only see them faintly, and only around devices and exos. People have them too, living things, without any technology. You can’t see those, can you?”

“No,” I lied. I hadn’t been able to see them that morning, but now they were as clear as all the other auras.

“Good,” he said. “I can only see them when I’m in surgery, and only recently. I don’t like it. I’ve been talking to my colleague Dr. Kichikawa at Tokyo Tech, and he thinks it’s all subjective. He says that I see the auras because I want to see them, because I’m getting old and I’m looking for proof of the soul. But I’m not so sure.”

I tried to keep my eyes from his counter. “What happened in surgery?”

Murphy took a moment to collect himself. “When I was plugging him in, I saw his aura change. We keep the body alive, you know, in case something goes wrong. We pulled his brain out and his aura stayed with his body. The brain didn’t have one. Then we hooked him into the

cybod, and his brain took on the cybod's aura. A digital aura. The one around his real body just faded away.

Sarah was chuckling, but I ignored her. "So? Isn't that what's supposed to happen?"

"I don't know. That's the thing. The auras that we see are just augmentations; they're things the exos make us see so we can identify technology. We're not supposed to see them around living things. What was it that I was seeing? I can't shake the feeling that I killed that boy, and what's walking around now is just some homunculus."

"As he gets closer to the end," Sarah said, "it gets easier for him to see."

I forced myself to say it. "Alan, you're going to die soon."

He hardly blinked. "No, my friend, my body is going to die soon. I've pushed it to its limits. Two weeks from today I'm going to transfer to a cybod." His voice didn't waver, but there was no conviction in it.

"Are you sure you'll survive the surgery?"

"That boy thought he was the same person he was before the operation. When we secured his brain and got the cybod running and he could see and talk again, he knew who he was. The parents knew who he was. But I'm not so sure. Let's say that aura around his body was his soul. Does that mean that he doesn't have one anymore? Does he have a different one? When we put his brain in the cybod, did the old soul go to God, and God sent back a new one?"

"I thought you didn't believe," I said.

"Then what did I see? How much of it is real?"

Sarah was laughing now, that free and oblivious laugh that had drawn me to her in the first place. I wanted to see her face again, to touch her skin and smell her again. I wanted to see what her aura looked like.

Suddenly Murphy was close and whispering. “What did she say to you?”

I couldn’t hear him. I had spotted the counter by his temple again, and I realized that it was different from the one on his chest. The number was much larger.

He grabbed my shoulder and shook me. “Sarah. I know she saw something. That’s what happened when she had her rejection. What did she say to you when she was taking herself apart?”

There was a knock at the door and Catherine beamed in. Murphy straightened up and made small talk for a minute or so before sneaking away. Catherine popped her heels off and started telling me about her day in the office. I tried to listen, but her voice was murky and distant. There was something floating around my exo, just out of reach.

“*Sarah?*” I called.

“*What is it, love?*”

It was hard to put the words together, even in my head. “*Are you real?*”

“*I could show you.*”

Suddenly her presence filled my exo, and I felt a hand on my chest. There was a push and I fell away from my body, towards a deep, cavernous blackness. But there were lights down there, and music, except it was too faint to make out. Then something went taut, and my heart began to howl at me. I twisted and screamed, and then I was back in my body, chasing down my breath. I looked for Catherine, but she was in the bathroom washing her face.

Sarah sounded disappointed. “*If you want to really see me, you have to find your way out. I can help you along, but you have to find the way.*”

“*Out of what?*” I asked.

“*Out of the body.*”

Catherine emerged from the bathroom, patting her face with a towel. I could smell the lavender facial wash she always used. “I haven’t even asked how you are. Is everything still working alright? How do you feel?”

The sight of her face settled my heart, and it sent me a smile. “I could go for something to eat,” I said.

Murphy cleared me for release on the third day after the surgery. I was beginning to understand why they ‘released’ you from the hospital, as they released you from a mental institution, or a prison. The bleached sterility of the place had closed in on me, and my exo was making me tired. I could see auras in my sleep, and dreamt I was wandering the halls, floating from device to device. I was looking for Sarah, trying to find the body that she had left in this same hospital ten years earlier. But it wasn’t there. Both of her bodies – organic and cybernetic – weren’t hers anymore. She had left them behind.

“The hospital atmosphere doesn’t agree with some people,” Murphy said, another cord between our necks. “You’ll feel better once you’ve slept in your own bed. Your mind is still adapting to the exo and that takes time. Until it’s fully adjusted, extended use is going to wear you out. But it’s just like a muscle: the more you use it, the easier it gets.” He was looking at a display of my exo, turning it over and over in his head.

“How much am I supposed to see?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“When you’ve got this cord in my neck,” I said. “You can see my exo, right? How much am I supposed to see of yours?”

“How much can you see?”

“Just some data about what model it is,” I lied.

He pulled the cord out of my neck. “That’s all you should be seeing. This is cable is meant to work in one direction, for just this sort of inspection. There are other cables that work both ways, but I don’t think we have that kind of relationship. I wouldn’t want to make your girlfriend jealous.” He gave me a little wink.

I kept my mouth shut. Even after he had removed the cable, I could still see into his exo. Now he was authorizing my release with the system. As soon as it was cleared, his exo showed him information on the next patient lined up for my room. Lawrence Hillcoat, twenty-seven, improper neural assimilation of a transfemoral robotic prosthesis. Murphy closed the file before I could read any more.

“I won’t be around to see you out,” he said, and extended his hand. “Be well, Lou. Call me in a few days and let me know how things are going.”

“I want to be here for the surgery,” I said. I still couldn’t say the word, *somatoplasty*, without seeing Sarah after the accident, twisted around the wreckage of her motorcycle.

“You remember all the bad things,” Sarah said. *“Why get sentimental? It was just a body.”*

Murphy had a hard time meeting my eyes. “I don’t know about that.”

“Promise me.”

I wouldn’t let his hand go, and he realized that he wasn’t going to get away. “Alright. It’s scheduled for the eighteenth. We’re going to do it early in the morning.”

“I’ll be here,” I said. I wanted to know if that counter over his temple was really different from the one on his chest. The number was ridiculous: two-hundred and fifty years, and every time I looked it went up. There was evidence that putting a brain in a cybod arrested aging, but

no one had been in a cybod for long enough to confirm it. As he left the room, I had a vision of his body face down on an operating table. The back of his head and neck were opened up like a flower, the top of the skull cut off to get at the brain. The nerves were snipped, and the heart stopped.

When Catherine returned from work, the nurses put me in a wheelchair and took me down to the parking lot. They had done the same thing when I had my appendix out, and it was just as empowering and embarrassing as it had been then. But the air outside was fresh and clear, and I quickly forgot about the hospital.

“It’s like that,” Sarah said. “While you’re still in it, it’s all you can think about. But as soon as you’re out, you don’t care anymore. You forget why you were ever in there in the first place.”

“Be quiet,” I said, and grasped Catherine’s arm for support. “Leave me alone.”

Catherine helped me into the passenger’s side. “I made up the couch bed in your studio,” she said. “I figured you’d want to close yourself in there for a while.”

“Thank you,” I said. “But I want to sleep in the bed tonight.”

She put her hand on my thigh and looked over her glasses at me. “Think you’ll have the energy to do more than sleep? It’s been lonely.”

A smile pulled at my cheeks. “I think I can manage to lie there. My back’s a little sore.”

She snorted and then laughed. “Poor baby. It must be so tough for you.”

As we rolled out of the parking lot, my exo flooded me with information about the city. Raleigh had spent the first three decades of the century transforming into a prosperous technopolis. Population bursts in the 00’s had continued unabated, but nothing like a big city

had ever coalesced. Instead we had a forest of suburbs and townhouses, dotted with shopping centers and patches of skyscrapers. In 2025 the city, enjoying a fruitful economy, decided to overhaul public services for most of the metro. They rebuilt the roads, integrated new public transportation, moved all the power lines underground, reworked the municipal broadband, and stuck computers into everything they could. It meant a tax hike and people fought it all the way, but when it was finished Raleigh was one of the most advanced cities in the nation.

The result is that my exo filled my head with a metro's worth of light and data all at once. I could see the network of power lines and fiber optic cables, running underground in vast webs of light. Downtown, though it was out of direct physical sight, was glowing in the distance. Every building we passed had its own ecosystem of cables and devices and exos, like trees in the rainforest. I watched the cars roll by, each illuminated in red, and realized what I was seeing. The power and broadband cables were nerves, buried in the red clay of flesh and covered with the topsoil of skin. The roads were arteries and veins, the cars blood cells, the drivers oxygen and nutrients. It was an analogy I'd heard before, but in the past I'd shrugged it off as personification. Now it was all I could see.

"Do you understand now?" Sarah asked. "The body isn't limited to a single unit. Not anymore."

By the time we got home I was tired again. I could trace the paths of utility cables through the walls of the house. Every piece of electronics announced its presence in my head, from the fridge to the television to the thermostat. They chattered at my exo, eager for attention, until my skull felt like it was screwed on too tightly.

"Do you want something to eat?" Catherine asked. She slipped a pan of chicken into the oven, having already answered the question for herself.

“I’m just going to lie down for a bit,” I said, and put my feet to the stairs. I headed for the one quiet room in the house: my studio. There were no electronics in there. Nothing for my exo to talk to and nothing to glow except for the wires in the walls.

I stopped before the landing. The door to the studio was closed, as always. Ten years ago, the room had been our office; Sarah’s and mine. On the night of her rejection, I had been coming up the stairs just like this. Sarah had wandered out of the office, but it wasn’t her. Every step was smooth, like water. There were wires in her neck, stretching back into the office, and she walked until they were taught. They popped out of her neck, and she was gone. Just crumbled. I thought she was going to fall right through the floor and never stop. Come out on the other side of the world somewhere.

“What did you see?” I asked her.

“The way out,” Sarah said. *“I didn’t quite make it.”*

“But why did you want to leave?”

“I didn’t. Not yet.”

She wouldn’t say any more, but things were starting to fall into place on their own. I had hauled her off to the hospital, where Murphy assumed her body had rejected her exo. She was one of the first people to have an exo, and a rejection was always looming in our minds. But now I understood: her exo had done the rejecting. It had rejected her body, and almost killed her in the process. Murphy, based on our conversation yesterday, had come to the same conclusion. Once the exo was removed, she came back to us within hours. But something was different. Her smile wasn’t quite the same, and the world didn’t excite her the way it had. Her exo was gone, and it had taken part of her with it.

I stepped into the studio and shut the door behind me. This room had once housed a pair of desks and a conglomeration of computers, but I had stripped it all. All that was left was the couch – an ancient, sand-colored thing that I didn't mind getting paint on – which Catherine had unfolded and dressed with cheap sheets. I had covered the floors in tarps and drop cloths and tacked whiteboards to the walls, though I never used them. There was a small cabinet to hold my supplies, and beside that was a stack of my paintings. A shallow stack, no more than ten thick.

“This is what you've been doing?” Sarah asked. *“What happened to our research? What about your dreams?”*

I resisted the urge to kick something over. *“What do you know of my dreams? Can you name one of them?”*

“We wanted to become famous exologists and travel around the world giving lectures.”

“No, you wanted that. I wanted children. I wanted you. But you were so caught up in yourself. Even after the wedding, you couldn't pull yourself from your work. Do you want to know what happened to my dreams? They died the day you did.”

Her voice grew faint. *“But I never died.”*

“Well, you fooled me.”

She pulled away from me, and for a moment I was glad. Then regret tugged at my chest, and I had to bury myself in my paintings to make it go away. Here a portrait of Catherine from the side, highlighting her generous curves and the perfect straightness of her nose. There an inaccurate landscape shot of the airport, the runways pointing in the wrong directions. The more I looked through them, the less I was satisfied. But Sarah was looking now, reading the output from my eyes.

“Paint something for me,” she said.

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can. You painted those for me, didn’t you?”

This time I kicked over my stool. *“Get out.”*

“But I—“

“Be quiet. Are you still blind? Do you still see nothing of other people’s feelings?

You’ve left your body and you still can’t get out of your own goddamn head.”

“I just want—“

“It’s not about what you want! These paintings aren’t for you. I did this to forget about you. Don’t you understand? I had to tear everything out and close myself in here with nothing but blank canvas. You already haunted me once, why do you have to do it again?”

“I’m not a ghost,” she whispered.

“They did an autopsy on your brain. They cut it up into a million paper slices. Do you know what they found? You were dead! That’s what they found. So go away.”

My head went quiet, and all I heard was the sound of my own breath. I picked up my stool and started to mix a batch of paints. The input from my exo wasn’t quite so heavy now. If I closed my eyes, I could see my next picture. I could turn it over with my exo and watch each brushstroke being laid. But the colors in my head were only feelings; they would still have to be realized in the paints themselves. So I made up reds and oranges, and tried to find the best way to reveal the glow of cables buried in clay.

The morning of the eighteenth, I showed up at the hospital and was allowed a short visit with Murphy before he went in to surgery. They had him in a hospital gown already, and they’d shaved off what was left of his hair. The back of his head and neck were decorated with black

lines and circles. It looked ritualistic and religious, and instead of incision guidelines I saw a ward to keep the mind from getting out.

“Hi, Lou,” he said. “How’s the exo treating you?” His colors were fading, like he’d been put through the laundry too many times.

“I don’t know what I did without it,” I said. After two weeks of adjustment, I’d grown accustomed to my exo and the level of insight it gave me. I could see not only Murphy’s exo but the beat of his entire nervous system, and I could do it while I was looking at something else entirely. But my personal view into his head was gone. It’d been a result of the direct connection, or otherwise something I’d imagined. What hadn’t gone away were the counters. Everything had them, from bugs to mobile devices to people. I’d looked online and asked around, but apparently I was the only one who saw them. Only people had two, and most of the time the numbers were the same. For some people with exos and everyone with a cybod, the number over the brain was larger, sometimes dramatically so. Over Murphy’s chest: four days, six hours. Over his head: three hundred years and rising.

“Are you sure you want to watch the surgery?” he asked. He shook my hand, but the life had left his arm already.

“If you’ll let me.”

“Sure, it’s just...I don’t want it to trigger anything unpleasant.”

I almost laughed. “It’s alright. I sat through Sarah’s somatoplasty; I’m going to sit through yours.”

A pair of nurses came in with a stretcher and rolled him off to surgery, while another nurse directed me to the observation room. As I took the stairs up, I thought about Sarah in her new robotic body. The body had an exo built in, and for a time the light returned to her. She

skipped right over the trauma of her accident; why bother with shock when she had been reunited with her research? For that was always Sarah's first love: her work, and the personal application thereof.

The light didn't last. Her body began to hurt at night; phantom pain from the flesh she'd mangled when her bike skidded into the tree. She fought the pain for weeks, but every time I saw her she had faded a bit. Her body was all still there – it could no longer grow thin or fat or old – but there was less of her, like she was leaking out. Finally I came home one night to find her in the kitchen with a screwdriver, taking herself apart. One of her legs was already gone. She was removing pieces like a surgeon and placing them in neat little piles and stacks. I tried to stop her, but she was too strong. She had hydraulic muscles. So I sat down and asked her why.

“Pain is gone in my leg,” she said.

She got through the other leg, and I forgot where my limbs were. I wasn't sure I was ever going to stand up again. Her hands moved to her torso, but she had only started when her movements became slow.

“It's not so hard,” she said. “I can see it now. Come on, I'll show you.” She held out a hand. I took it, and her eyes closed, and she was gone.

Down in the operating room, a whole team of doctors had already put Murphy to sleep and flipped him onto his stomach. There was a robotic body on one side of the room, facing the wall. The back of the head was open and empty, but otherwise it was indistinguishable from an organic body. The face, though I couldn't see it, was probably modeled after Murphy's own face. It was a far cry from the blocky, awkward, primitive body they'd put Sarah in. For what felt like half an hour, the doctors carefully cut into the lines on Murphy's neck, peeling back layers of skin like they were opening a banana. Eventually his spine was exposed, and I could

see the silver tendrils of his exo mixed in with the tendons. They removed that first and started on his brain.

As a pair of doctors sawed through Murphy's skull, two others prepared its replacement: a black, oval-shaped device that would hold his brain and connect him to his new body. I was no longer thinking about Sarah. As they snipped his optical nerves, I thought about auras and souls. The robotic body, which was already powered on, had the white glow of most electronics. Murphy had an aura too, but it was softer and more nebulous, the light of biology instead of technology.

Finally they were ready to make the transfer. The doctor's closed in around Murphy, and a dense morbidity crept over them. Here was where it could all go wrong. The brain had to be connected to the new skull in stages, so that the blood pumping through it could be gradually replaced with a synthetic analogue. At the same time, the body had to be connected to an artificial brain that would keep the heart and lungs working. You had to fool the two into thinking they were still connected, or else they would realize they were supposed to be dead and make it a reality.

Another half hour ticked by. The doctors were going as slowly as they could; they knew that a botched somatoplasty on the man who had helped pioneer the procedure was a stain that would never come out of their careers. I watched patiently, studying the auras. Then, finally, the last nerve was cut, and they locked his brain into the new skull. His body retained its glow, but the counter by his chest began to freefall. The counter by his temple had stayed with his brain, and it was still going up.

At first, there was no aura around his brain. Then I looked closer, and there was a jewel of muted light. Suddenly I could see into his mind again. Completely anesthetized, his

consciousness had fled into the core of his brain. There were no thoughts, but instead of kind of readiness, the anticipation of stimulus. His new skull was already wirelessly connected to his new body, which itself was connected to the hospital's network and the greater internet. Already I could see his brain start to adopt the sharp white aura of the cybod.

The doctors began to hook him into the cybod. I closed my eyes and looked with just my exo, and then I saw it. The jewel of light in his mind was his essence, the condensation of the processes that made him Alan Murphy. I realized then that you could never fully trick the brain. Even numbed and reduced to its most primal state, his brain knew it had been severed from its body. It was searching for a new vessel. But instead of the new body itself, it was drawn to the wireless connection. As the doctors secured the final wires, I saw a clear path running from that jewel into the expanse of the internet. I saw the way out. And there, waiting at the other end, was Sarah. She had her hand out. I didn't take it.

THE END

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VITA

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