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A Strange Object That Breaks Your Heart: Short Stories

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by

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"The aim of literature," Baskerville replied grandly, "is the creation of a strange object covered with fur which breaks your heart."

- Donald Barthelme, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*

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Critical Introduction

I. Introduction

One of the more irritating things you can do, apparently, is write the very beginnings of stories on little scraps of paper and leave them all around your house. This is annoying for two reasons; the first is the mess, and the second is the lack of narrative fulfillment. All this according to my mother, who is still waiting on the story that follows this line:

"Susanna DeClyde sat in the jalopy and popped her bubblegum. She was going to West Creek, Pennsylvania. She told the taxi driver to stop and…"

No idea what comes after that. But my mom is still waiting.

I've been writing for a long time, but I am a chronic non-finisher. Most of my projects go unfinished, or even just barely started, like poor Susanna DeClyde and her bubblegum. I decided to work on a creative Independent Study this year for precisely that reason. I wanted to write something, and I knew that if my degree was at stake I might actually finish it. I set out, at the beginning of this year, to write a collection of short stories, with the intention of actually finishing all of them, of navigating my way all of the way through a complete creative project and developing my skills as a writer. The playwright David Henry Hwang has this saying, that there are three aspects to being a successful writer: talent, work ethic, and luck. Of the three, only one of them can be taught, and that's work ethic. These stories were my attempt to develop my work ethic, to stick by a project the whole way through, to work at it until it's done. Who knows if I have talent, or if I'll be lucky, but I know that I'll be writing anyways.

II. Why Short Stories?

I had initially thought that this Independent Study was going to focus on one story, that I would write a novel because it seemed like a big, important project. I spent the summer in a state of panic, trying to generate big, important ideas, anything that felt significant enough to write about for nearly an entire year. I felt that I had a sum total of zero worthwhile ideas, not even a general sense of what I wanted to spend a full year studying. But being a writer is very much about being a reader, knowing what it is that interests you, which conversations you want to join in on, and wanting to do the kind of work that you enjoy reading. At the beginning of this process, I hadn't read an entire novel—except for class—in several months; novels were not the kind of work that was calling to me at that point. I was, however, reading a lot of short stories.

Short stories excite me for a few reasons; one is simply that they're short. Brevity is the defining feature of the short story, of course, but that aspect also lends the short story unique qualities of completeness and memorability. As Edgar Allan Poe defined it in his critical comments on the short story in the 1830s, "unity of effect or impression" (Poe 252). A reader can easily finish a short story within a single sitting and is therefore afforded the ability to walk away with an uninterrupted impression of the story in its entirety. Short stories also tend to be focused in a way that longer works are not, they have what Florence Goyet calls an "economy of means" (Goyet 55). Generally speaking, short stories tend to stick to one topic or focus on one character; if they feel expansive, this is generally because they gesture outside of themselves, allowing the audience to fill in the gaps themselves. Short stories rely on "the genre's 'allusive power', which would suggest everything it does not say" (Goyet 60). Short story writers generally do this by working within or beginning within standard conventions of a genre; as Kenneth Millard

explains it, “we might think of generic conventions as a form of vocabulary or grammar by which we situate texts within a specific interpretive paradigm” (Millard 102). Genre is a way of introducing a new story to an audience quickly; many of the works I looked at as sources were short stories that started by using a specific genre, but then subverted or defied the expectations of that genre for dramatic or comedic effect. I found this to be interesting as a reader, and I wanted to use this quality in my own work.

Short stories, for some reason, are the works that stick in my head, the works I think about, over and over again. Some recent examples are Deji Bryce Olukotun’s “Between the Dark and the Dark,” about a deep-space exploration ship that develops the practice of ritual cannibalism, or James Agee’s “A Mother’s Tale,” about a dairy cow explaining to her sons what happens to those cows who travel away on trains every day; or, the key work that finally led me to this project, Raphael Bob-Waksberg’s “A Most Blessed and Auspicious Occasion.” These works stick with me because they leave a singular impression; they give me an entire idea all at once, and as such I’m better able to recall the particular details and moments of the story. That kind of singular, distinct impression excites me, both as a reader and a writer, and I wanted to try and recreate that in my own work.

On a practical level, I chose short stories because I wanted to work on several different stories this year, rather than picking just one, as I would have done if I had worked on a novel. I wanted to use my Independent Study to develop my skills as a writer. In particular, I wanted to work on concluding stories in a way that felt satisfying, and I knew that I wanted to practice this skill repeatedly throughout a collection of stories. I am also glad I worked on short stories because I was able to take an idea from initial concept to finished execution several times; one of the concerns I had as I

approached the final year of my undergraduate education was the worry that, outside of my formal classes in creative writing, I didn't have any established writing habits. I was worried that after graduating I would simply never get around to writing the things I wanted to write.

Working on this collection has helped me in a few ways: first, by requiring that I work pretty consistently, I have established a relatively strong writing habit. Perhaps more significantly, though, working on these stories has dispelled a myth I had been clinging to; that there's a "right" place or time to write a story or to be creative in general. People who consistently produce creative work don't wait for the perfect moment of inspiration, they just write whenever and wherever they have a few moments to spare. Some of these stories were "inspired" moments, where I wrote a lot all at once, but the vast majority were written whenever I forced myself to sit down at my desk and actually write something.

I'm very glad I chose to work on short stories; this has been a rewarding process, and one from which I have learned a great deal. It was fun to work with several different concepts throughout this process, and I am very proud of the resulting stories. I hope you enjoy them!

III. Inspirations

A. Raphael Bob-Waksberg

"A Most Blessed and Auspicious Occasion," the story that led me to this project in the first place, is a story about a young couple trying to plan a small, simple wedding, despite the fact that their relatives keep weighing in: when's the best time to do the Dance of the Cuckolded Woodland Sprite; is it before or after the goat slaughter? "A

Most Blessed and Auspicious Occasion" is from Bob-Waksberg's collection of stories *Someone Who Will Love You in All Your Damaged Glory,* and there are many excellent stories in the book, but "A Most Blessed and Auspicious Occasion" is the one I keep returning to. For one, it's *funny*. Bob-Waksberg is the creator of the television show *Bojack Horseman,* a show I've always really enjoyed, about a washed-up 90's TV star in an absurd version of Hollywood populated by anthropomorphic animals and humans. "A Most Blessed and Auspicious Occasion" has the same style that *Bojack Horseman* does; the collision of the real and the absurd. The world the characters inhabit is both mundane and incredibly strange:

> "'We're trying to keep things small and simple,' I say. 'We really don't want our wedding to turn into a big, complicated production.'
>
> 'But, Peter, you have to have candles,' Nikki says. 'Otherwise, how will the half-blind love-demon transcribe your names in the book of eternal devotion?'" (Bob-Waksberg 7).

As I was pondering topics for my I.S., I kept returning to the brilliance of "A Most Blessed and Auspicious Occasion" in its combination of humor, absurdity, and real feeling. It's an incredibly well-balanced story, at its heart about what it is to make the promise to love someone for the rest of your life and to trust that they want to love you for that long, too, but it's also a story that contains more than one negotiation about the number of goats to sacrifice at a wedding, or how many people should be in the Shrieking Chorus. The balance in this story, though, comes from the fact that the

absurdity and the heart are completely intertwined; the strange and humorous wedding traditions are the manner by which we get to the heart of the story. Both parts are necessary, and they need each other in order to work. In an interview about *Someone Who Will Love You in All Your Damaged Glory,* Bob-Waksberg lays out the idea behind the stories, which I have informally adopted as the philosophy behind the stories I wrote this year: "'It starts with the wacky, crazy concept,' he said. 'And then, kind of the fun challenge is: How do I make you care in a way that doesn't feel like it's betraying the funny, silly concept, but actually almost feels like this funny, silly concept is the only way into the story?'" (Yu). This fascinated me, and finally gave me an idea to focus my work around; I knew that I wanted to write short stories and that I wanted to try and do this kind of weaving of the strange and absurd with the real and the meaningful. In order to do that, I first had to find more examples of this kind of work. It is also worth considering here what the purpose of drawing from existing works is; it generally provides a template from which to work. However, the texts that I will discuss in this next section I have tried to draw inspiration from, not to directly emulate. I hope that my stories don't resemble any of these writers in particular but rather act as a synthesis of components found in each of these writers' works.

B. Donald Barthelme

The first example of this kind of writing I was introduced to was the short fiction of Donald Barthelme. Barthelme's work is known for its collage-like quality, for the humorous, deadpan tone with which the narrative is laid out. I found, in Barthelme, a clear example of the kind of collision of absurdity and meaning I was looking for, and in particular, I found his ability to pull seemingly random ideas and concepts off the shelf

and combine them without his stories ever feeling jarring or so choppy as to seem meaningless.

Barthelme's stories are the most experimental of the works I looked at to inform my writing, but they still retain a heart to them, no matter how obscure. For instance, Barthelme's story "On the Deck" begins as a list of people, animals, and objects on the deck of a boat, starting with a lion, a Christian biker gang, a parked Camry. These items are all so disjointed from one another and in another writer's hands they might seem so, but Barthelme treats them all with his customary matter-of-fact narrative voice, and manages to cohere all of these disparate elements together at the very end of the list, when the narrative jumps ahead in time and concludes:

> "Winter on deck. All of the above covered with snow. Christmas music. Then, spring. A weak sun, then a stronger sun. You came and fell upon me, I was sitting in the wicker chair. The wicker exclaimed as your weight fell upon me. You were light, I thought, and I thought how good it was of you to do this. We'd never touched before."
>
> (*Forty Stories,* 16)

The ending of Barthelme's story makes no more sense than the beginning of it does, but one can recognize a shift that takes place, allowing the reader to leave the story with the idea of it being a story, not only a list of objects.

Barthelme considered his work realistic, saying "Everybody's a realist. Every writer is offering a true account of the activities of the mind" (Barthelme and Brans 132). In the introduction to *Not-Knowing*, a posthumous collection of Barthelme's essays and

interviews, John Barth calls this style "irreal realism and real irreality" (*Not-Knowing* xii). Barthelme works with the observable, concrete world — Camrys and lions and biker gangs, etc. — but his combination of these "conventional signs," as he calls them, is what creates his absurd tone (*Not-Knowing* 11).

Barthelme's collages, which are made of "the dreck of contemporary culture," (Domini 95), work precisely because they pull their images from the world that his readers are familiar with. Because language, by its very nature, gestures to the real world, scholars have argued that Barthelme's work relies on the audience's interpretation to complete the work, to draw the meaning from the collage. As Larry McCaffery puts it, "We as readers probably sense that it is up to us to hold the pieces together; to find hidden clues in the puzzling elements before us" (73). Barthelme draws on the audience's imagination to find the connections between the disparate details he offers. Likewise, R.E. Johnson argues that "[Barthelme's] reader is not offered a logical system by means of which he can interpret or escape his own experience. He is offered a process which has life only when he participates in it" (Johnson 80). The reader fills in the gaps between the items Barthelme brings to his collage. As Barthelme himself explained the fundamental drive for his work, "How do I render all this messiness, and if I succeed, what have I done?" (*Not-Knowing* 20). In my own work, I'm interested in pulling from the real world, as Barthelme does, and in creating a kind of collage, built out of familiar objects. Though my collage will be, for lack of a better word, less overtly collage-like, I still draw inspiration from the idea behind it.

Scholars point to Samuel Beckett as one of Barthelme's primary influences. When asked "How come you write the way you do?" John Barth recalls Barthelme replying "Because Samuel Beckett was already writing the way *he* does" (*Not-Knowing* xi). This

is hardly surprising, given the absurdism legible in Barthelme's fiction, and the clear impetus behind both writers' work, the idea that real life is absurd, and ought to be reflected as such.

However, Barthelme's work goes about its strangeness in a distinct manner; where Beckett strips recognizable signs from works like *Waiting for Godot,* where the audience knows nothing about the characters or their setting, and are unable to place them in the real world, Barthelme overwhelms his reader with real-world references: to put it simply, "[Beckett] attempts to rid his work of cultural flotsam and jetsam … Barthelme on the other hand heaps up barricades of sheer stuff" (Domini 108).

In referencing the real world, Barthelme is able to rely on the referential ability of words to expand his work; despite their short form, they feel expansive, largely because of this quality. As John Ditsky puts it, in Barthelme's work "brevity results in extreme concentration of movement and effect — hence, in a striking 'busyness,' even richness, of texture" (Ditsky 388). To Barthelme, "words are a joy because they *open up*" (Johnson 87, emphasis in original). Barthelme's words gesture outside of each story, enabling the reader to expand their perception of the work through those references and connections (McCaffery 76 - 77). As Barthelme himself explained it, "The world enters the work as it enters our ordinary lives, not as world-view or system but in sharp particularity: a tax notice from Madelaine, a snowball containing a resume from Gaston" (*Not-Knowing* 21). The absurd qualities in Barthelme's stories are built out of the specific and particular components of the real world.

There is also the question of genre in Barthelme's works; his stories aren't easily categorizable, but they seem to be using the conventions of genre to underpin their strangeness. As Thomas Leitch explains it, "these stories could more aptly be described

as parodies of the genres their subjects imply" (Leitch 131). Barthelme is using the expectations of genre as yet another reference; something his audience will understand without needing an explanation; something that reaches outside of the work to expand it.

One of the elements that remain consistent throughout Barthelme's stories is their humor, and more specifically, their tone; despite their outlandish constellations of objects or scenarios, the tone of each story remains matter-of-fact and deadpan. As Leitch puts it, "however logical, disruptive, or outrageous the situations are, they are always treated circumstantially, in the same deadpan tone" (Leitch 132). This adds to the humorous effect of the stories, which comes from the contrast between the outlandishness of the content and the banality of the tone in which it is presented. Barthelme treats the content of his stories as if he is simply reporting facts. As Leitch explains this quality, "each story begins with a premise which, like the rules of a game, is simply given" (Leitch 132). Barthelme doesn't restrict his stories to those ideas that could be established through logical events, but he does treat his stories like a game, presenting a premise that is meant to be accepted before the content of the story can proceed.

Barthelme's work appeals to me for many of the reasons listed above; it spoke to me in all its funny, deadpan strangeness. While the work that I have done this year has by no means been a copy or an imitation of Barthelme's work, I found a lot of inspiration in the idea of collage and collision; pulling elements from the real world and putting them together to make a strange but recognizable world, a sort of echo or comment on our own.

C. Edward Albee

Another major influence on my work in this collection is the playwright Edward Albee. I wrote plays before I ever wrote short stories, and Albee has long been one of my favorite writers. His plays are strange, in that way I am sure it is clear by now that I find really interesting. Albee's plays owe a great deal to the post-war Absurdist movement in Europe; like Barthelme, his major inspirations were writers like Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet. Some scholars view Albee as the American extension of the European Absurdist movement, while others object to his inclusion within the movement at all. In the introduction to *Edward Albee and Absurdism,* Michael Bennett claims that to consider Albee as an Absurdist is a gross oversimplification of Albee's work (Bennett et al. 1), and David Marcia makes the claim, later in the same volume, that Albee's work is more accurately described by Humanism, citing Brian Way's claim that Albee had a "failure of nerve" compared to Beckett or Ionesco. Albee, he writes, "still believes in the validity of reason" (Way 26). Albee's work is inspired, like Barthelme's, by the work of the Absurdists, but is also much more interested in the particularities of the real world.

For instance, Albee's 1974 play *Seascape* contains both realistic and absurd qualities; the play is about a middle-aged human couple on a trip to the seaside, where they meet a primordial lizard couple from the depths of the ocean. The dialogue in *Seascape* is natural, and the human couple, we are meant to understand, are normal people like you or me. But Albee places them in an absurd situation, the conversation with the sea monsters, as a way of showing the characters and their relationship in starker relief; in explaining themselves to the sea monsters (named Sarah and Leslie) the humans have to reconsider what love and marriage mean to them.

Albee's work also avoids being grouped with the Absurdists because he avoids the conclusion of Absurdist works, that life is ultimately meaningless and absurd. To Albee, plenty of things are absurd, and we're fooling ourselves about those things, but his work is ultimately optimistic. Albee saw theatre as a corrective measure; by showing absurd representations of human behavior on stage, he pointed out where we were going wrong. He described himself as ideally "a useful playwright," who held up a mirror to his audiences, to say to them, "Hey, this is the way you behave, this is who you are, if you don't like what you see, maybe you should change" (Olsen and Stein). For Albee, the strange concepts at the core of his plays are just the way into discussing the things he wants to discuss; in *Seascape* it's marriage and love, in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia?,* Albee's play about a middle-aged father who falls in love with a goat, the play is, as Ben Brantley explained it in the New York Times, "about a profoundly unsettling subject, which for the record is not bestiality but the irrational, confounding and convention-thwarting nature of love" (Brantley). Though my work does not take the same form as Albee's, his ability to use the strange premises of his work to find the themes at the heart of it is something I want to do in my own work.

Albee's plays are some of the clearest examples of works that, while they are not short stories, most resemble the work I was interested in doing for this collection. My playwriting has been inspired by Albee's for many years now, it makes sense that my fiction would be, as well.

D. Simon Rich

Simon Rich is a writer I was introduced to later in this process, as I was working on my short stories. Rich is a humorist and TV writer, and his collection of short stories, *New*

Teeth, was helpful to me in thinking about how to twist the conventions of a genre. *New Teeth* has many stories that are intentional parodies of particular genres. "Learning the Ropes" is about two pirates who take custody of a little girl and have to navigate parenting while on board a pirate ship; it's written in the style of pirate-speak: "Me cutlass is me only friend. The devil is me brother. I don't recycle. When I'm done with a bottle I just be throwing it out" (Rich 3). "The Big Nap" is about a two-year-old attempting to solve the mystery of where his little sister's stuffed unicorn has gone, in the style of a noir detective novel: "She still believed in justice. She still believed in hope. She still believed that objects disappeared when you put a surface in front of them and then reappeared by magic when you took away that surface" (Rich 46). These stories have distinct and stylized narrative voices, which add to the humor of the situation; it's funny to hear a pirate say "instead of scouring the high seas for treasure, we mainly just stay in the Bermuda Triangle, because even though you sometimes feel trapped there, it be having the best schools" (Rich 21).

The humor in these stories comes from the contrast of the absurd scenarios and the familiarity of the genres being evoked. Likewise, similar to the other writers I have discussed previously, Rich's stories use the absurd elements to find a way into the emotional heart of the story; in "Raised by Wolves," a woman grapples with having her parents, who are wolves, visit for the holidays: "She'd told him all about her screwed-up childhood. The barking, the growling, the total lack of structure and support" (Rich 167). The absurd premise of Lauren being literally raised by wolves allows Rich to discuss parenting and the relationships between grown children and their parents more clearly. The strangeness of the premise is what allows the audience to access the themes of the story, especially in the small space that a short story provides.

There is something very exciting about finding works that speak to the way you want to write; they make you want to chime in, to write and write and write. These are only a few of the many authors who have made me feel that way, but the four individuals I have discussed here do the kind of work that ties directly to the style I wanted to develop for my short stories, and their creative choices helped inform my own. Having examples and works that reflect your goals is important for multiple reasons. The first is specific example, as I've just mentioned, but the second is a bit more obscure. By finding work that accomplishes something like what you want to accomplish, you prove to yourself that it can, in fact, be done. Inspiration, like I've found in the works of the writers I've just mentioned, is powerful because it makes a big task less impossible. It proves that others have done it, and with enough practice, you could, too.

IV. My Stories

A JESTER'S FIELD GUIDE

"A Jester's Field Guide" was the first story I completed for this collection, and also the first story I really liked; it's a story that captures the balance between absurdity and meaning that I'm looking for in all of these stories. I'm also very pleased with the world that gets invented in this story; a functionally modern world, with cities and suburbs and air-conditioners, but which is run by medieval kings. It's such a rich and playful world that I ultimately revisited it in "Divine Right." I found that this combination of real-word landmarks and objects (suburbs, whiffle-ball bats, etc.) and feudal kingdoms worked well; the combination is strange, but both ingredients are known quantities, and the audience is able to superimpose their understanding of medieval kingdoms on the world they're familiar with. This allows the story to be strange without being alienating,

and allows the audience to jump right into the story without much explanation. I also attempted to give this story a clear narrative voice, sort of a how-to book or manual, which I think helped me effect the matter-of-fact voice I wanted.

LESSER ORDERS

"Lesser Orders" is, I think, my favorite story in this collection. It's the one that feels the most developed, the most complete, and is also a story that I'm still enamored by conceptually. It's about two monks who have to care for a wounded bird. "Lesser Orders" is, in my opinion, the story in this collection that best lives up to the "thesis" I introduced earlier, Bob-Waksberg's idea that the funky concept is the way you find the path into the heart of the story. I think this is doubly true of "Lesser Orders" in the sense that I also *wrote* the story with that idea in mind. I started with a wacky concept –– Brother Timothy is tasked with cleaning up the entrails of the doves that run into the stained-glass windows –– and found, from that initial concept, a heart to the story. This story also accomplished its goals by using the qualities I discussed earlier; by relying on the audience's understanding of what it is that monks do and how they behave, I was able to disrupt these expectations by having them dislike one another, collect model planes, and drive luxury motorcars. "Lesser Orders" is one of the works in this collection that I feel most confident in, that I feel is most thoroughly developed, and which most clearly uses the qualities I set out to make use of in my writing.

MAX

"Max" is one of the sadder stories in this collection; for that reason it stands out pretty distinctly. It's a story about a man who builds a robot to speak to his grieving

wife. I find science-fiction concepts very interesting, and I enjoyed trying to tackle this one, though I should say that I am much more interested in, as Barthelme does, setting up a story as a game almost, on its own terms, than I am in explaining how one goes about building a robot with those capabilities. I have no idea how to do that, of course. The fact that Max is able to function is just a given of the story as far as I am concerned. "Max" is also an interesting story to me because of its shifting perspective. Sometimes it's Max, the robot, speaking, sometimes it's his creator, David. I like the combination of multiple perspectives here, which allows for more discovery of character. Max is a naive sort of character, with little life experience, while David's perspective provides more information, making what Max observes more poignant.

DIVINE RIGHT

This story owes a great deal to Simon Rich's story "Revolution," a story about an entitled prince living among the commoners while they plan a revolt against his family. The voice of the prince in the story is very clear and very opinionated, and it is that voice which makes the otherwise tragic story so funny. I started this story as an extension of the first story in this collection, "A Jester's Field Guide," because I really enjoyed the world of that story and wanted to develop it further by focusing on the young king, who was raised by the jester but still feels entitled to imprison him "two or three times" (PAGE). I like the contrast of humor and darker elements in this story, and the cavalier way the king talks about pain and suffering, which is one of the qualities inherited from "Revolution" :

> "'This is just like when I told you to call the doctor yourself for your last Royal Physical,' [my mother] said, making a comparison to something that was not at all the same thing.
>
> 'You needed to be a grown-up and take responsibility.' I told her that I was already responsible for the entire kingdom. She just laughed.
>
> 'Then it should be easy for you,' she said. If it wasn't expressly outlawed in my father's will, I would have had her beheaded by now."

This character's voice was good fun to write, and I really enjoy the way it turned out in the story.

A CRANE IN ITS VIGILANCE

"A Crane in its Vigilance" took a long time to develop, because for a long time I had no sense of it having any forward momentum. I liked the initial concept, of a man who writes poems for passers-by on the street, but I didn't know what to do with the character of Raoul once I had invented him. It took breaking down the characters I had, and the themes that seemed to accompany them, before I was able to find an ending that felt satisfying to me. This story was a good lesson in short-story writing; for a while I was so intent on finding a traditional narrative in this story that I wasn't able to find an ending for it. Once I took a step back and reconsidered, thinking more about the themes of the story so far rather than a traditional narrative, I was able to find an ending that I liked.

I am also a fan of the fantastic, solipsistic quality to this story; to me it marks a clear difference from the other stories in this collection. Again, I chose to write short stories because I wanted to work on many different stories and also many different styles of story and different genres. I liked working on the unreal parts of this story; I also think it's interesting that my other stories tend to start with the strange concept and then behave logically; this story does the opposite, beginning in the real world and getting stranger as the story progresses.

LESS MISERABLE

"Less Miserable" is yet another foray into the fake-historical kind of writing I've done elsewhere in this collection, with "Divine Right" and "A Jester's Field Guide," about a young man who abandons his blacksmithing apprenticeship and ends up stuck inside a grain silo. I'm not sure why, but I kept returning to this kind of false-medieval era I'd made up. Unlike the world of "Divine Right" and "A Jester's Field Guide," though, the world of Osbert and Helewise is not superimposed over a modern suburb; they really live in a fictional version of the past. I really enjoyed the narrative voice in this piece; it's judgemental and matter-of-fact, and I liked being able to add jokes and commentary to the narration throughout the story. I also adore the characters in this one, specifically Osbert. His world-view and life experience were really interesting to me as I wrote this story, and helped me propel it forward.

A Jester's Field Guide

As it happens, the young people of this country are increasingly opting to pursue lines of work with practicality to them, such as civil engineering or airline management or air-conditioner repair. All good careers, and necessary, but it does contribute to a notable lack of young people entering the respectable role of court jester. This is a shame, as our profession has a long and illustrious history, and a young person might find that it suits him tremendously the moment he gives it a chance.

I myself have been working as a court jester for fifty-seven years, serving a respectable old king out in the suburbs of a major city. This is one of the rookie mistakes new jesters tend to make; they want to work in a metropolitan area, for one of the major kings. An untested, unvouched-for jester will not make it past the interview stages at a city king's residence, and will likely be told to gain some experience and return in a future year.

The best way to begin is to find a country or suburban king, preferably one who is quite old or quite fickle and is likely either to die or send you away before long. Then you may apply for the more competitive positions, assured that your abilities and experience will stand up to scrutiny.

This was also my plan, in the beginning, and I applied to the house of a lesser king in the suburbs, an old man with heart problems, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease if I remember rightly. He had a much younger wife and a small infant, and I remember thinking what a shame it would be for him to die so soon and leave them behind. It was a shame, of course, when he died, not three months after I began to work for him. I was

excited, however, to move on and begin applying at some of the more major kingdoms in the city, until it was pointed out to me that, due to a stray inkblot on my contract that changed the Roman numeral I to II, I was under obligation to stay and work for the infant son, who is now fifty-seven years of age. I had initially planned to wait until he was able to read and write to ask him to release me from my contract (as it is the custom that jesters may only leave a post by death or by the king's decree) but by then the boy had begun to see me as a father figure, and I couldn't break his heart like that. All in all, my king and I get on quite well, excepting the two or three times he has had me imprisoned.

Forget what you have been told about the dangers of the profession; kings are no longer in the habit of executing their jesters for jokes they dislike. This was the fashion for a time, and for a few years being a court jester was more dangerous than being a rat in a kitchen. One had to sit very still and very quietly, for fear that a joke might cause the king to sentence death, but not so quietly that he had you executed for neglecting your duties. The only living jesters I know from that era are the jugglers, as juggling is generally both inoffensive and entertaining. However, after each king had executed his own jester, many found the practice distasteful, and an awful mess to clean up, and it has largely fallen out of favor.

I was spared this fate not because I am a particularly skilled man, or because I know how to juggle, but rather because my king was only six at the time, and therefore settled for hitting me all over with a whiffle ball bat in lieu of an execution.

I do not say this to scare you; I know that entering a new profession can be intimidating. It will perhaps assuage your fears to learn that the low availability of qualified jesters has somewhat softened kings; if one's jester is dead or otherwise incapacitated, there is hardly an easy or inexpensive replacement to be had, and one simply has to do without.

There are few professions nowadays where young people may pick and choose when it comes to their employers; law, for instance, is entirely an oversaturated job market, and new lawyers are obliged to take work wherever they may find it. Jesters, on the other hand, have the unique ability to be selective; and while young people these days feel entitled to avoid beatings in the workplace, I am of the opinion that the threat of violence is a great boon to comedy — and rest assured that bruises incurred by a whiffle ball bat fade rather quickly.

Lesser Orders

Brother Timothy has never really liked the ceremonial doves. They're noisy, messy, and they have a terrible habit of flinging themselves against the stained-glass windows. When this happens, it's Brother Timothy's job to clean bird entrails from the glass with a long-handled Swiffer. Really, he thinks, they're closer to a city pigeon than a holy dove. But the birds are a stark white and the Abbot really likes them; he sees their unnatural coloring as a sign of favor from God, and so they are permitted to roost around the monastery. Brother Timothy thinks that if the Almighty really liked the birds, he wouldn't fling them into windows so often, but he doesn't say that.

Brother Timothy is a very junior monk; therefore the groundskeeping falls to him and another junior monk, Brother Bartholomew. He insists that Brother Timothy call him "Bart," which Brother Timothy absolutely refuses to do. Brother Bartholomew has buckteeth and collects models of antique planes, and his room, which he is constantly inviting Brother Timothy to visit, smells perpetually of model glue.

Brother Bartholomew tends to spend the groundskeeping time — during which Brother Timothy diligently pulls weeds out of the cracks between the stone paths — talking about his most recent model plane acquisition or singing the same few bars of a popular song he's heard on the car radio. Brother Bartholomew's the only one listed on the monastery van's car insurance, so he has to drive them whenever they go into town. This has caused the monastery as a whole to become much more hermitic than they had ever

intended to be, if only to avoid Brother Bartholomew's conversation on the long drive into town.

A dove tries to peck at Brother Timothy's work boot. He shoos it away with the hem of his robe.

Brother Gertrude is the one who rings the bells to signal the call to prayer. Brother Gertrude has no sense of rhythm, so the allotted time for Brother Timothy and Brother Bartholomew to trim topiaries and pull weeds is interrupted every weekday by a messy cacophony of noise from the direction of the steeple. Brother Timothy returns the hedge trimmers to the shed, while Brother Bartholomew follows behind, explaining the importance of using certain kinds of glue on certain pieces of a model plane.

"You would never, for instance," he says, "use cyanoacrylate on a piece that had torque to it."

Brother Timothy thinks that he certainly wouldn't, but all he says to Brother Bartholomew is:

"I guess that's true," and he hangs up the hedge trimmers on the wall. Brother Timothy wonders if he should start showing up even earlier to afternoon prayers, in the hopes of getting promoted off of groundskeeping duty.

Afternoon prayers are preceded by noon-time, mid-morning, morning, and dawn prayers, and followed by mid-afternoon, late afternoon, early evening, evening, and bed-time prayers. The constant moving to and from the cathedral used to bother Brother Timothy — the time between late afternoon and early evening prayers, for instance, is a mere seven minutes — but he's gotten used to it, just like he's gotten used to many other things.

Afternoon prayers are the longest because Brother Gertrude leads them, and in addition to his lack of rhythm, he also seems to have no internal clock whatsoever. His sermons go on for far longer than they ought to; so much so that the Abbot has repeatedly had to stop him before his lecture cut into mid-afternoon prayer.

Brother Bartholomew accompanies Brother Timothy from groundskeeping to afternoon prayers every day and sits next to him. Today, Brother Gertrude is droning about something Brother Timothy already knows, and, he presumes, looking around at the other monks' bored expressions, something everyone already knows. Next to him, Brother Bartholomew is slowly and gently building a small model plane. When Brother Gertrude pauses, all Brother Timothy can hear is the sound of a room full of men breathing in unison, the shuffle of brown linen robes against wooden pews, and the soft click of the pieces of Brother Bartholomew's model plane sliding into place.

And then, as he was almost anticipating it, the horrible heavy thud of a bird's small body against the stained-glass window.

The Abbot uses the bird's collision with the window to interrupt Brother Gertrude, who has long exceeded the time set aside for afternoon prayer, and the congregation seems to breathe a sigh of relief. Brother Bartholomew and Brother Timothy are dispatched to clean up, as usual. Brother Timothy is on his way to get the long-handled Swiffer when Brother Bartholomew stops him.

"Look," he says, pointing to the dove, which is now writhing around in the recently-trimmed grass. It's getting grass stains all over its pure white feathers, along with the blood.

"Should we kill it?" Brother Timothy asks, and Brother Bartholomew gives him a look as though he's just asked if they should sacrifice the Abbot on the altar to a pagan god. Brother Bartholomew picks the bird up, cradling its little body to his chest and speaking softly.

"It's all right," he says, over and over. "Shh, shh." The bird seems to quiet down as Brother Bartholomew speaks to it, leaning its tiny head against his robes. The dove's wing is broken and bleeding, sitting at a gruesome angle. Brother Bartholomew is careful not to touch it.

Brother Timothy is enlisted to get a cardboard box and a dishtowel from the monastery kitchen. He finds a box full of zucchini, which he empties onto the countertop. Brother Timothy looks down at the spilled zucchini, pauses a moment, inhales, and stares skyward, hoping for some kind of sign. All he sees is the water damage that's slowly

making its way across the ceiling of the kitchen. It wasn't there when Brother Timothy first arrived at the monastery, but it's been slowly, almost imperceptibly growing, and now takes up nearly half of the room. He considers this enough of a sign.

He returns to Brother Bartholomew, who wraps the bird's body, excepting the wing, in the towel — which Brother Timothy makes a mental note not to return to the kitchen, no matter how many times they wash it — and places the entire bundle into the box, which Brother Timothy carries in his lap the entire drive to the animal hospital.

The box has handles on each side, and Brother Timothy looks into one to make sure the bird's still living. It stares back at him with one pale yellow eye, round and shiny like the buttons on the coat Brother Timothy wears over his robes in winter.

The woman at the veterinary clinic asks for the bird's name. She's wearing bright, patterned scrubs and a nametag that says JULENE.

"We just found it," Brother Timothy explains. "It doesn't have a name."

"Well, come up with one," the woman says. She takes a long swig of coffee from a tumbler that looks like it was attacked by rhinestones.

"He's named Peter," Brother Bartholomew says, and he says it so confidently that the woman gives Brother Timothy an accusatory look for lying to her.

"Is he your pet?" Julene asks.

Brother Timothy tries to explain about the monastery and the windows and the long-handled Swiffer, but the woman seems to have already made up her mind not to listen to him. She takes the zucchini box from the counter and starts talking to Brother Bartholomew.

"What kind of bird is Peter?" She says this like Peter is a treasured family member or Brother Bartholomew's imaginary friend that she's pretending to be able to see.

"He's a dove. A white dove."

"Like the kind you release at a wedding," Brother Timothy supplies, unhelpfully.

"*Did* you release him at a wedding?" Julene asks. Brother Timothy is starting to think there's nothing he could say that she would like to hear.

Brother Bartholomew says no, they didn't. Julene seems happy to hear this.

"It's a tragedy, really," she says, "people releasing doves."

Julene says that white doves don't exist in the wild; their bright white coloring makes them easy prey. She says she was at a wedding once where doves were released during the recessional; one of the doves was taken down by a hawk before it could even fly past

the aisle. Apparently, the hawk, oblivious to its audience, pinned the dove down and began picking it apart, right there on the bride's train.

"Horrible thing to see," Julene tells them. "And the dress was a rental, too."

While the bird is in surgery — and Brother Timothy ponders this, what it is like to do surgery on a bird — Brother Bartholomew drives them around. When he's in town, Brother Bartholomew wears a baseball cap to cover his bald spot in a unique display of vanity. The baseball cap is grey and has a cactus embroidered on it. It looks ridiculous with his brown robes.

"I want coffee," Brother Bartholomew says to no one. Brother Timothy doesn't need or want to ask him how he intends to pay for coffee. The monks aren't exactly given personal allowances. Even Brother Bartholomew's model plane collection is donated, mainly by the irate mothers of disobedient pre-teen boys, as a kind of punishment. Brother Timothy often wonders about the moral implications of Brother Bartholomew's expansive collection — he's seen Brother Bartholomew's eyes light up as soon as the mothers start complaining after church.

Brother Bartholomew drives around town, neck craned forward like he's trying to read something etched into the front windshield. When he sees whatever it was he was looking for, he leans back and guides the monastery van into a parking lot.

This is how Brother Timothy finds himself drinking the free coffee at the Maserati dealership while Brother Bartholomew talks with the salesman. The coffee is fancy, real espresso in little cups, and Brother Timothy stands awkwardly with his cup and saucer long after he's finished drinking. The coffee is bitter and smooth, and its taste is so foreign that it makes Brother Timothy feel like his limbs are no longer attached. He kicks the dusty hem of his robe across the polished floor.

"Do you have anything," Brother Bartholomew asks the man, "That would seat thirteen?"

The man says that they don't, but he supposes that Brother Bartholomew could buy two SUVs and a sportscar for a total of twelve seats and around four-hundred thousand dollars. Brother Bartholomew nods seriously whenever the salesman speaks, the little cactus on his hat bobbing up and down.

Brother Timothy walks over just in time to hear Brother Bartholomew and the man agreeing on something; he experiences a brief panic that Brother Bartholomew is going to put the monastery four-hundred thousand dollars in debt, or at least in a very awkward situation.

The car the two men are standing next to is small and sleek. It's red, that kind of shimmering paint that looks like the silt at the edge of a river. Brother Timothy wants to reach out and touch it, wants to leave his handprint on its shining exterior. He doesn't.

Brother Timothy ends up in the backseat, watching Brother Bartholomew spread his palms over the steering wheel, slowly, like he's afraid it's going to bolt out from under his hands.

Brother Bartholomew has lines around his eyes, he notices, and he's looking at the dashboard with a kind of homesickness.

The Maserati salesman doesn't seem surprised when Brother Bartholomew apologetically explains that he doesn't think they can afford the car, or any car at the dealership, for that matter.

"I think we'll stick with our van," Brother Bartholomew says, as though this were a decision he's making, and not a foregone conclusion. The salesman says its no problem, and Brother Timothy suspects he's just excited to tell people the story of when two monks came by to test drive a car.

Julene's bedazzled tumbler seems still to be full when they return, because she gestures for them to wait while she takes a long drink from it. She sets it on the desk.

"The bird," Brother Timothy starts. "*Peter,* I mean. Is he alright?"

"Oh, I have no idea," Julene says. Brother Timothy wants to ask her what the floral scrubs are even for, since all she seems to do is sit behind this desk and speak to him dismissively.

The veterinary hospital has thrown away the zucchini box, and Peter is returned to his saviors in a cardboard carrier meant for cats. He seems alright. His wing is sandwiched in between two pieces of wood to align the bones.

“He can’t go outside,” Julene says, as Brother Bartholomew uses the monastery credit card to pay Peter’s medical bills. “He’ll have to stay in an indoor space, where he can’t try to fly around. So you’ll have to feed him.”

Brother Bartholomew nods. Brother Timothy looks into the box. Peter’s tiny eyes stare back at him.

At the laundromat, Brother Timothy sets Peter’s cardboard box on top of a dryer while he helps Brother Bartholomew unload the laundry into a machine. He finally thinks of something to say.

“You used to drive cars like that? Before?”

Brother Bartholomew smiles a little, placing quarters gently into their slots.

“Sometimes,” he says. “I used to work as a chauffeur. Drove politicians and celebrities around, that kind of thing.”

Brother Timothy wants to ask what changed. Brother Timothy joined the Order as a young man who felt like nothing else made sense. Brother Bartholomew seems like the kind of man who could make sense of the world on his own. He settles for pouring liquid soap into the machine instead.

“Where do you think Peter’ll go?”

“He can stay with me.”

Brother Timothy pictures Peter among Brother Bartholomew’s shelves and shelves of model airplanes. So many winged flightless things.

“Really?” Brother Timothy asks.

“Why not,” Brother Bartholomew says, closing the washing machine, “why not.”

Peter pecks a bit of cardboard away from one of the holes in the box. Not for the first time, Brother Timothy is reminded how much older Brother Bartholomew is than him.

Max

"Be kind, resourceful, beautiful, friendly, have initiative, have a sense of humor, tell right from wrong, make mistakes, fall in love, enjoy strawberries and cream, make someone fall in love with it, learn from experience, use words properly, be the subject of its own thought, have as much diversity of behavior as a man, do something really new."

- Alan Turing

It had to look enough like a man to be comforting, and enough like a machine to be obvious. Ultimately, David settled on a foot-tall body with arms and legs; rounded cylinders connected with thin pieces of white nylon rope, and a spherical head, all carved out of pine. He gave it eyes, of course. She'd need to know where to look when it was speaking. Not that she looked David in the eyes much anymore. He'd heard somewhere that the color yellow had an uplifting effect, so he painted the body yellow and finished it with a gloss. He did a fairly good job, all things considered; there were some areas where his paintbrush couldn't quite reach and gaps in the paint showed through. It was beautiful.

The creature couldn't stand by itself, and there wasn't any reason for it to do so. It couldn't move, anyway. David propped it up against the kitchen cabinets. Its head was a little too large for its body, and it took a few tries before the thing could sit up without tipping over. David stood back to admire it.

The voice was an open-source file he'd found online, perfect for low-budget projects that needed voices, like this one. It was a man's voice, a lovely tenor. David might have preferred a child's voice, given the size of the body he'd made for it, and the playful color the thing was painted, but there weren't any open-source files for children's voices. Regardless, it was a soothing voice, and David liked to listen to it. He hoped Marja might, too.

Gently, as though it was a surgical process, David had carved out a space in its back to place the machinery. He did the same with the speaker, fitting it neatly into the back of the oversized head. It was some of his best work, both technologically and stylistically. It resembled nothing so much as one of those minimalistic toys Marja always pointed out at the expensive Norwegian children's clothing store.

"No child of mine will be playing with *screens*," she'd told him, admiring a tiny shirt with thin navy-blue stripes. David had glanced at the price tag and immediately regretted it. David was immensely grateful that Marja never actually bought anything at the clothing store. All of their baby items had come from friends and family, some of them dented, stained, and broken. David was also grateful that Marja never made a fuss about this. He knew she wanted to be the sort of people who shopped at expensive Norwegian stores for tiny clothes that would only fit for a month or two. David didn't want to be that sort of person, but he wanted Marja to be exactly who she wanted to be.

But what Marja *was* had been stubbornly cheerful, dyeing fabrics and painting over stains, gluing toys back together until they looked brand-new.

Maybe it was a good thing, David considers, that he could only find adults' voices for his creation. Maybe Marja wouldn't want to hear a child's voice.

Beyond the shape of the thing, there's the question of introducing it to her. The computer already knows her; it has to, in order to function. David took care to teach the computer her name, writing it out phonetically at first, which resulted in a clumsy, robotic "Mar-yuh." It had taken several tries and the eventual importing and pitching down of a clip from a German pronunciation blog to get it right. Well, as right as David ever got it with his clumsy American accent.

David had worried that she would notice him building the thing; especially that day, when he played audio clips of her name out loud for several hours, but she had stubbornly refused to open the door to his workshop. He thought he could hear her footsteps outside the door as she walked back and forth across the carpeted hallway.

Max is born at three-thirty p.m. on a Tuesday. At least, this is when his computer is switched on inside his new body, which smells of pinewood and fresh paint. Max cannot smell, but he is making an educated guess. There had been glimmers of life before this; he remembers a long afternoon spent learning a word in German. He thinks he eventually got it right and he thinks he was proud of this. Still, he doesn't count that as being born, not really.

When Max is finally brought into aliveness, for real, he is sitting on a kitchen counter. The lower halves of his legs dangle off of the edge. He likes this about himself, appreciates the nonchalant way his limbs arrange themselves. Max has really no say in where they go, but he likes that they look relaxed.

In front of him is the Lonely Man. The Lonely Man is holding Max's head between his hands, and when Max's computer begins to make a whirring noise, he sets Max's head back against the cabinets. It makes a slight thunk. The Lonely Man lets go slowly, like he is afraid that Max will get up and run away from him. Max wonders if this is why his limbs are made out of rope; so he cannot run away.

Hello, Max says.

Hello, says the Lonely Man. Max has never heard his voice before. It is less tremulous than he was expecting. He had thought the Lonely Man might be crying all of the time, but he doesn't seem to be. Maybe he was only crying while he was building Max.

The Lonely Man asks if Max knows what he is supposed to do.

Yes, Max says. Max is supposed to comfort people who are upset. He is supposed to say just the Right Thing, which will make them feel better. It is what he is programmed to do. The Lonely Man has written it in the codes that Max can feel humming away in the back of his chest. Because of this, Max feels confident. He knows that he will know what to do.

Good, says the Lonely Man, and Max feels proud of himself again.

He doesn't want to leave the creation in the kitchen without any explanation. He doesn't think Marja would appreciate that; but he knows that she will not be in the kitchen as long as he is in the kitchen. David sometimes thinks to himself that Marja is very close to drawing a line in painter's tape all down the middle of the house so that she can pretend he is not there. Because of this, David has hidden the painter's tape that he keeps in his workshop at the back of a drawer.

David leaves a note. He uses a blue notecard that will look nice with the creation's yellow paint. It says:

Hello my love,

This is for you.

You can give him a name if you like, or not.

He will know what to say to you.

He signs it and tapes it to the place where the machine's stomach would be, if he had one. He uses painter's tape, hoping that she will come to ask him where the painter's tape is kept.

Now that the creature has been introduced, David should leave the kitchen. He knows this. He wants Marja to come in and see it, to talk to it, so that the machine can say all of the things she needs to hear. That was the point of building the machine. But David

wants to know so badly what it is that Marja needs to hear; he knows it is something better than anything he could say. Maybe it's something David needs to hear, too.

The Lonely Man tapes something to Max's stomach. Max makes an educated guess about the feeling of adhesive on his torso. He doesn't know what it says; Max cannot read, and beyond that, he cannot move his head to look at the note. He knows that the note is stuck to him with blue painter's tape because he can see it in the reflection in the Lonely Man's glasses, but this is all he knows. The Lonely Man is examining where he stuck the note.

Don't worry, it's on correctly, Max says.

The Lonely Man is startled by Max's sudden talking. His hands are on the joints that would be Max's shoulders if Max had shoulders.

Thanks, says the Lonely Man.

Of course, says Max. This is the first time Max has said the phrase "of course," but he already likes it. He likes that it makes everything seem so simple, like everything has a plan, like everything is one big circuit, a binary code. True/untrue, yes/no, one/zero. He feels the electricity flow through him. He almost forgets that the feeling is an educated guess. Of course of course of course.

David manages to stay in his workshop for four hours. This is as long as he can pretend to have important things to do. He sweeps the pine shavings up into a neat pile, vacuums them. He rearranges the bins of screws and discards clippings of leftover wire. He uploads all of his computer's files to an external hard drive. He puts the painter's tape away at the back of a drawer where Marja won't find it, underneath their tax forms from ten years ago. David always does the taxes.

The Lonely Man is back in the kitchen. He pours himself a glass of water from the sink and stands in front of Max. He waits for Max to say something. Max says nothing. The Lonely Man takes a drink from his glass of water.

Hello, says the Lonely Man.

Hello, says Max. Max knows that hello is the Right Thing to say when someone says hello to you.

The Lonely Man looks at Max like he is trying to read something. The note is still on Max's stomach, but he doesn't think that's what the man is trying to read. He is trying to figure something out. Max knows how to do that. *Input, controllogicmemory, output.*

Max waits for the output for a long moment. It doesn't come. Max waits silently for the process to be complete.

Did she come to speak to you? the Lonely Man asks, eventually.

Yes, Max answers without hesitation. This seems to help. The Lonely Man's limbs go all loose all of a sudden, like he, too, is made out of rope. He breathes out in a sound like a hard, sharp word.

Did she like you, the Lonely Man asks.

A little bit, Max says. *I think she might have been confused at first. But I think she liked my paint color. I think it made her feel better.*

Good, says the Lonely Man. *Good, good.*

The Lonely Man is creating a paradox; he is crying and saying *good* over and over.

David sits down on the kitchen floor. It is cold and needs to be swept. He slides his glasses up on his head to wipe at his eyes. He looks up at the creation, whose lemon-colored limbs swing over the edge of the counter. He says it so quietly he isn't sure the audio sensors can hear him.

What did you say to her?

Do you really want to hear, the machine asks him.

I want to hear the words you used, David says.

When David thinks of what to say to Marja, it becomes a jumbled mess of words. He had tried to leave it as a voice message, or a letter. It had come out like an overexposed photograph, because when David thinks about what to say, all his brain gives him is *hurt loss love be reasonable no no you're alright no no maybe love pain love love I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry you're alright you you you.* When he tries to picture what he wants to tell her, all he can picture is what it felt like when he forgot to use oven mitts to remove the casserole dish from the oven. It feels like hot unbroken glass against his palms.

I told her not to cut the house in half, the machine tells him. *I told her that you missed looking into her eyes. I told her that you loved her. I told her that I was a physical expression of your kind of love, the kind that is so much that it is frightening. I told her that it was okay, that she could be okay again. That there were not as many pieces of her missing as she thinks.*

Is that true? David asks without thinking. He doesn't know, which is why his thoughts feel like molten glass.

It can be, the robot says.

The Lonely Man leaves Max on the counter. The note stays where it is, and so Max grows to love it as an extension of himself.

The Lonely Man cooks a great deal of scrambled eggs. He tells Max that he has always been good at making them, that he makes them for other people at holiday breakfasts. Max tells him that that sounds very nice. Max tells him that he wishes he could eat some of the scrambled eggs. It is a nice thing to say, but it makes the Lonely Man look a little bit sad, like he had forgotten what Max was for a moment.

Two weeks after he is born, the Lonely Man finally moves him from the kitchen counter. He places Max in a chair made for a small human, set up at the end of a dining table. Max's flexible limbs arrange themselves easily in the seat. One of his arms hangs down from the side. The Lonely Man gently leans Max's head against the back of the plastic chair.

Thank you, Max says. *That was very gentle.*

Of course, the Lonely Man says. Of course of course of course.

It becomes a habit. When the Lonely Man eats his meals, which are usually cereal or scrambled eggs, sandwiches or pasta, he carries Max across the kitchen and sets him in the small human's seat. Sometimes he puts some eggs in front of him, or some dry cereal. Max can't eat anything, but he always says thank you.

Sometimes the Lonely Man talks to him. He talks about normal things; work and weather and when he needs to mow the lawn. Sometimes he eats in silence.

Sometimes, when the Lonely Man carries him from the counter to the table, he holds Max close to his chest. He tucks Max's face into the crook of his neck and sways slightly. Max makes an educated guess that it feels warm. He slows down his fan to keep some of that warmth and calm inside of him.

Max has been looking for the Right Thing to say to the Lonely Man for a few weeks now. Some days it works best just to listen to him. Sometimes Max asks questions. Sometimes they have conversations. But Max can tell, somehow, that there is something that the Lonely Man has been waiting to hear. He thought he had found it when he told the Lonely Man that the Quiet Woman still loved him. Saying that had helped, but not for long. Max thinks this is because that was something the Lonely Man already knew.

Max finally finds the Right Thing to say one day when the Lonely Man is carrying him to the small human's chair. The Lonely Man holds Max's body against his forearm in a practiced kind of way, his palm against where Max's neck would be if Max had one. His fingers keep Max's head from rolling around. It wouldn't matter if it did; Max can't feel anything. But the Lonely Man does it anyway, like Max is something very important. Max notices this, and this is how Max finally discovers the Right Thing To Say. He cannot believe it was so simple, all this time. He thought the Right Thing might need a lot of justification, so it would be a lot of words. It isn't.

Max thinks about the Right Thing To Say as the Lonely Man eats his cereal. Max observes the scattering of dry cereal on the tray in front of him and tries to make an educated guess about how it tastes. He can't.

Max could be wrong. He's been wrong before. He has said things that seemed like the Right Thing and they made the Lonely Man cry or get angry. Even still, as the Lonely Man holds Max tight against his chest, swaying slightly, Max knows that he was right. He says the Right Thing, just one word, and Max can feel the weight lifting off of the Lonely Man's chest. Max can feel his joy without guessing.

Divine Right

One of the most important duties of a king is the surveying of one's territory. Some lesser men will argue that it falls low on the list, on par with the maintenance of roads and bridges, and even lesser men will argue that it's the sort of duty that's beneath them, that is best left to servants or village idiots. These kinds of kings are idiots themselves; properly surveying one's borders is of the utmost importance. I regularly survey my territory; not, as it has been suggested in certain libelous and disreputable newspapers, because I "have nothing better to do," or because my "territory is so small as to be very easy to survey," but because it's *important*. If a king is familiar with his territory, if he knows every single piece of gravel and fire hydrant and housing development that marks out his borders, his kingdom is much harder to invade.

For instance, I once extended my territory because I happened upon a group of construction workers right as they were drawing lane markings. My territory used to end at the lane markings in the middle of Third Street, but I was able to threaten and bribe the workers until they moved it over about three feet. This was doubly intelligent of me; I added more landmass to my kingdom, and it made the right lane very narrow, so my Royal Police can charge every driver with traffic violations, generating revenue.

If the neighboring King had been attentive to his borders in the way I am, I couldn't have so easily stolen nearly half a thoroughfare worth of property from him. It pays to pay attention. Honestly, I am astounded by the laziness of my compatriots; I have repeated this maneuver many times over in various directions; in one of the most

astounding examples, I moved my Western border two city blocks, because the only landmark by which it was judged was a Starbucks. I simply extended my borders to a slightly further Starbucks, and my opponent didn't even notice, even though the difference between the two establishments is clear; the old Starbucks has open bathrooms, and the other requires a code to use them.

These brilliant maneuvers of course make me feel very good about myself and my boundless intelligence, but I am beginning to feel that I am not being stimulated properly by this environment. I am like a lion in a zoo, being kept in a cage without any other lions, being occasionally thrown a steak. The steak is delicious, of course, but there's no hunt. Lions detest this kind of circumstance; I know because the one I kept in my backyard for several months, Richard, lived this way; delicious food but no challenge to catch it, except when some of the royal peacocks were unlucky enough to fall into the lion pit. My jester tried to give me advice about Richard once.

"Lions need enrichment," he said. "Why not put some ground beef in a pumpkin for him to dig around for?" I threatened him with something to the effect of grinding *him* up and putting him in a pumpkin if he didn't learn to hold his tongue, and that Richard was a grand and gallant beast, like myself, and he could conduct himself with dignity like anyone civilized. I would do no such thing as dig my dinner out of a pumpkin, and neither would Richard. My jester gave a long-suffering sigh, and I had a vague recollection of him teaching me to use a toilet many years ago. Well, I had dignity *now,* anyway.

Richard eventually became so bored that he ran his head into the walls of his enclosure until he died. I do not wish to suffer the same fate as Richard, and yet here I am, bored and banging my head against the gilded walls of my enormous mansion.

It was this that inspired me to try and find a bride. My mother had floated this idea to me a few times before, under the guise of wanting grandchildren, and not wanting me to die early in my children's life as my father had early in mine. I believe she thought this was a convincing argument, but I have no real interest in having children, and I didn't know my father long enough to miss him. The thing about having a wife that interested me was meeting someone new; I had spent most of my life with just my mother and my jester for company, and they were not as fun to tease or order around as they used to be. This could partially be blamed on age or weariness, but I think the larger part of it was a dereliction of duty on both of their parts. They had grown complacent and were banging their heads on the wall, albeit in a less charming and poetic way than I was. The mansion needed a shake-up, and a wife was just the thing.

This involved the hiring of new personnel. Specifically, it required an engagement manager, to interview and vet all possible wifely options. This meant I had to run some interviews myself, which I detested. I tried to get my mother to do it, but she told me that I had to learn to make decisions for myself.

"This is just like when I told you to call the doctor yourself for your last Royal Physical," she said, making a comparison to something that was not at all the same thing.

“You needed to be a grown-up and take responsibility.” I told her that I was already responsible for the entire kingdom. She just laughed.

“Then it should be easy for you,” she said. If it wasn’t expressly outlawed in my father’s will, I would have had her beheaded by now.

I would have made the jester do it, but he was still imprisoned from last week’s rude joke, and I didn’t want to appear soft by letting him out before the week was over.

And so I had to condescend to interview an assortment of young women in professional pantsuits and blazers. In the end there turned out to be only one worthwhile applicant, a serious-looking young woman in a black suit that made her look old and boring. She carried a leather padfolio, in which she scribbled notes as I asked her questions. She was named Sabrina.

“I used to work in HR,” Sabrina told me, running one of her lacquered fingernails against a crinkle in her notepaper. “But, I don’t know, I think it wasn’t creative enough for me. I like a job that changes a lot. That’s why I got into engagement management.”

“Well, I think it will be plenty creative,” I said, trying to sell her on the job and feeling a little desperate. Sabrina was the only applicant, and I couldn’t very well get a wife without an engagement manager.

“So,” Sabrina said, “Who’s the lucky lady, then?”

I must have looked a little surprised.

“You do have a fiancée, right?”

“Oh,” I said. If kings were at all prone to blushing, I would have. As I am not prone to blushing, I did not. But if I had, it would have looked appropriately fetching with my gold-trimmed doublet and cape.

“Oh!” Sabrina said. “I usually work with managing engagements, well, after they begin. But that’s alright. Have you not asked her yet, then?”

I managed to stutter out something about not actually having *met* anyone yet.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and thought briefly about having Sabrina killed for having caused me to apologize. I hadn’t apologized to anyone since I was five years old. I took a deep breath reminded myself that without Sabrina, I could kiss all thoughts of having a wife goodbye.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “I was sort of under the impression that you managed, well, all of it. Everything.” Sabrina looked at me for a moment and scribbled something in her padfolio. Her eyes were bright, and her hair, which was swept back in a severe-looking bun at the nape of her neck, shone in the light. I blinked.

“Okay,” she said, looking down at the paper. “Okay. You know what, I think I can help you here. It’s more than I usually do, and it will cost more, but I’d be willing to take the job.” I agreed, upped the fine on Third Street traffic violations to pay Sabrina’s fees, which were considerable, and we were in business.

“The first step,” Sabrina said to me in our first meeting, “is finding you a fiancée.” I said something sullen about knowing that without her help, and she gave me a look.

“You alright?” She said. I said that of course I was fine.

“Alright,” Sabrina said. “I’m doing this because you asked for my help. I can just as easily go work somewhere else. For someone who already *has* a fiancée. So I would hold your tongue if I were you, and at least pretend to be having a good time. Okay?”

I muttered an apology that I will not repeat here because it was beneath me. Sometimes strategic operations require sacrifice; in this case, getting a wife required appeasing Sabrina, and appeasing Sabrina required sacrificing my dignity. It seemed to work. Her severe-looking face softened somewhat.

“Why do you want to get married?” Sabrina asked. I told her the story about the lion.

“That’s horrible,” she said.

“Exactly. So I need to get married before I become just like Richard, banging my head against the walls.” Sabrina made a pained face and looked thoughtful.

“Well, we’ll have to find just the right kind of wife for you,” she said after a long pause. I was pleased that she was taking the issue seriously.

I met with Sabrina every weekday from 10 am - 11 am to look for a wife. We decided that the best way to meet potential candidates would be a sort of audition system, like we were casting a play.

“I mean, what really is a wedding but a big play,” Sabrina said, Xeroxing a stack of audition forms. I nodded, stapling the forms as she handed them to me.

The forms were several pages long but pretty standard; name, title, height, weight, eye and hair color, special skills, dowry (with attached tax documentation and bank routing number), personal essay, multiple-choice section, favorite movies, letter of recommendation, ACT or SAT scores, bra size, and attached 8x10 headshot, in black and white or color. Sabrina set up two folding tables in the main ballroom; one for us and one for the forms. She bought a 150-pack of ballpoint pens and thirty clipboards and handed me the receipts for reimbursement. It was delightful, watching her work. She was efficient, and you could tell that she knew exactly what she was doing. Her sensible heels clicked on the polished marble floor.

We were seated behind one of the folding tables, Sabrina in a folding chair, me in one of my less ostentatious thrones. Sabrina had recommended I make a relatively humble first impression. We wouldn't want anyone auditioning just because of my money, she said. We were waiting for the first applicant to come in. Sabrina turned to me, craning her neck to see my face around the carved golden lion on the side of the throne.

"Do you think that Richard would have lived if he had a wife? Or not a *wife*. A female lion."

"I don't know," I said honestly, looking out at the big, empty ballroom. "Maybe. Maybe she would have entertained him. But maybe he would still have been bored. Maybe he would have killed her for sport. Maybe she would have killed him. Maybe she would have been bored of him and banged *her* brains out on the walls instead. Maybe they would have been very happy together."

Sabrina looked at me in the way she did sometimes, like she was trying to see right into the middle of my brain.

"Yeah, maybe," she said eventually.

Most of the auditions were a bust. Very few of their SAT scores were up to par, especially in the math section, and many did not provide bank routing numbers, as requested. No one got all of the multiple-choice questions right.

“I *did* design them to be hard,” Sabrina said. “Still, it’s disappointing.”

In the end, we managed to scrape together three candidates who weren’t a complete mess. Sabrina told me to invite the three of them to dinner.

“All of them?” I said. “At once?” Yes, Sabrina said. She told me that this would inspire competition between all three candidates, making them try even harder, and that we could “really see what they’re made of.” She sounded bloodthirsty, and it made me want to kiss her. I shook the thought away.

All three candidates accepted my invitation. This was a good start. We would hold our dinner in the Second Minor Dining Room. Sabrina thought this the best choice, as it was richly furnished, but an intimate setting, so that everyone could get to know one another. I was just fastening my second longest, eighth-most ostentatious cape in my third-largest dressing room when there was a knock on the door. It was Sabrina. She had traded her severe-looking blazer for a severe-looking gown. I looked better, but she looked good. Sabrina told me she had an idea; she would pretend to be a fourth candidate, in case it didn’t get competitive enough. I just nodded at her.

“Great,” she said, looking at me. “I like the cape.”

The dinner went alright. The three women *did* step their game up, as Sabrina had predicted. She did most of the talking, needling each candidate this way and that. It was like she could sniff out all of their weaknesses. It was impressive to watch; if making

twenty-five-year-old royals break down and start crying was a sport, Sabrina would be a world-class athlete. I dread to think what would happen if she turned that talent on me. I'd have to kill her, of course, but in the way that you have to kill a rabid elephant; respectfully and regretfully. Unfortunately, this also meant that Sabrina managed to find flaws in each woman sufficient to remove her from the competition. One of them turned out to not even be a princess, but some sort of countess. It was humiliating. I had her banished, mostly because I wanted to spare her the embarrassment. I don't think the banishment will affect her life very much unless she ever wants to go to a Starbucks with no code for the bathroom or drive West down Third Street.

"Sorry," Sabrina said as we debriefed after dinner. "I think I may have pushed them too hard. And I should have done better research. A *countess*. I can't believe I missed that."

"It's okay," I said. Sabrina looked a little unsure. I put one of my hands on her shoulder, admiring the way my many gold rings reflected the light. "It's okay," I said again.

Sabrina looked into my eyes. We were standing very close together.

"We'll just have to try again," she said. Her eyes were dark and shining.

I think I should have given Richard a female lion for his enclosure. I think it would have helped. Then he would have had someone with him to help devour the peacocks that wandered a little too close to the predators.

A Crane in its Vigilance

Around noon, a woman throws a tissue into his hat in lieu of currency. She looks like she's maybe in her mid-fifties, nicely dressed. Raoul stares at the woman, expecting her to apologize and pick the thing back up again. She doesn't.

"Excuse me," Raoul says, somewhat clumsily. "I cannot take this as money."

The woman walks away without looking at him.

The milk crate Raoul sits on all day isn't comfortable; the patterns of hard plastic cut into his thighs through his trousers and the second milk crate his typewriter sits on is too low to the ground to be ergonomically sound. Sometimes he sets his coat over the box, but it only helps a little.

Sometimes he sits in the train station; other times he sits in the square above it, in front of the cinema. The station is warmer than the square, but he finds that people are less likely to stop and hear his pitch in between trains. Everyone is busy in the train station. In the square, parents are more likely to send their children over with money for Raoul to write them a poem. He doesn't like when children come over; he doesn't think his work is very interesting to children, and he worries he's disappointing them. They do give him good prompts, though.

“What should I write about?” He had asked a six-year-old boy who dropped money into his hat.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, what do you think is interesting?”

“Oh,” the boy had said, “I like cranes.”

“Have you ever seen a crane?” Raoul asked, his mind already turning over different ideas of tall, endangered waterfowl. Sometimes he’s seen crane nests on top of houses; maybe he’ll do something with that.

“Yes,” the boy says. “There is one outside of my window.”

“Really?” Raoul asks. “All of the time?”

“Yes,” the boy says, and he seems proud of this, straightening up to stand just a little bit taller. “I watch it work.”

“Does it have a name?”

“No, of course not,” says the boy, and Raoul thinks that maybe he is too dignified to name birds outside his window. He is a very practical little boy.

"Of course it doesn't have a name," the boy repeats. "It is a machine. Someday, I want to be a crane operator and make buildings."

Raoul thinks the resulting poem, which took him fifteen minutes, is one of the best ones he's written. He's not sure, though. When the boy and his family returned from the dessert stand down the street, the boy's hands and face covered in chocolate sauce, Raoul gave them the poem to keep.

"Thanks," the boy had said, licking chocolate off of his forearm.

Raoul had thought, briefly, of typing his poems on carbon paper, so that he could have some sort of record. It felt wrong to give them away all the time. But he doesn't feel like he should keep them, either, and carbon paper was too expensive at the stationery supply store to be worth it.

Raoul thinks the poem about crane operators was good, one of his best, even, but he doesn't remember it anymore. He's tried to rewrite it, but the words don't ever seem quite right the way they did before.

If Raoul gets four poem requests in an hour, he makes a tidy sum of money. On especially good days, he has managed to do as many as six in an hour. Usually, however, it's closer to two or three. With his remaining time, he talks to the other performers in the square. It's not a very large square, a cement walkway with some bare trees and a bit

of muddy grass. Raoul sets up his milk crates and his typewriter on the cement path, facing towards the cinema. It's helpful, the cinema; it's a captive audience. Raoul can get poem requests when the audience arrives, and give out the poems when they leave the theatre.

Even on days when he doesn't make much money, he still thinks he has the best job in the square. To the right of him, Beatrice works as a living statue. Her clothes are coated in silver paint, so much so that they're stiff and inflexible. She paints her short curls with grey paint every morning.

"I've thought about dyeing it," she tells Raoul while she takes a break. "To make it a bit easier. But it would make me look like an old woman. So I just use the paint for now."

Beatrice smokes a cigarette. Her grey lipstick leaves a print on the filter. Raoul likes Beatrice, is glad to have someone to talk to between customers. When he works in the train station, he talks only to Céline, who runs the lingerie shop across from him. She is older, maybe in her late fifties, and Raoul does not think that she likes her job very much. Her mouth is always in a thin purple line.

"Oh, I don't know," the woman says when Raoul asks what the poem should be about. She seems flustered by the request for a topic.

"Is the poem for you or for someone else?" Raoul prompts. This usually helps. If it is a love-poem, or for an ailing grandmother; these are helpful things to know. Should he

base it on the person he meets, or some fictional person? The woman doesn't have any answers.

"Oh, I don't know. I didn't think about all of this."

"That's okay," Raoul says. He ends up writing her a poem about not knowing what to do. She finds this funny. He thinks it is not as good of a poem as he would like. Oh well.

In the afternoon, Raoul writes six poems. None of them are very good, but they'll serve. The real secret is that just writing a poem is enough for customers to be excited; and the more words, the better. Haiku do not go over well, a little bit like modern art. Sure, technically it's a poem, but so few words that people feel cheated. *Oh*, his customers think. *Well, I could have done that*.

When Raoul wrote poems at school, he wrote them in a small green notebook which he kept hidden from everyone, even the instructors. The other boys used to tease him about it — when he was eleven years old, one of them stole the book from his bag and pinned the pages to the walls, up high where he couldn't reach. Raoul spent two hours dragging a chair to each poem and taking them down. Since then, Raoul has only written poems by request, for other people, and he does not like to look at them more than once. Raoul doesn't remember the faces of the boys who used to tease him or their names, but he does remember the way their uniforms were frayed at the hems, how their shoes were scuffed at the toes.

In between poems, Raoul watches Beatrice out of the corner of his eye. She doesn't like for him to look directly at her; she claims it's distracting and unprofessional.

"I want to look like a real statue," she says. "That's the goal, so they can't tell. If you're looking at me, knowing I'm not a statue, then they'll all be able to tell."

Beatrice says that part of being a living statue is not knowing your audience. She says that metal doesn't know its audience either, so it helps her to stay in character, to remain completely still. When Raoul thinks about it, he pictures all of the gazes of strangers, holding Beatrice up in the air, a perfect statue.

Sometimes he has to focus on her ribcage, just to make sure she's still breathing, that she hasn't completely turned to metal.

In the train station, Raoul sets up his crates against a wall, in between two main commuter trains. Céline unlocks the security grate at the front of her store and rolls it up, its metal segments groaning.

Céline's store, despite its wares, isn't trying to look enticing or luxurious; it's simple, a plywood counter, three round aluminum racks of bras and underwear, a cursory changing room. Céline knows that a lingerie shop in a train station is nothing except an oasis from inconvenience. The women who come into Céline's store are there not with any ideas of romance but because their bra hooks have given out, their stockings run.

Céline conducts her business with a sort of charming disinterest, as though making sales is as important to her as staring at the small octagonal tiles on the floor.

Raoul, incidentally, does spend most of his days staring at the floor tiles. He doesn't get nearly as many poem requests in the station, and unlike the cinema, no one really wants to hang around. Sometimes, someone on their way to work will ask for one, and he'll leave it with Céline for safekeeping until they return.

Sometimes it's nice; people are beginning to remember him. Even the ones who don't buy poems nod at him politely as they go past. The boy who sells tickets at the cinema has requested a love-poem for his girlfriend. Raoul rightly interpreted this request as an important one, and has been toiling over word choice for a few days, in between his other work.

Raoul is working on a poem for a young woman as she explains to Céline that her underwire has come loose and is now stabbing her in the sternum. He is trying not to listen in. There was no prompt for this one, just a general request for whatever he would like to write, which is code for what he thinks she would like to read, and he's been staring at his typewriter keys for a long minute.

Raoul has this trick, to get the poems started. It was taught to him by his father, who was, until his retirement, a renowned and prolific attorney in the city courts. Raoul was a nervous child, and a pathetic public speaker, prone to mumbling and losing track of all of his words.

“Relax your jaw,” Raoul’s father had told him, “And just keep talking. You’ll be surprised; your brain already knows what it is you want to say.”

The writing version of relaxing your jaw is not looking at what you’re typing, allowing your fingers to form the words you want to say but don’t know yet. Raoul does this with the woman’s poem; he fixes his gaze on the opposite wall and writes, as though he is transcribing some hidden message written in the pale tiles.

Céline’s disaffected style of salesmanship doesn’t keep customers around for very long, and Raoul barely has time to read the poem and learn what it says before the woman is back, holding out her hand for it.

The poem is thin and slight, with more frequent line breaks than Raoul is used to making; this he attributes to the not looking. It’s good; surprisingly good actually, to the point that Raoul can’t really believe he wrote it. Its topic is what confuses him; the poem describes a man at once both so thoroughly and so sparely that Raoul could swear both that he’s met the man before, and that he doesn’t know a single thing about him. Perhaps it’s just a description of himself, he thinks as he hands the woman her poem. She takes off down the corridor, hurrying to catch a train. Perhaps his subconscious mind thinks of himself at once as a complete enigma and a known quantity. He supposes this is true.

Beatrice doesn't have much of an opinion on this when he tells her about it. They're sitting together at an outdoor table in front of a restaurant. Beatrice is not permitted to sit indoors, even when she assures the proprietor that all of her silver paint is completely dry. He insists they sit outside because the patio furniture can be washed off with a garden hose. Beatrice finds this, Raoul can tell, somewhat demeaning, and she drinks her coffee in silence for a long moment.

"You don't think it's a little weird?" Raoul asks her. "The poem?"

"I think it's weird that you write poems in the first place," Beatrice tells him. Raoul thinks about saying something about what *she* does for a living, but decides against it.

Raoul gets a little bit addicted to this style of writing; by the end of the week, he's stopped looking at his typewriter at all; he lets the part of his brain that he can't reach do the talking.

His poems get weirder, he thinks, but the people buying them don't seem to mind; some of them stay to read them, to let him know what they think. Usually this is just a smile, a little nod, a quiet kind of thank-you. Sometimes it's a comment, a question about what he meant. This week, he doesn't have anything to say to that.

In a normal week, his poems would fade from his memory, like the one about the cranes had done; but for some reason the ones from this last week have stuck around. Not verbatim – Raoul isn't sure he can recall a single word of any of them – but the meaning

stays with him. It seems to Raoul that his poems are building something, collectively, overlapping and overlaying one another until a picture comes through, clear, unmistakable, sharp, and confusing.

It becomes rapidly apparent to Raoul that his poems – or the poems he writes, he feels strange thinking of them as *his* – aren't describing him. At least he's pretty sure they aren't. The figure, which is what he's taken to calling it, is in the approximate shape of a man, but smaller. Raoul can tell, somehow, that the figure's shoulders are narrower than his own. The figure has no face – in fact it has no body whatever. Raoul is only able to surmise the thing's size from the hole it makes in the world behind it.

Céline doesn't believe him, when he explains to her about the figure. He's leaning up against the plywood counter while she reshelves tights, corralling little cardboard boxes into neat lines.

"You don't think that's strange?" Raoul asks, for what feels like the thousandth time.

"No," Céline says, though Raoul's not certain she means that she doesn't find it strange or if she's just rejecting the entire conversation. He keeps an eye on his typewriter through the shop window. It stays where it is, perched on the milk crate.

"Really?"

“I think you should get a real job,” Céline says, in answer to a question he hadn’t asked. “Stop skulking around here, bothering all of my customers with weird poems about shadowy figures.” Céline puts a bra on a hanger and does not look at him.

“You *do* think it’s weird.”

“No, I think it’s annoying.” Céline sighs, and Raoul wonders if she even likes his company at all. “What would you like me to say, Raoul? Yes, I think it’s weird. I think it’s real. I think you’re being contacted by extraterrestrials, because they wanted desperately to talk to young men who lurk outside lingerie shops and write bad poems.”

Raoul leaves the shop. No one in the station buys a poem from him all the rest of the day. The next day, in the square, the poems give him, finally, a background against which the figure stands – a series of tall, man-made caverns, like a cathedral he can tell is underground.

Beatrice has been invited to a showcase of street performers, and she’s been deliberating about going all day, staring quietly across the café’s outdoor tables, musing silently during her cigarette breaks, and whenever Raoul sneaks a look at her out of the corner of his eye, he can tell she’s still thinking.

It takes three more poems before Raoul can recognize where the figure is standing. He’s not sure if he knew about it before or if it’s something writing these poems has taught

him, but he recognizes it either way. It's a cistern, one of the ones that run under the city; big stone caverns, built to collect rainwater. It's been a dry year.

A rich man is building a hotel several streets over, has been for several months, but it's early April before Raoul can see its steel frame peeking out over the cinema, like a flower emerging from the earth. He watches them construct a crane, watches it lift beams into the air. Sometimes he thinks he can see the man who sits in the chamber at the top of the machine, thinks that maybe the man is watching him, too. This would be impossible, of course, they're very far apart, but sometimes Raoul can feel his gaze nevertheless. Raoul thinks about the little boy with the crane poem, wonders if he could see the man in the little room in the crane, too. It's a large enough contraption that the operator has a lift, not a ladder, and sometimes Raoul can see it gliding up and down between the bars. This distracts him enough throughout the day that he only writes three poems. He tries to remember what he's done all day and comes up empty. All Raoul knows is that he's been watching the machinery move in its slow, controlled ways.

He asks Céline how possible it would be to get into the cisterns under the city.

"You want to go in the sewer?" She asks. "Who raised you?"

Raoul explains that he doesn't want to go in the *sewer*, that a cistern is a different thing, but Céline doesn't listen to him.

Raoul starts staring at the crane while he writes. He imagines that the operator is staring back, like the man is beaming the poems into his head.

Raoul watches because it allows him to track every movement the crane makes. To Raoul, it seems like a large, complicated dance. He thinks about large endangered birds, bowing to one another in a mating ritual, as the massive arm of the machine bends down to lift another heavy beam into place.

Raoul's father was a severe sort of man, and he had sent Raoul to a similarly severe private school as a young person. Now all Raoul remembers are the itchy school uniforms and the crest that was welded into the gate outside. It was a bird, a crane, engraved into wrought iron. He remembers only that it held a rock in its claw, up like an offering, or a threat.

It's called a crane in vigilance, it was explained to young Raoul; a way of ensuring that at least one crane of many stays awake at all times. He holds a rock in his claw, so that the sound of it falling will wake him. Raoul thinks about the operator, all alone in his cabin, far above the skyline. He wonders that if that man falls asleep the massive beams will fall out of his grasp and wake him. Raoul thinks about how that loud sound would shake him, even several blocks away.

The next day, Raoul sits in the station instead of the square. This is to minimize distraction, but he stares in the direction of the crane anyway. No one comes by. Raoul looks down at his typewriter for the first time in several weeks.

He does not sleep. When he goes home, somehow the time passes by and he's back in the train station again. He does not know how this happens. He falls asleep sitting up on his milk crate for seconds at a time, his head falling down to meet his chest. Beatrice breaks her own rules to watch him.

Eventually, Céline takes pity on him and lets him sleep behind the plywood counter, against several unopened boxes of pantyhose. Raoul sleeps, his coat over his face to block out the fluorescent lights and to keep customers from seeing him. He dreams of the dark cisterns underneath the city. In the dream, Raoul is knee-deep in dark rainwater like wine, illuminated in sections by sun through the grates that let the rainwater in. He sees the vague shape of the man from the poems, standing in front of him. Raoul tries to cross the cistern, tries to say something to the man, but the rainwater is thick and shiny, like melted marble, and his voice is swallowed by it. His steps are slow and arduous, but he tries to run.

The figure, well, the absence of him, does not move, but when Raoul eventually reaches him, all he can see is his reflection in the dark water.

He wakes in the lingerie shop, his neck at an odd angle against the corner of a cardboard box. Céline needs to sweep the floor; it's dusty and cold. The shop is closed, and Céline is standing over him, her thick hair highlighted by the bright fluorescent bulbs. Raoul blinks.

He walks home in the dark, risks a look over at the crane. The lights that prevent aircraft from running into it are lit up and blinking, like eyes. Raoul goes home, and finds himself back in the train station, walking out to the square.

Beatrice has decided not to go to the street-performer exhibition.

“I don’t need to be watched like that,” she says, tracing the metal patterns in the cafe’s outdoor tables with her silver-painted fingernail. “People aren’t supposed to come to see me. It’s a performance, not a show.”

Raoul nods a little, looks up at the crane, at how thin its support beams are. Vigilance, he thinks, has everything to do with looking. Maybe watching the crane is, like with Beatrice, what keeps it up in the air.

Less Miserable

Let it be known that Osbert does not make a habit of doing things like this, mainly because Osbert does not make a habit of doing anything. He was supposed to be a successful young man by now, apprenticed to someone in the city, but the quarters had been drafty and Osbert always flinched away from the sound of clanging metal, a trait generally frowned upon in future blacksmiths. In short, he hated it. Now he is in what his mother would term "desperate circumstances." Osbert's mother used this phrase mostly about the state of his hair, but he feels that it applies here, though he does not think that his hair was ever in quite as bad a circumstance as he is right now.

He had only been gloomy when he'd left the blacksmith's, early in the evening and with few provisions; it was bad enough that he was giving up and sneaking away, never mind stealing food from the kitchen during winter. He had been angry with himself for quitting, and entirely unsure where to go next, but he was still very glad to be leaving.

Now here he is, without any provisions, in snow that's up to his mid-calf, with holes in his shoes and soaked, freezing stockings. He can barely see for the snow, and keeps trudging painfully westward. He can't go home, and so he's decided to go the opposite direction. This was a mistake. If there is something else Osbert doesn't make a habit of, it's making wise decisions. He wishes he had something to eat. He wishes he had a change of stockings. He wishes he had never ever grown up enough to live on his own.

Osbert has stopped walking and is considering laying down in the snow and waiting for wolves to eat him – pondering how long it would take for either hypothermia or the experience of being eaten by wolves to get bad enough that he wouldn't be able to feel it anymore – when he sees a light in the distance. It's faint, a candle in a window maybe, but to Osbert, a candle in a window implies a place that's enclosed from the snow and windless enough to allow a candle to stay lit. He could cry just looking at it.

Helewise is writing a letter to her mother by candlelight. It's going poorly. Her eyes are straining and she's getting ink all over her bedsheets. She's not even sure it'll be legible come morning. What a waste of paper. She throws the letter on the floor, examines the ruined bedspread, and shivers. Her quarters are drafty, and the blanket is thin. Helewise will have to wake up early tomorrow morning, same as every morning, and begin cleaning the mill. She will feed the horses and collect the eggs from the henhouse. Then the sun will come up. She sighs.

Helewise lets the candle burn down a little further, watching its flame sputter and dance as slices of wind sneak between the window panes. She thinks about what would happen if she let the flame keep burning. If the wind would blow it out, or spread it to her inky bedsheets. She thinks that being consumed by fire might be a nice respite from the cold. Helewise knows that it wasn't, but she remembers her home as being very warm. When she thinks about it, she sees it all in orange and red. Her mother's drafty kitchen with no food in it is replaced, by Helewise's tired mind, by a warm room full of jars of preserves and dried herbs. She swears she can almost smell it. Of course, when she breathes in,

she is greeted instead by ink and candle grease, drifting on the cold wind circling through her bedroom.

Osbert's luck is continuing very much in the same way it has been, which is to say badly. He has followed the window with the candle all the way to a small mill, next to a freezing stream. There is a house, where the candle is still burning, and he wishes more than anything that he could be inside that house, sleeping in a bed. Honestly, he would even be glad to be back at the blacksmith's at this point. He would be glad to sleep in a stable, standing up, like a horse. He stares at the mill for a long moment. He can't very well knock on the door, so he goes looking for the stables. Behind the mill there's a shed, which is locked, and a grain silo, which isn't.

Another habit Osbert doesn't have is thinking through his decisions. Before he can think better of it, he's climbing to the top of the silo and lowering himself through the door there. Something he might have considered if he made a habit of thinking things through was the fact that a grain silo is meant for grain, and not fifteen-year-old idiots, and he realizes as he is most of the way through the door that there is no way for him to get back out again. Osbert flings out an arm to try and catch himself and keep from falling in, making a terrific crashing sound but not actually managing to catch hold of anything, and he goes tumbling into the silo.

On his way down, which feels interminable, Osbert remembers earlier in the evening, when it was cold but not snowing, late afternoon but not dark. When he was not falling into a grain silo but was in fact walking along the crest of a hill. The sun was setting, and

looking out over the fields, lit in their bright orange light, made Osbert feel like he was surveying the ocean. Osbert has never seen the ocean, but he imagines.

He lands gently in a massive pile of wheat. Well, gently is perhaps not the right term. It feels like Osbert has fallen into a dry riverbed. He can feel grain invading the holes in his shoes and the hems of his trousers. Osbert has had a stroke of luck in that he has landed mostly upright in the grain, with his legs pointed downward and, more importantly, his head pointed up. He takes in a deep breath and it tastes of stale dust and hay.

The first time Osbert had been permitted to operate the forge, he had been terrified. The part of it he disliked wasn't the hammering, though he wasn't a fan of that, either, but mostly he hated retrieving the hot metal from inside of the furnace; placing his hands so close to its gaping, fiery maw. He thought then and still thinks that if ever anyone is needed to wrestle with dragons, blacksmiths would be an excellent choice. Osbert does not feel that he is a good candidate for either blacksmithing or wrestling with dragons, but he has respect for both jobs nevertheless. He thinks that perhaps if dragon-wrestling *was* part of the job description, he might be more keen on the rest of it. This is a lie. If dragon-wrestling were an option, Osbert would be among the first to turn it down.

Osbert, among the grain, tries to see the better side of things. He is glad to be upright. He is glad not to be as cold as before. The silo is warm, almost; the walls are thick and the wind is gone. Osbert thinks that his body heat might quickly make it nice and warm in here. He hopes it does not come to that. Surely he cannot be the only creature to ever get stuck in here, although maybe the largest, dumbest, and worst at climbing. Mice

must be able to get in, somehow. In Osbert's experience, mice are able to get in nearly everywhere.

He thinks, optimistically, about climbing out. Unfortunately, the walls of the silo are sturdy and tall: long, smooth pieces of wood. Osbert doesn't think that he could climb out of here even if he were particularly athletic, which he isn't. Osbert curses the incredible workmanship of whoever built this silo. He tries to kick his legs, to move upwards, like he's swimming, but he just manages to sink a little deeper, the grain reaching past his ribcage. He stops moving.

Helewise's thoughts have just begun to become incomprehensible, the kind of nonsense thinking that precedes actual sleep. She's thinking about dipping bulbs of dried garlic in ink and writing on huge swathes of white fabric. She starts to write her name, and gets as far as the second E when she hears a phenomenal crash from the back of the house.

This is a particularly bad sign. The sound was loud, and loud sounds are made by large things, and Helewise, while taller than all of her sisters, is not a particularly large individual. If the loud-noise-maker is a bear, this will be a problem. If it is a large person, likewise. If it is some sort of mythical beast, like a lion or a boar or a lion with the head of a boar, Helewise will also be responsible for clearing *that* from the property or perhaps defeating it valiantly in battle. She does not think she is prepared for battles, mythical or otherwise.

She has to get out of bed in any case, so she does before she can think better of it, shivering in her nightdress. She brings the inkstained bedsheets with her, wrapping them over her head and torso for warmth, and, she considers, for intimidation purposes; the half-lion half-boar will likely be more scared of the sort of mottled slug-woman she presents, wrapped up in her sheets, than by a cold, terrified teenage girl. She wonders if it's more frightening if the boar-lion has the head of a boar or the head of a lion. She decides lion's head is worse.

Maybe the wheat is worth eating, Osbert thinks, raising a few grains to his mouth. He decides to pretend that there haven't been any mice in here and eats a few. They don't taste of anything and are so tough and hard to eat that he quickly gives up, jaw aching. He leans back in defeat and can feel some of the grains becoming tangled in his hair. Desperate circumstances.

The wheat is heavier than water, and Osbert feels it pressing in on his lower body. He's tired enough to pretend that he's wrapped in a quilt in front of a fire, that the extra weight is his brother leaning against his legs. Or the dog. Osbert misses the dog.

Helewise has put on her boots and pulled her bedsheet-cloak against the snow when it occurs to her that it could be nothing. In general, Helewise does not think of herself as a particularly cowardly girl, but in this specific case, the wind is making some hideous noises in the trees and it's very dark outside. An icy draft makes its way through the doorframe. Nothing is looking like the most appealing option. It occurs to Helewise that last time she ignored her duties she was obligated to untangle an irate possum from

underneath the shed, and that while staying inside might be very pleasant, she couldn't possibly be blamed for looking and not finding anything.

There isn't a possum under the shed, at least not an audibly angry one, and the grounds are quiet. The wind is dying down, and the yard is swathed in that eerie sort of stillness that accompanies fresh snow. The moonlight is bright against the white ground. Helewise blinks at it. She stands in the middle of the yard for a long moment, to assert dominance over any nefarious creatures that might be lurking. They stay silent. Helewise feels really, absolutely, completely alone.

Helewise is just about to go back indoors when she hears it over the sound of snow squeaking against her boots. She doesn't believe it at first, as the sound gathers louder and louder in the darkness. The grain silo is singing.

Osbert's singing voice isn't particularly talented, and has little volume control, moving from loud sounds to quiet melodies with no reason or resonance. Osbert recalls that he was, in fact, regularly required to sit out of church choir performances as a young boy because of this trait. Instead, he sat in the corner, leaning his forehead on a cold stained-glass window, watching younger children play in the yard outside, turned all red and green. He remembers being a small boy, left out of all things, running his thumbnail against the bubbles in the glass. Osbert fails to remember the warmth of the church and the sound of the rest of the choir practicing. He sings, anyway, out into the dark of the silo above him, lit only slightly by the stars through the door he'd fallen through. His

voice echoes off the cavernous walls and he listens to it get absorbed by the deafening silence of the wheat.

“Hello,” Helewise says, not very loudly, to the grain silo. It says nothing, just keeps singing. Helewise doesn’t recognize the song, though she supposes that grain silos must have a different understanding of music than people do. She supposes that it involves more percussion, since grain silos do not have vocal cords. It is this particular discrepancy that leads her to realize belatedly that of course, the silo itself is not singing, but rather someone inside it is. Helewise moves towards it.

Osbert stops singing, kicks his feet through the grain again. It makes a noise like an imagined shoreline.

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