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A Former Liar Armed with Truth and Aiming for Greatness

Jonathan Gallardo

Cedarville University, jongallardo42@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This portfolio is a collection of my favorite works of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry that I wrote during my final four semesters at Cedarville University. “Cicadas at Lorelei” has been accepted for publication in *The Merrimack Review*, and “I Don’t Share My Grandfather’s Love for Mathematics” has been accepted for publication in **82 Review*. This collection deals with my discovering the truth about Jonathan Gallardo and using that truth to create art. I present to you *A Former Liar Armed with Truth and Aiming for Greatness*.

A FORMER LIAR ARMED WITH TRUTH AND AIMING FOR GREATNESS

by

Jonathan Gallardo

A Collection of Creative Writing Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of English,
Literature, and Modern Languages at Cedarville University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Creative Writing Minor

Cedarville, Ohio

2016

Approved by

For my father's father, Vicente C. Gallardo

INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this, you're doing so for one of two reasons, the first one being, you know who I am. Whether it's because you're related to me or you're my friend or an old professor or even someone I only talked to once or twice, you're coming to this collection with some knowledge of who I am. You already know what to expect. But what if you don't know me? What if you're reading this collection because you enjoy good writing and you came across the name "A Former Liar Armed with Truth and Aiming for Greatness" and thought it was interesting so you decided to read it? You have no idea what's coming. So let me fix that for you, and please adjust your expectations as you see fit.

The problem with expectations is they're often unrealistic, so before you get disappointed, let me begin by telling you what not to expect from this collection. Don't expect award-winning, *New York Times* best-selling, film-franchise material. This isn't a work of staggering genius that will break your heart. It's not a recap of a century of solitude. I doubt it will drastically change your life (but if it does, let me know).

With this collection, I aimed for greatness, but it's up to you to decide for yourself if I achieved my goal. There are flashes of brilliance, I think, but for the most part, it's your typical college student creative writing portfolio. I'm not Stephen King, J.R.R. Tolkien, T.S. Eliot, or Kendrick Lamar.

So what should you expect? The truth in the forms of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. Observations from the real world, thoughts in my head that make it onto the page. I'm serving up the truth on a silver platter. Truth with a side of sarcasm and an extra helping of weird.

The truth wasn't always my top priority. In fact, it was pretty low on the list when I began creative writing a little over two years ago. I lied because I was afraid of what other

people thought of me. I wrote in a false voice to make myself appear as some deep thinker or tortured soul. I lied because I felt my abilities were inadequate, especially after reading the works of my classmates. I lied because of my competitive spirit – I wanted to be better than everyone else. So naturally, I tried to be like everyone else. I aimed for greatness and instead hit mediocrity right in the bullseye. I wasn't ready back then. I wasn't equipped for greatness because I did not have truth.

How did I find truth in writing? I think it found me. I stumbled over it near the end of my junior year. It was hiding in the poem, "The Fate of Georgie Porgie and Other Stories." Originally, it was going to be a creepy piece about the feeling of ants crawling over one's skin, but for some reason, it turned into twisted nursery rhymes. That poem taught me I could use my writing to make people laugh. Everything I wrote before that was either borderline humorous or not funny at all. "Do You Want to Marry Someone You Met on the Internet" and "Unicornucopia," although funny to some degree, do not showcase my full talent for humor, and pieces like "Light Bearer" and "Red Sox T-Shirt" don't have a single drop of humor in them. That's not to say I didn't enjoy writing them. With the former, I enjoyed writing from the perspective of Satan. But with "Georgie Porgie," I realized that I could make people laugh and that I enjoyed doing it. Instead of trying to be someone I wasn't, I stayed true to myself, and it worked. With this in mind, I started to get the hang of this writing thing.

The fiction and nonfiction in this collection deal with the second part of the collection's title: Aiming for Greatness. With poetry, I didn't do that much rewriting—three drafts was the most, I think. But with the other two genres, I've gone through a hundred revisions, as Eliot once said. "I Can't Remember Any of My Seizures" and "I Don't Share My Grandfather's Love for Mathematics" went through nine drafts each, while "My Dad Taught Me to Fold Paper Airplanes

When I was Nine” took ten rewrites. And with fiction, “Chickens Walked Around” was just day after day of writing, cutting, rewriting, and cutting, and I am still going through that process. The scene with the walrus has already been cut from my manuscript, and the beheading scene does not yet have a place in the story.

God also gave me a talent for observation. I remember things better than most people I know. I linger on words I said, on words I never said, on random moments that disappear from the normal person’s memory seconds after it happens. I put this gift to work most often in nonfiction. When I first started in the genre, I thought I wouldn’t have anything to write about because I’ve been blessed with a very stable life. No deaths, no break-ups, no familial feuds. But as I thought about it, I realized that I’ve lived a pretty weird life. Epilepsy, asthma, my Chinese-Filipino-Irish heritage, romance and the lack thereof, visiting Taiwan nine times. So I’ve learned to follow that weirdness.

This weirdness goes back to the truth that I addressed earlier. What is meant by weirdness? I believe it’s a combination of all the things that make someone unique. Your experiences, your mannerisms, your talents, even your sense of humor. When you follow your weirdness, however, you must let go of something else: your pride.

With “Chickens Walked Around,” I stopped worrying about what other people would think of my writing and I just wrote. Before I knew it, the 10-page piece turned into 100 pages of comic fantasy and young adult romance, and it shows no signs of stopping. If you want to know me as a person, read “Chickens.” Because it’s the weirdest thing I’ve written, it’s also the truest thing I’ve written.

The truth is I’m a recovering liar who’s just following his weirdness wherever it takes him. I’m hoping it leads to greatness, but I have shaky hands and my confidence, although not

terrible, could use some work. The truth is I have miles to go before other people call me great. But this past year and a half has helped set me on the path to greatness. I'm far more prepared than I was when I started. It will be an adventure, and it will be difficult. But I think I'm up to the task.

So having said that, please enjoy "A Former Liar Armed with Truth and Aiming for Greatness."

FOREWORD

Stephen King said the art of writing “isn’t about making money, getting famous, getting dates, getting laid, or making friends. In the end, it’s about enriching the lives of those who will read your work, and enriching your own life, as well. It’s about getting up, getting well, and getting over” (King 275). And he’s right. We shouldn’t write because of what we can get from it. Rather, we should write because of what others can get out of it through us. But King’s missing something here. Something that I have and King does not – a personal relationship with the Writer. God has given me a love for writing.

One must be careful to not place too much meaning into their gifts. I know that God can take that away from me whenever He pleases. If my hope came from my writing, then when I can no longer write, I’m in for a big surprise. I don’t have hope because I write. Rather, I write because I have hope. Hope in Jesus Christ, hope for a better world. Because of my relationship with Christ, because of the hope that I have in Him, I want to speak the truth in my writing, not only about what I see but also about what I hope to see.

Joseph Conrad said his goal in writing is “to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see...If I succeed, you shall find there...all you demand – and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask” (O’Connor 80).

But what is truth? For something to be true, what must it have? It must be accurate to reality, but it’s not enough to just be accurate for yourself or a reader. “When writing with maximum impact, the writer seems under compulsion to set down an unbearable accuracy” (Moore 333). It has to touch the souls of readers all over the world. No matter their age, ethnicity, or social status, it has to make them go, “That’s exactly right!” Terrell writes that the

best writers use their craft to “explore its unique capacities to address the humanity of a story’s characters as well as to make contact with the experiences of readers” (Terrell 257).

O’Connor writes that the aim of art, no matter the medium, is truth. “The person who aims after art in his work aims after truth, in an imaginative sense, no more and no less” (O’Connor 65). How do I tell the truth? One way is to “depict a fallen world that has hope, that finds a way to enable to live the truths of the narrative through the power of God” (Fant 178). This is what I hope to do. I want to tell stories in a God-honoring way that will spread truth to those who might not otherwise hear it. I want to write about what I see because “God’s creation, including the creatures in it, have meaning and importance because God made them. The world is therefore worthy of the writer’s portrayal and understanding and love” (Ryken 32).

Here’s a newsflash for all those Christian writers out there who concern themselves with writing pure, unnatural, white-as-snow stories and characters – that’s not the truth! It would be the truth if we lived in a perfect world, but last I checked, we don’t, and we won’t until we enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. “[T]hough the good is the ultimate reality, the ultimate reality has been weakened in human beings as a result of the Fall, and it is this weakened life that we see” (O’Connor 179).

For fiction to succeed, it has to bear some resemblance to the real world. “Fictions do not take us out of time and the world. Even tales of the marvelous do not take us out of time and the world. Their sequences and vicissitudes are woven of the same contingencies, surprises and reversals which attend on our own” (Wilder 458). Ironically, fiction needs truth or else it won’t work.

The truth hurts. The truth gets your hands dirty, it will make you feel uncomfortable. You’ll discover things about yourself that you wouldn’t want to tell others, you’ll come across

topics that you wish you'd never learned about. But this shouldn't bother us. "Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't try to write. It's not a grand enough job for you" (O'Connor 68). And this is also true for nonfiction and poetry. Human nature is sick and disgusting. It'd be nice if people all wore nice suits and dresses and only said "oh, golly" and "darn it" and "oh my lanta" when they stub their toe or rear-end a Lexus, but that's not the case in this world. So when we write a story set in this world, in this time, we shouldn't try to portray it in a cleaner light. "If you can't deal with something honestly and with authentic humanity, then perhaps the story is better without it" (Terrell 250).

I struggled with telling the truth early in my writing career. I lied to fit in, to make people think I was someone I wasn't. I pretended to have a dark, tortured soul when in reality, I was neither dark nor tortured. But I wasn't the only one who fell into this trap of avoiding the truth.

Many Christian authors and artists struggle with speaking the truth. They are afraid of making themselves and their audience uncomfortable. Christian rapper Andy Mineo works his way around the truth on his song, ironically titled "Uncomfortable." He says his "own people owned people, but they don't own that. They say racism dead, man our president is black. Two terms in the White House, that don't mean jack if we still believe our present ain't affected by our past" (Mineo 2015). Here, Mineo vaguely acknowledges that there's a problem, but he doesn't go into much detail. In fact, he switches topics in the next line. Instead of focusing on the problem for 16 bars, he only gives it four. Yes, racism is a problem. So what? Mineo doesn't give me any concrete examples, he doesn't give me a reason to care.

On the other end of the spectrum, hip-hop artist Kendrick Lamar immerses the listener in a bath of uncomfortable truth. In "Keisha's Song (Her Pain)" he tells a difficult story about the

life of a prostitute: “Her anatomy is God's temple and it's quite simple, her castle is 'bout to be destroyed” (Lamar 2011). He raps on “m.A.A.d City” about his childhood in Compton, California: “Back when I was nine, Joey packed the nine. Pakistan on every porch is fine, we adapt to crime. Pack a van with four guns at a time, with the sliding door” (Lamar 2012). I could go on, but I’m writing on faith and writing, not the music of Lamar.

Mineo and Lamar both profess faith in God. The difference? Lamar isn’t afraid to get at the truth, to make his listener see what he sees, what he experienced, no matter how uncomfortable it may be. Mineo, on the other hand, glosses over the truth, choosing to remain in his comfortable bubble.

The writer can’t pretend he doesn’t notice the fallen state of the world. Doing so reflects badly onto the author and the Author. O’Connor writes that as Christians, “we reflect the Church in everything we do, and those who can see clearly that our judgment is false in matters of art cannot be blamed for suspecting our judgment in matters of religion” (O’Connor 190). As writers, we have to show the reader what we see. The world is suffering from the effects of sin. Divorce proceedings. Malignant brain tumors. Young girls working with a new man every night. 18-inch coffins. Unworn baby shoes for sale.

The nonbelieving writer often has no problem portraying this truth. Often, he will put man’s depravity on full display. So where many Christian writers have failed to tell the truth, secular writers have succeeded.

But as believers, we have another truth, one that lies beyond the vision of the nonbeliever. This truth is one of hope, of the happy ending, of the thought that one day, death will be no more. And it is this truth that is our biggest obligation.

This is the difference between the secular writer and the Christian writer. The former looks at the world, sees its brokenness, and thinks to himself, there's no hope, so I might as well live that way. He doesn't know hope, he doesn't know peace. On the other hand, Christians can take a look at the world and say, sure, it's bad, but we know God has something better planned for us.

As God takes every one of us and redeems us, rescues us from ourselves, Christian writers can partially redeem this fallen world, one paragraph at a time. They can take something broken and transform it into a beautiful creation. The non-believer does not have an obligation to redeem because he sees nothing that needs redemption. To him, the world is perfectly fine. "The Christian novelist is distinguished from his pagan colleagues by recognizing sin as sin. According to his heritage he sees it not as sickness or an accident of environment, but as a responsible choice of offense against God which involves his eternal future" (O'Connor 167).

Redemption is almost never clean. Sacrifices have to be made. Once again, we have to be willing to get our hands dirty. God redeemed us because we were broken. If we were holy, we wouldn't be in need of redemption. He stooped down to our level, became one of us. He traded the comforts of heaven for the discomforts of Earth.

I want my writing to redeem, to dig up the bad and the ugly and reveal in them the beauty that was hidden all along. Beauty in this world is not synonymous with perfection. It is not whitewashed, or sterile, it is not the absence of flaws and scars.

Christians have this tendency to find beauty in that which the world would not call beautiful. Childbirth is gruesome. A little, crying human comes out of bigger crying human and there's blood and afterbirth and screams and most of all, there is pain. But there is beauty in the pain, there is beauty in all of this chaos. A tiny human, created in the image of God, has just

entered the world. And that's beautiful. But since there are non-believers who find childbirth beautiful, let me give an example from my Christian worldview. Christ's death on the cross was horrific, but it was beautiful in that the Creator loved his rebellious children so much that He was willing to die for them so that they might live with him for eternity. This act of love in the face of hate is the most beautiful thing in the world.

There is beauty in death, and we can say this only because of hope. We hold onto the hope that death is just a bridge we must cross in order to spend eternity with God. The non-believer does not have this hope, so he does not see the beauty. To him, death is just an end.

The Christian lenses I wear show me there is beauty in this world despite its troubled past and present. This is why I can write about this world without despair – because I know that there is a happy ending on the horizon. Now, the happy ending “does not deny the existence of...sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (Tolkien 68).

This hope of a happy ending does not make me better than the secular writers of the world. I hurt, I cry, I bleed just like everyone else. But because I have this hope, I have to tell others about it. I write in the hope that the world will see this Joy through my writing, that by reading my work, it will see the hope and the peace that I have, and it will know that the best is yet to come.

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ON BABY SHOWERS AND MISTAKEN IDENTITIES
(CHICKENS WALKED AROUND, EXCERPT I)

An unnatural quiet hung over the forest. Normally, one could hear the flaps of dove's wings, the rapid-fire knocking of a woodpecker, the rustle of leaves under deer's hooves, squirrels' scurrying up trees and across branches. But today, silence was king. The sun made a poor attempt to hide behind a thin layer of cloud.

A cloaked figure sat against a tree, his face obscured by his hood so that an onlooker would not have been able to tell if he was awake or asleep. The six masked figures stood in the forest and watched him from a distance, contemplating this very thought. They floated a few inches above the ground.

They drew daggers from their cloaks, jagged blades covered in rust and decades-old blood. They crept towards the hooded man and surrounded him, taking care to not kill the silence.

One of the figures stepped forward and was about to swing his dagger, but the man jumped up, startling his would-be assassin. His hood slipped off his head, revealing a young face. He swung his sword at them, its blade glistening in the sunlight. They leaped back in a mixture of surprise and fear, but they quickly regained their composure.

"Who are you?" asked the young man.

"We are from the Finisher, Prince Gordon," the six said in unison. "We have direct orders to kill you."

The young man furrowed his eyebrows. “First, my name’s Garrison, not Gordon,” he said. “Second, who’s the Finisher? Third, how long do you practice speaking in unison? You’ve really got that locked down.”

“Your name’s Garrison?” The group shuffled around slowly and whispered among themselves, breaking their unison.

“We’ve got the wrong guy, Henchman 1.”

“Why does everyone assume I’m the leader? Just because I have “1” in my name doesn’t mean I’m in charge.”

“I say we kill him. I haven’t killed anyone in seven hours.”

“This is awkward. I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Let’s just leave. Maybe he won’t notice.”

“Hey!”

The group looked up as Garrison walked towards them. “I can hear everything you’re saying. Are you going to let me know what’s going on?”

“Sorry. We were looking for a guy named Gordon,” said Henchman 1. “We’ll leave and pretend like this never happened.”

“But who’s the Finisher?”

“It was nice meeting you, Garrison,” said Henchman 1, “but we’re late for a very important, um, something.”

One of the other figures spoke up. “Glamdorf is having a baby shower!”

“Yeah, a baby shower. Wait. What’s a baby shower?”

“I think it’s like a thunderstorm that rains babies.”

Garrison sighed. “You know what? You guys can leave. I don’t even care anymore.”

As the leader of the group turned to walk away, he stopped. A confused look came upon his face, and he stared at Garrison.

“You look familiar. Have we met before?”

Garrison frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“Sorry. It’s just, your face, it’s like—”

Henchman I didn’t even finish his sentence before running to catch up with his group, who had been carrying on the previous conversation.

“What’s the purpose of a baby shower?”

“To breathe life into an unpopulated area, of course. What else would it be?”

“So babies come from the sky? My parents always told me that babies were the product of—”

“Guys! Since when did we start floating? This is so cool!”

Sound flooded into the forest as if the shrieks had broken through a dam.

“Dustin. Dustin!”

SEMI-AUTOBIOGRAPHY

1. The end always comes when you're not expecting it.
2. When people ask me why I haven't read a certain book or watched a particular movie, I'll either say "Because I'm Asian" or "Because I was homeschooled."
3. When I was a freshman in high school, I would walk around the YMCA reading the World Almanac.
4. On an unrelated note, I've been single my whole life.
5. Friends seem to always come to me for relationship advice.
6. I don't think affirmative action is good for this country, but it's good for me.
7. On multiple-choice tests, I get worried when I pick the same letter four questions in a row.
8. The noose is a forget-me-knot.
9. I've never had a chocolate chip cookie.
10. Sometimes when I'm with my younger sister, Hannah, people will ask us if we're dating.
11. If I could have any superpower, I'd want to make things touch without moving them.
12. I first ate ice cream when I was 22.5 years old.
13. If a snake offers you fruit, say "no."
14. Vanilla ice cream tastes like cake that has spent the past three days in a refrigerator.
15. Sometimes when I can't fall asleep, I pretend there's a burglar in my room.
16. I considered majoring in English but I changed my mind when I saw the core requirements.
17. I wish I could be a kid again so that I can read Dr. Seuss books without people giving me weird looks.
18. Eternity scares me, the prospect of living forever and ever with no end in sight...
19. My sister and I can quote *Napoleon Dynamite* from memory.
20. In Ohio, a 74 on the driver's test is a failing grade. I got a 75 on both the road and maneuverability portions.
21. When I voted for the first time, the people at the polling place thought I was twelve years old.
22. I'm suspicious of anyone who's always smiling.
23. I've never had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.
24. If someone asks you if you listen to Nickelback, ask, "who?"

25. People keep telling me I can't make any money with a journalism major.
26. I'm teaching myself the guitar so that if I have to live on the streets, I can make a little money.
27. Everyone has a little bit of Gollum in them.
28. I procrastinate because I work better under pressure.
29. When I was younger, I picked ants off the ground and put them in webs so I could watch the spiders eat them.
30. I have a lightning-shaped scar on my forehead, but I have no idea how it got there.
31. I've been to Taiwan eight times. Or nine. I can't remember.
32. Oreos taste like burnt graham crackers.
33. I'm suspicious of anyone who never smiles.
34. My grandfather is already pressuring me to have a son.
35. I don't know how to parallel park.
36. If I could be any animal in the world, I'd be a mongoose.
37. When I was seven years old, I hissed at people when they tried to talk to me.
38. From third grade to junior year, people compared me to Harry Potter.
39. There has never been a sadness that can't be cured by a child's laughter.
40. I wish I was 5'7".
41. If someone asks you if you liked *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, say no.
42. I was tempted to put a *Hitchhiker's Guide* reference here, but don't panic.
43. If I had a cat, I'd worry that it was planning to murder me in my sleep.
44. Iced coffee tastes like if pretzel rods took an ice bath and dumped the water into a cup when they were done.
45. I'm naming my second daughter Lafawnduh.
46. If a guy asks a girl if it hurt when she fell from heaven, is he actually calling her Lucifer?
47. I can fold a Swiss Army Knife out of a single sheet of paper.
48. I don't know how to tie a tie.
49. I want the Loch Ness Monster to exist.
50. Life is like a box of chocolates: it's full of things I can't eat.
51. The OCD part of me hates that this line exists.

THE FATE OF GEORGIE PORGIE AND OTHER STORIES

London Bridge has fallen down.
Dozens of people have drowned.
But the bad news is the city's budget
does not allow for the reconstruction of the bridge,
my fair lady.

There was a crooked man, and he walked a crooked mile.
He retired after a very long and successful career in politics.

Little Bo Peep lost one baby sheep
and didn't know where to find it.
She searched the hills, scoured the pastures,
and after three days,
Mary had a little lamb,
medium-rare,
slathered with
garlic and rosemary.

Rock-a-bye baby, in the treetop,
when the wind blows, the cradle will rock
and someone will call child protection services.

Hey, diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle,
the cow jumped over the moon
and soon after died from oxygen deprivation.
But the cat is now a successful concert violinist.

Little Jack Horner sat in a corner,
eating a Christmas pie.
But because his mother worried
about child obesity, she took away his pie
and gave him celery and kale instead.

Georgie Porgie, pudding and pie,
kissed the girls and made them cry.
He spent the rest of his life shunned,
labeled a pervert by his community.

Rub-a-dub-dub,
three men in a tub.
These days, these two lines have a connotation
far different from what the original author intended.

Old MacDonald had a farm,
but he was forced to sell it
due to his neighbors' accusations that
he engaged in animal cruelty.
He now lives in an asylum
where he roams the halls, repeating E, I, and O.

LIGHT BEARER

“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

–Genesis 3:15

if you let your son
play with a snake
it will strike

the heel is not bruised
it is broken

did you weep
when you watched your son
hang like a tattered scarecrow?

you cast me down to earth
and thought I would not rise again

you were wrong
I have extinguished the sun

you had your chance
it's my turn now

AFTERMATH OF A PNEUMOTHORAX

I

The nurse hunts for a vein
With the agility of an arthritic centipede,
Piercing me not once, but twice.
The doctor smears a local anesthetic
Below my left armpit,
Stealing the feeling in my chest
For one-half of the clock's cycle.
The surgeon guides the needle into my chest
With the nimbleness of a mongoose.

II

Now I'm trapped in a
Room that smells white,
A purity constructed with
Latex and sanitizer.
The nurses touch me with their rubber hands.

III

Night comes to visit.
Darkness covers the sky like a moth-eaten blanket,
Punctured by the light of a
Half-eaten block of Gorgonzola
And the subjects of a
Dozen connect-the-dots metaphors.

IV

My eyelids don't slam like
The door of a teenager's bedroom;
Instead, they flutter for a moment, then close slowly,
Like when you refuse to accept that you
Have arrived at the end of an exceptional book,
So you riffle through the pages,

Hoping to delay the advent of the end,
As if closing the book will lock its stories inside.

V

I awake to an abundance of needles.
One dips into the scarlet pipelines of my body.
The blood flows out like a reluctant child at work who,
Upon hearing about the chance of a reward,
Starts moving much more quickly.
Through the large glass eye in my room, I see
Snowflakes dancing with the wind,
Taunting me as I lie confined to a bed.
So like a dandelion emerging out of a crack
In the sidewalk, this poem arises
From my damaged lung.

ON INFANT RULERS AND NINE-FINGERED WOMEN
(CHICKENS WALKED AROUND, EXCERPT II)

Dustin spotted Xenia Stringfellow staring at a locker. He began to walk toward her, then stopped. He could feel his heart beating faster, and his palms began to sweat.

You can do this, Dustin, he thought. Just walk up to her and talk to her.

He stepped closer, then turned around and walked away from Xenia.

Save yourself the embarrassment, he told himself. She probably doesn't remember you, and even if she did, she wouldn't like you.

Dustin stopped again. *But what if she does like me? I'll never find out unless I ask. I'm going to talk to her.*

He turned around, but Xenia was nowhere to be seen. *There goes your chance.* A finger tapped his left shoulder, and he jumped. It was Enzo.

"Don't scare me like that!" Dustin said.

"That was sad, what just happened there," said Enzo. "You were pacing back and forth like a father waiting for the birth of his first child."

"I just got nervous. I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You need help, Dustin."

"What are you going to do? Take me to a palm reader?"

"Don't be silly. No, I'm going to teach you how to land Xenia Stringfellow. She won't even know what hit her."

“When were you going to tell us that we were going to run out of food?” Bentley was kneeling down besides Garrison’s bag, which contained half a loaf of bread and some moldy cheese. “After we starved to death?”

“Look, I can explain,” said Garrison. He grabbed the bag away from the boy.

“Yeah, that’s what they all say.” Bentley scrunched up his face as if he was about to cry. Then he laid down on his stomach and buried his face in the grass, his hands and legs spread out like a starfish.

“What are you doing?” asked Mason.

“He’s eating grass,” Portia sighed. “He does that when he gets upset, or when he hasn’t had enough to eat. But getting back on track, when were you going to tell us that you didn’t have enough food for all of us, Garrison?”

“I was planning on it,” he said, shrugging. “Eventually.”

Bentley looked up at Garrison. “Probably when he had no food left. Which one of us were you going to eat first?”

“Bentley, I don’t think Garrison has a taste for human flesh,” said Mason. “It’s an acquired taste.”

“Anyone can acquire it if they’re desperate enough,” said Bentley.

“Look!” said Garrison. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the food situation. Okay? At least I’m telling you now, right?”

“After you’ve been caught,” said Bentley under his breath.

“This doesn’t help us with our problem,” said Portia.

“What’s that?” asked Mason. The group directed their attention to his pointing finger. A city sat in the distance.

“That’s Blackdrop,” Garrison said. “We can get food there! And I know the king. He can help us get to our destination.”

“How timely,” said Portia, rolling her eyes. “A city pops up just as we were about to eat each other. There wasn’t any risk here, was there?”

“I didn’t know it was so close,” said Garrison. “To Blackdrop!”

“I don’t like the sound of this,” said Mason. “It sounds too convenient to be true.”

The first thing that Garrison noticed about Blackdrop was the yellow fog. It reminded him of a cat, the way it slithered through the alleys, into the butcher and barber shops, made its home in the apothecary with the broken window, rubbed its back against the walls of the three-story apartment buildings. It didn’t seem to affect the people, however. They walked around with huge smiles on their faces. Garrison flagged one of them down, an old woman with nine fingers and a basket of cheese. When she saw them, her eyes grew as large as plums. Garrison was afraid her head was going to explode.

“Have you come to fulfill the prophecy?” she asked.

“What prophecy?”

“Haven’t you heard the prophecy?”

“No,” said Garrison.

The woman looked disappointed. “Oh. Me neither. I was hoping you had. We’ve heard people talking of a prophecy, but no one knows what it is. So whenever we have visitors, we ask them if we know.”

“Enough with the useless exposition,” said Garrison. “We’re looking for the king,”

“Oh, Elmer? He lives in the palace. Not the purple one shaped like a fish bowl, but the palace next to it.”

“I don’t think his name is Elmer,” said Garrison.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure it is, young man. Learn to respect your elders!”

The woman threw a block of cheese at Garrison, and it hit him in the face before falling to the ground. The woman bent down to pick it up.

“I’m not going to waste a perfectly good cheese,” she said before walking away.

What surprised Garrison the most about the palace was not the walls, which were a combination of purple and brown. It wasn’t the floor, which was basically a field of gray grass. It wasn’t even the elephant sitting in a far corner of the room struggling to play the flute. No, what surprised Garrison the most was the absence of people. There were no guards in front of the doors. No servants going in and out of rooms carrying trays of food. No one had answered the door when he knocked, so he let himself in.

“Where do you think the king is?” Bentley asked.

“Let’s ask the elephant,” said Portia. She walked up to the creature and said something. It shook its head, rubbed its trunk, and kept playing. “This guy’s no help,” she said.

“The king might be in that room straight ahead,” Mason said.

“What makes you think that?”

“There’s a sign above the door that says *Throne Room*.”

Bentley ran ahead of the group and went in. A few seconds later, his scream pierced the air.

Portia ran in, and Garrison followed, dragging Mason along the ground. Then they saw what Bentley had seen. It was a baby walking on his hind legs.

The baby wore a white cloth diaper, leather boots and a red cotton cape encrusted with lollipops. A crudely made paper crown rested on his head, and in his left hand he held a purple scepter twice his height.

“Who are you, and why are you here?” he asked as he pouted his lips and placed his hands on his hips.

Bentley hid behind Garrison. “He doesn’t sound too happy, Horse Thief.”

“He’s just a baby,” whispered Garrison. “What are you so afraid of?”

“We are but humble travelers, your grace,” said Portia. “We have embarked on a noble quest and we seek your assistance.”

“Quit it with the language, miss,” said the baby. “Where do you think you are? A high fantasy?”

“What’s that?” asked Bentley.

“Never mind. What are your names?”

“I’m Portia, and this is Garrison. Behind him is my brother Bentley. And that crawling man is Mason.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” said the infant. “My name’s Elmer.”

“Hold on,” Garrison said. “I thought the king was a man.”

“He was,” said the baby. “But he died, so I took his place.”

“How old are you?” Portia asked.

“Seven months as of two days ago.”

“And you’ve already learned how to walk? That’s impressive.”

“Can you teach me to walk?” Mason asked.

Elmer studied Mason for a moment, then changed the subject.

“You said you were on a quest. What is it? Slaying a dragon? Rescuing a princess locked in a castle? Destroying a powerful weapon of evil? Searching for a relic that will give you supernatural powers?”

“We were wondering if you could show us how to get to the Cave of Crystal Dreams,” said Garrison.

“Do I look like a cartographer to you?” asked Elmer.

“Legend has it that the king before you knew the surrounding areas like no other. He knew every street, every alleyway, every dirt path within 500 miles of here.”

“Oh, I know that guy. He’s my dad. He lives in the purple fishbowl.”

“I thought you said he died,” said Garrison.

“He did. Why any man would color his hair like that, I’ll never know,” said Elmer as he pulled a lollipop from his cape and started to suck on it. “But here in Blackdrop, to dye your hair is to lose your job. It’s the law.”

“So the old king’s still alive?” asked Portia.

“Yeah. He’s just not in a position of leadership anymore.”

“So can we see him?” asked Mason.

“Sure. He should be in right now. Just knock on the door five times. I’ll tell him you’re coming. Lollipop?”

“I’ll take an orange one, please,” said Mason.

CEREBRUM

What happens to a mind overworked?

Does it melt like a snowflake
On the tongue of a young child?
Or stretch like a hamstring—
And then snap?
Does it wither like a daffodil in the August sun?
Or starve—
Like a tortoise overturned?

Maybe it collapses
Under the burden bestowed.

Or does it explode?

WORST-CASE SCENARIO IF I EVER HAVE A SON

When you were young,
you'd climb into bed and say,
"Read me a story, Daddy!"
You never tired of hearing the same tale:
your eyes just as wide, your gasps
of surprise as loud the first time as the tenth.
The wardrobe, the looking-glass, the ring,
they all held you in their grasp.

But now, after those years of listening,
you've lost that excitement.

All you do now is sleep,
and immerse yourself in virtual worlds
created outside of your mind.

Then I realized that though you had
a great imagination,
you had grown older, and what you gained in years
you lost in wonder.
You traded books for consoles,
the sound of turning pages for the noise
of artificial gunfire,
because books were too childish for you.

You will never know how deeply
you hurt me when you said you were
too old for bedtime stories,
too old to listen to my voice
as it transported you to worlds of
chocolate factories and Swiss families.

Adolescence has stolen your
wonder, your imagination,
as I feared it would.
You are free to do as you please now, for you think
you have no need of me anymore.

RED SOX T-SHIRT (IN MEMORY OF GAGE WILLIAM CREED)

“It’s probably wrong to believe there can be any limit to the horror which the human mind can experience.”
—Stephen King, *Pet Sematary*

Face flushed red,
Curly blond locks,
Gap-toothed grin
 laughter
Screaming giddily
Short, quick strides,
 arms pump against wind
As he runs
From Daddy—
 just a game

Father’s face,
Stubble, strong jaw
 love,
Chases after his son
 only one—
Running down
 the front yard—
Slow down
This is a game

 face, red smiling
Bright green eyes, small
 puffing
 breath—
Hears name
 over and over
Again—
As grass
 turns into gravel

Father's face,
Widow's peak, brown
Blue eyes
 worry
Fear,
Sees the truck,
 its shrieking roar as it
Heads towards son
He leaps forward
To make a tackle—
 outstretched,
Right hand grasps
 jacket

Bright lips
Frown
 stumbles
 but only for
A moment—coat comes off
 he keeps running
Frown turns into
 triumph
He's won —
Daddy can't catch me!
 blast of sound
Assaults his ears

Father's eyes
Watch horror—
Hands
Clutching jacket—
As the truck's grille
Strikes child
 pulls underneath
 drags
him along the road

Father's cries echo
through neighborhood
 he chases the truck
In hope

still alive
He sprints
Calves burn, lungs threaten
explode

Blood stains street
Twenty feet— boy's red
baseball cap
Forty feet— left sneaker
Velcro still in place
Sixty-five —child's
Red Sox T-shirt
Eighty feet— other shoe
in middle
Of the road
scraps of corduroy
locks of hair
One hundred and ten feet—
Four year-old body
Flesh mixed stone
Discarded the curb

Father on knees,
Holding son
In trembling arms
Tears rush cheeks,
looks at sky
screams

ON CAR ACCIDENTS AND HOMOSEXUALITY
(CHICKENS WALKED AROUND, EXCERPT III)

Dustin shook his pen, then tried writing again. No luck. It had run out of ink.

I should have used a pencil, he thought. He reached into his left front pocket for his phone, texted Enzo. *You can let me out now.*

His friend texted back. *Sorry. In class.*

Dustin started pounding on the closet door with his fists. “Is anyone there? Let me out!”

Almost immediately, the door opened. Dustin stepped into the hallway and saw the familiar facial hair of Mr. Mutterspaw.

“Dustin? Oh, I’m so happy for you!” The teacher embraced Dustin in the hairiest hug he’d ever received. “Congratulations!”

“What’s going on?” Dustin’s eyebrows furrowed. He did not return Mr. Mutterspaw’s hug, only held his arms out from the man’s body.

“O Frabjous day! Callooh! Callay! Dustin Stokes has come out as gay!” The teacher quickly ran his fingers through his beard.

“Keep your voice down,” whispered the boy. He looked up and down the hall, but saw no one. He then groaned and rolled his eyes. “Mr. Mutterspaw, not everything is a symbol for something else. You’re stuck in that lit teacher mindset. If you must know, I wasn’t announcing my sexuality to the world. I was locked in there.”

“No, you weren’t. The door was unlocked. Anyways, how’s *Oedipus*?”

“I’ve only read the first few pages. It’s kind of weird.”

Mr. Mutterspaw smiled. “Oh, it only gets better. The ending is the best! It’s like if chocolate chip cookies, wheatgrass and the WWE had a baby.”

“Wow. Okay. I’ll make sure to raise my expectations.” Dustin paused. “Wait... shouldn’t you be teaching class right now?”

The man’s hands rushed to his face. “You’re right! To the classroom!” He ran down the hallway.

“Mr. Mutterspaw? The room’s that way.” Dustin pointed in the other direction.

“You’re right! To the classroom!”

Garrison woke up the next morning and went to the river. He didn’t bother to put on shoes, just walked through the wet grass and mud that felt soft and cool against his soles. He sat down and watched the water travel around the rocks and branches on its way to a place beyond his vision.

He heard feet rustling through the grass. He turned around and saw Portia walking towards him. Her hair was wet and glistened in the sunlight.

“What’s up?” he asked.

Portia waited a few seconds, then sat down beside Garrison, making sure the hem of her skirt covered her knees. Her hair dropped down in front of her face.

“Look, Garrison, I want to clear something up. Last night, what Bentley said about me, it’s all true.”

“About your fifteen ex-boyfriends?”

“Fourteen: Clarkson, Russell, Giannis, Basil, Liam, Quinton, Atticus, Derrick, Derek, Da’rick, Millard, Creon, Hassan, and Pinto.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Portia pushed her hair back and took a deep breath. “Because I’d rather you hear it from me, not my brother. I’ve had trouble with commitment.”

“I see that.”

“But with you, it’s different. I’ve never been around someone like you.”

“It sounds like you’re going back on what you said a few days ago.” Garrison smiled. “You’re falling in love with me, aren’t you?”

“No! I mean, I don’t know. I’m confused.”

“We’re dangerously close to falling into cliché,” he said. “But I don’t care. Let’s go with it.”

Garrison ran his hand through Portia’s hair. It was still damp, and it smelled of melted butter. To his surprise, she didn’t push him away. He stared into her eyes, and for the first time, he noticed how vibrant they were, sapphires surrounded by a sea of white.

A small figure rushed in and barreled into Garrison, knocking him to the ground. Bentley stood over Garrison and pummeled him with tiny fists.

“Get your hands off my sister!”

“I wasn’t doing anything, I swear!” Garrison pushed the boy off and stood up.

“You had your fingers in her hair,” said Bentley. “That looked like something!”

“She had a leaf in her hair. I was taking it out.”

“Bentley, nothing was happening,” said Portia, who stood up, straightened her skirt and fixed her hair.

Mason appeared, crawling as fast as he could.

“Hey, you kids!” he shouted. “Hands off!”

“You’re too late, Mason. You two,” Bentley said, pointing at Garrison and Portia.

“Walk in front of us, and never leave our sight. We’re heading back.”

Bentley climbed onto Mason’s back and rode the old man like a horse, steering him with his braided beard. “Let’s go, old boy!”

A red Honda Civic hatchback sat on the side of Emerson Avenue. Two teenage boys sat in the front seats, talking to each other.

“Are you sure this is the right address, Enzo?”

“Dustin, for once, can you just stop worrying and trust me? This is her house. I guarantee it.”

“Because you’ve been wrong before.”

“This is not one of those times. It’s 421 Emerson Avenue.”

“Sorry, Enzo. I’m just nervous. I really like this girl.”

“What, really? You only talk about her every day.”

“So you know what you have to do?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Wish me luck.” Dustin stepped out of the car and into the road in front of Xenia’s house. He stood there, looked into all the windows for a glimpse of the mysterious girl. His eyes gravitated toward a window on the second floor. He saw some movement. *That’s probably where she sleeps*, he thought. A long honk interrupted his spying. He looked to his left and saw Enzo’s car heading straight for him.

The front bumper collided with his left knee, knocking him to the ground. Enzo shut off the engine and ran out of the car. He fell to his knees and looked to the sky.

“Oh, no!” he said. “I’ve killed a young man, just on the brink of his prime! What will happen to me and my family?” He began to wail.

“Enzo, tone it down!” said Dustin. “You’re being melodramatic right now. It’s not believable. And don’t forget the next step.”

“Oh, right. Sorry, I don’t get to pretend like I’ve hit someone with my car very often.” Enzo reached into the back seat of his car and grabbed a handful of old ketchup packets. He ripped one open and squeezed its contents onto Dustin and the road.

“Hurry, Enzo!”

“I am! This is taking too long! Why didn’t we get a bottle of ketchup?”

Five minutes later, Dustin was surrounded by tomato sauce and torn foil.

“Do I look like I’ve been hit by a car?” he asked.

“More or less.”

Enzo ran up to Xenia’s house and rang the bell with his left hand while banging his right fist on the door.

An old woman answered the door. She had cornrows and huge glasses that looked like they came straight from 1987.

“Yes, I’ve found the Lord,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I wish you’d stop bothering me.”

Enzo frowned, then continued his acting.

“I’m not one of those people,” he said. “I just hit a kid with my car. It was an accident. He’s bleeding. I don’t know what to do! I don’t want to go to jail!”

“Mother of Lazarus! You’re right! There’s a bleeding boy in the street.”

“Is there anyone else in your house that could help?”

The woman looked back into her house. “Xenia, come here!”

Enzo breathed a sigh of relief. He hadn’t told Dustin this, but he wasn’t completely sure that they had the right house. A black cat came running to the woman.

“Oh, there you are,” she said.

“Wait,” said Enzo. “This is Xenia?”

“You were expecting someone else? Let’s go! We can’t let this young man die.”

Enzo ran down the hill and into the road. He knelt down next to Dustin.

“Dustin, get up. Wrong house.”

“What?”

“We have the wrong house. Xenia doesn’t live here.”

By now, the woman and her cat had arrived.

“Oh, my,” she said. “It looks like you were hit with a giant plastic ketchup bottle.

What did the perpetrator look like?”

“Ma’am, I’m the one who hit him,” said Enzo. “I told you not even two minutes ago.”

“I don’t think so,” said the woman.

A screen door slammed. Xenia Stringfellow came out of the house to the right of the cat lady’s. Her hair was wet. Dustin made eye contact with her, and she frowned, shook her head, then walked back inside. He made sure to note the number beside the front door: 423.

One house off, he thought. Just my luck.

“I think I’ll be okay,” said Dustin.

“You must come in for a drink,” the woman said. “You look thirsty.”

“Oh, he is, believe me,” said Enzo.

“I don’t want to intrude,” Dustin said.

“It’s no trouble at all,” said the woman, helping Dustin stand up. “My name’s Millie, by the way.”

“I’m Enzo, and this is Dustin.”

As they walked up the hill to Millie’s house, thoughts of fresh-squeezed lemonade or milk and chocolate chip cookies just taken out of the oven filled Dustin’s head, but only for a moment before they were chased away by the sight of Millie’s living room.

Cats were everywhere. One rubbed its back against the window. Another was curled up on the upright piano, which was missing a few keys. A Siamese sat on top of the grandfather clock, staring at Dustin as he moved through the room.

“I take it you like cats?” he asked.

“Love them. They’re a lot less complicated than a husband, and cheaper to take care of, too.” Millie picked up a Persian. “How’s my little Fairborn, huh? Please, have a seat. Just be careful not to sit on Enon, Lebanon, Bellbrook or Carlisle.”

As Millie walked out of the room, Dustin and Enzo strategically placed themselves on a lime green couch, making sure not to touch any cats. Dustin found himself next to a tortoiseshell, who glared at him before running her tongue along her fur. “Where are we?” he asked.

“Old woman, twelve cats, house filled with antiques and pictures of old salt shakers. My guess is we’re in the house of a woman who’s never been married.”

“Come on, Enzo. Not everyone who has a cat is single for life.”

“True, but the more cats a person has, the greater chances are that they’ll never find love. Studies have been done, you know.”

Their eyes landed on a shotgun which hung on the wall right above the mantle.

Enzo tensed up. “Don’t panic, Dustin, but I think our lives are in danger.”

“Why?”

“There’s a rule that says that gun will go off in the near future.”

“If there is, I’ve never heard of it.”

“Millie’s probably going to take it down and shoot both of us. You can never tell with these crazy cat ladies.”

Dustin moved his gaze down from the weapon and saw a picture on the mantle. In it, a young woman with a graduation cap stood in front of a familiar building.

“Hey, Enzo. Check it out. Is that A&W High?”

Enzo stood up to get a closer look. “Yeah, it is. Around 1972, I think.”

Millie walked into the room, holding a platter with two glasses. “Here are your drinks. Enjoy!”

“Oh, I love apple juice,” said Dustin. He grabbed a glass and took a big gulp, then spit it out. He put down the glass, making sure not to spill it on the carpet. He wiped his tongue with his hands. His throat and lungs were burning.

“This isn’t apple juice!” he said.

“Of course not,” said Millie. “It’s a single-malt scotch. Do you not like it? I have some wheatgrass in the fridge. Or cough syrup, if you’re into that type of thing.”

“You know, most old ladies serve lemonade, or milk and cookies,” said Dustin.

“Well, I’m not most old ladies,” said Millie.

MADNESS BEGINS IN DAYTON, OHIO

I sit in my friend's room in the middle of March,
Struggle to study for a Media Law exam
And focus on the four different screens, 32 games in 40 hours,
Where hundreds of soles emit high-pitched cries
As college students attempt to unite leather and nylon in holey matrimony.
The fans in the stands paint their faces and chests with the colors of their teams,
Scream their support until polyps appear in their throats.

Tomorrow's test whines like a shot clock buzzer
To tell me that time is running out.
Sleep knocks on my door,
And any other night, I would invite her in,
But tonight, I'm courting Madness.

DO YOU WANT TO MARRY SOMEONE YOU JUST MET ON THE INTERNET?

It's not that the sloth wouldn't love you—
not that she wouldn't reach for you
and embrace you with her three-toed arms.

You and the sloth, I think, would
make an adorable couple. But the creatures
of the trees, like the trees, don't speak

for themselves. If you're serious about this relationship,
you must crawl a mile in her toes.
Hang upside down from a branch, abandon

your life on the ground. Enjoy the fur coat that
 covers nearly every inch of your body,
 the algae forest growing on your fur,
teeming with beetles and roaches. Slow down your life, do not move
unless necessary, eat only leaves. Listen for the shriek of the harpy
 eagle, the growl of the prowling jaguar,
hang still and hope
 your time to die has not yet come.

No, it's not that the sloth wouldn't
love you, it's the other way around.

UNICORNUCOPIA

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall”
—Proverbs 16:18

How did you get into this sticky situation?

Your mane flowing like the Amazon River,
your coat so white it turned Shadowfax into Black.
But your horn, the spiral of mystery,
crowned you as the greatest of all creatures.
The narwhal, your step-brother,
you have avoided ever since that awkward
conversation you had a few centuries ago that led to him jumping into
Canadian waters, where he makes his residence to this day.
You felt much more comfortable around your equine brothers, the ones
who shared your odd ungulation, but you stood hands above them.
Faster than Man o’ War,
better at hide-and-seek than the White Stag. The sons of Adam
never captured you, despite numerous traps, arrows, nets.
The Pegasus looked up at you with winged jealousy
as he had done ever since he was born out of the marriage of
Perseus’ blade to Medusa’s neck.

You went wherever you pleased, living young, wild, and free,
no time to befriend puppies, transport beer, or see biscuits, not when you were busy
laughing at
Rudolph and Bambi, cursed with broken November maple branches
growing from their skulls.
They stood furiously,
leering at you like a Shakespearean king.
You galloped under the Bifröst, scoffed at
Sleipner and his arachnoid limb structure that would fill Ungoliant with envy,
ridiculed him for allowing Odin to ride upon his back,
swam through salt water to the Land of the Houyhnhmns and traded rational thoughts
with the residents,
trekked to India and spoke with each of the seven heads of Uchchaihshravas,
raced Secretariat at Churchill Downs and lapped him.

From Chincoteague to Rohan you traveled, leaping
from fiction to reality with ease.
You could not be tamed, no other creature matched your power.

One day, while high-stepping through a forest, you met a young woman, a virgin
dressed only in white. You
forgot your wildness and
rested your head in her lap as
sleep led you to the land of dreams
where there resided an
incessant buzzing sound. When you woke up, you felt hemp digging into your
skin, your legs refused to move.
Your horn was gone. All that remained was an ugly stump,
a humble remnant of former glory.
Humans surrounded you. One was busy grinding
your alicorn into a fine, white powder.
You hoped that this was just a nightmare
dressed as a day dream, that it would be over swiftly, but then you realized
your freedom had been snatched from you.
In its place, domestication.

Nails pierced your hooves,
your mouth tasted metal for the first time, leather wrapped around your back. You used to
reign over all creatures; now reins ruled you,
dictating your every move.
Blinders restricted your vision, forcing you to focus
only on what was in front of you as you pulled an embellished four-wheeled wagon
under the control of a human.
Your hooves clicked against pavement, your
joints longed for pasture or meadow.
Little children in their church clothes yelled, "Look at the little pony!"
That's no way to talk to a unicorn, you said to yourself.
They would offer you a sugar cube or an apple, sometimes a carrot,
but you refused.
This was food fit for a donkey,
not your pampered palate
which grew up on only the finest grass.

After chasing you for years, age and hard labor finally wrapped their
long fingers around your life. You lay dying in a stable, silver blood leaking
from your body.
Your eyelids, my friend, flickered. Your heart
resigned, and you put your hoof in Death's hand. He made you a deal.

You have found a new life in the bottle. As you
drip onto the page, you hope that nothing happens to this sheet of paper,

as you have become attached to it.

ON LONELY MEN AND TALKING WALRUSES
(CHICKENS WALKED AROUND, EXCERPT IV)

Bentley had made it a point to prevent Portia and Garrison from any physical contact with each other. As they walked on the shores of the Wet Ocean, the boy made sure that he walked in between them. Once or twice he looked up and saw them smiling at each other over his head.

“So, Garrison, whatever happened to that horse we had a while back?” Bentley asked, hoping to distract him from Portia.

“I forgot we even had a horse,” said Garrison. “I guess he ceased to exist because no one remembered that he even existed.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” said Portia.

“Guys, don’t forget about me,” said Mason. “I don’t want to die!”

“Death is not as bad as you make it out to be,” said an unfamiliar voice.

The group looked up and saw a tall, thin man. He wore a light brown coat. His hands were rooted in the pockets of his white pants, which were rolled up at the ankles. His hair was combed over the front of his head to disguise the mass exodus of hair from his scalp. A crab scuttled across his bare feet, but he had no reaction.

“Hi, there!” said Mason.

“Oh, look,” said the man in a slow, unexcited drawl that seemed like it hadn’t known happiness in years. “An ugly talking dog.”

“I’m a person!”

“And I’m Jalfred, the loneliest man in the world,” he said as if every word he spoke was causing him intense pain in his stomach. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you.”

Garrison introduced himself and the rest of the group. Jalfred just stared at them.

“What a lovely party,” he said, staring at the sand. “Am I invited?”

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Portia.

“Life is meaningless. Death is inescapable. Nobody loves me. This peach is rotten.”

Jalfred reached into his pocket and pulled out a peach. The group could almost hear his fingers squeezing the juices out of the fruit.

“Do I dare to eat this?” He turned it over in his hand, then dropped the peach. It landed with a thud in the sand. Mason started sniffing it.

“I’ve walked alongside the Wet Ocean for years,” said Jalfred, “searching for something to give my life meaning. I haven’t found it yet.”

“Jalfred, there’s so much to be happy about,” said Portia.

“Like what?”

“Um, you’re walking along the beach. The sun is shining. Come on guys, what else?”

“Your legs are working,” said Mason.

“The sun is shining,” said Garrison.

“I already said that,” Portia said.

“You’ve got a hole in your jacket,” said Bentley. “In the right arm.”

Jalfred took off his coat and found the hole. “Why am I not surprised?” he asked. He stared at the ocean through the hole, then threw his jacket into the water.

“Jalfred! That was a good jacket! You’re not helping, Bentley,” said Portia. “Listen! Do you hear that? The mermaids are singing!”

“They’re not singing to me,” said Jalfred. “They’re making fun of me, my hair, my skinny limbs. And they’re not that good at singing. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to continue to feel sorry for myself.”

“You’re coming with us,” said Garrison.

“Why?”

“This isn’t healthy, Jalfred,” said Portia. “We’re going to help you.”

“Doubt it. No one has ever helped me before. Why would you help me?”

“Because we feel sorry for you,” said Mason.

“And because we need someone whose self-deprecation is so severe that it has an element of comedy.”

Portia rolled her eyes. “You’re not helping, Bentley.”

“You just said that one minute ago,” said her brother. “Why are you repeating yourself?”

As Dustin walked out of the cafeteria, he saw the long, dark hair that had occupied his thoughts for the past week. He tried to turn around and run away, but the exodus of students who had just finished their lunch stopped him. Xenia had no trouble catching up to him.

“What were you doing in the road by my house yesterday?” she asked.

Dustin fumbled for words. “I was, um, just looking for something to, um, hey, look! A walrus!” He pointed past Xenia’s shoulder.

“What? Where?” She turned around, and Dustin saw his chance. He made a second attempt to run away, only to fall flat on his face. The contents of his backpack fell out, littering the floor. As he tried to get up, he realized the problem. His shoelaces had been tied together. He heard a high-pitched laugh and looked up to see Wallace caught in a fit of laughter.

“How do you like that, Dustbin?”

“Go away, Wallace. Pick on someone your own size,” said Xenia as she pushed him away. She knelt beside the fallen boy. “Are you all right?”

“I’ll be fine.” Dustin struggled to untie the knot Wallace had created with the shoelaces.

“So what were you doing on my street yesterday?” asked Xenia.

“I wanted to see where you lived?” Dustin cringed.

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Telling you?”

Xenia brought a palm to her forehead. “What did I say, Dustin? *The creepy guy doesn’t get the girl.*”

She placed a crumpled piece of paper in his hand and closed his fingers around it.

“Don’t make me regret this,” she whispered. She walked away.

Dustin opened it up. It was 10 numbers along with a note: *Be less creepy.*

He stood in the middle of the hallway, staring at the paper. He didn’t feel the masses of people brush past him, their backpacks carelessly colliding with his body.

“It’s so cold. Why did I even come with you? This was a terrible idea.”

Jalfred had taken his arms out of his sleeves and was hugging himself underneath his shirt. The beach was far behind the group now as they trudged up the snow-covered mountain.

“I can’t feel my hands and knees!” said Mason.

“I offered to carry you, Mason,” said Bentley. “It’d be better than crawling through this cold white powder.”

They reached the peak of the mountain, but not a single person appeared in their field of vision.

“I don’t get it,” said Mason. “I thought there was supposed to be a wise man here.”

“That’s what Uncle Annie told me,” said Garrison. “A man who had the secret to infinite wisdom.”

“What do we need wisdom for?” asked Bentley. “We have each other!”

“If you think about it,” said Portia, “you’d have to be pretty stupid to sit by yourself at the top of a mountain. It’s cold, it’s far away from civilization. What happens if you get sick or lonely?”

“You die, I guess,” said the old man.

A large creature burst out of the snow in front of the group. Two long tusks stuck out of its mouth, and it raised its two front flippers and waved them around. Wrinkles covered its large, blubbery body, and a rusted crown rested on its head.

“Roar!” it said in a high-pitched voice.

“Did that thing just say ‘roar’?” asked Jalfred.

“Yes, I did!”

“Oh, the horror,” said Jalfred. “A talking monster.”

“Come on, aren’t any of you scared?” asked the creature.

“Not really,” said Portia.

“It’s because you’re talking,” said Mason. “It anthropomorphizes you.”

“I don’t know what that means,” the animal said.

“And you sound like a squirrel,” said Bentley, “not a, um, what are you supposed to be?”

“I’m a walrus, and my name is Andre. And don’t make fun of my voice, okay? I had an accident when I was just a calf. I’m not a bad guy. I just wanted to scare you.”

Sensing that the conversation was going nowhere, Garrison spoke up. “Andre, is there a place we get away from this wind and snow?”

“I know just the place,” said Andre. “Follow me. You, old man! You look cold. Climb onto my back. You too, little boy!”

“Wait!” said Mason. “How do we know we can trust this walrus? For all we know, he could be an assassin or a con artist.”

“Or he might be taking us back to his lair so that he can eat us,” said Jalfred. “On second thought, that doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Guys, you can trust me,” said Andre. “My grandmother told me, ‘If you can’t trust a walrus, you can’t trust anyone.’”

“Well, she was a walrus,” said Mason. “She’s going to be biased towards her own kind.”

“Can you please stop arguing?” asked Portia. “Who cares if he’s trustworthy or not? There’s added suspense and tension because we don’t know if we can trust him.”

“Yeah,” added Garrison. “It’ll make our adventure a little more interesting.”

“Just what we need,” said Jalfred. “More excitement in our lives.”

“He tore the golden brooches that upheld

Her queenly robes, upraised them high and smote

Full on his eye-balls, uttering words like these:

“No more shall ye behold such sights of woe...”

Dustin closed the book and threw it under his bed. *I can’t believe Mr. Mutterspaw thought that was a good story*, he thought as he turned out the light.

Dustin sat up quickly, looked at his nightstand. His phone had just vibrated. He picked it up, saw one notification. He opened it and nearly dropped his phone onto the floor when he read it. After staring at it for a minute or two, he called Enzo, hands shaking, forehead sweating. With every ring, he grew more worried that his friend wouldn’t pick up. After the eleventh ring, however, Dustin heard a lethargic “Hello?”

“Enzo! I need your help! Xenia texted me. How do I respond?”

“Dustin, it’s 3:00 in the morning.”

“What do I say?”

“Why are you asking me? I’ve been single my entire life. I don’t know anything about relationships.”

“But you know a lot about people. And you said you’d help me with this. Come on, Enzo. Help me. I don’t want to mess this up.”

Dustin heard his friend let out a long sigh. “Fine. But you owe me.”

“Thanks, Enzo.”

“What did she text you?”

“*Hey.*”

“That’s it?” asked Enzo. “That’s what you’re panicking over?”

“She put a smiley face after it. What’s that mean?”

“It means she’s happy.”

“Or, maybe she’s angry at me and she’s using the smiley face to disguise her current mood. Man, she’s good!” Dustin punched his pillow.

“Dustin, if she were angry at you, she wouldn’t just text *hey.*”

“You think so?” asked Dustin hopefully.

“You’re reading into this too closely. Take a step back and look at it again.”

“*Hey.* Smiley face. Is she calling me a happy person?”

“You’re hopeless, Dustin. Good night.”

“But Enzo!”

It was too late. His friend had already hung up.

Dustin arrived at school in the morning with his eyes half-closed. He still hadn’t replied to Xenia’s text, even though he’d stayed up for an hour after getting off the phone. He was not prepared for the day, much less Mr. Mutterspaw’s energetic greeting.

“How did you like *Oedipus Rex*?” asked Mr. Mutterspaw with a wide grin.

“It was stupid and depressing,” said Dustin, yawning.

The teacher brought his hands to his cheeks and let out a long scream. After 15 seconds, he gasped for breath.

“But it’s a classic! The epitome of the Greek culture! The Nikola Tesla of Western literature!”

“I found it to be as enjoyable as jabbing golden brooches into my eyes,” said Dustin.

“That doesn’t sound very enjoyable,” said the teacher.

“All I learned from *Oedipus* was that if you believe in Fate, your life must be pretty bad. Pain, heartbreak, death, that’s all that Fate has for you. Not the life for me.”

Mr. Mutterspaw folded his arms and gave Dustin a smile. “Well, I guess that’s just how life works. It’s like a big puzzle. We’re all given the same pieces, but we put them together differently, throw some of them away. For you, a throwaway piece would be Fate. In the end, we end up with completely different pictures.”

“That almost works, Mr. Mutterspaw. The problem is, a puzzle already has a destined solution. Come to think of it, a puzzle would make a good analogy for Fate. Anyway, the pieces will only fit one way. The finished product will look the same for everyone. That’s where your analogy falls apart.”

“How do I fix it?”

“Replace puzzle with a tub of Legos or something.” Dustin began to walk away, then hesitated. “Mr. Mutterspaw?”

“Yes, Dustin?”

Dustin started to speak, then closed his mouth. He decided to keep Ms. Hooper from the lit teacher, at least for now.

“You, um, you have kale in your beard,” he finally said.

“Well, what do you know? I do! Thanks, Dustin!” Mr. Mutterspaw picked the leaf from his facial hair and put it in his mouth.

I CAN'T REMEMBER ANY OF MY SEIZURES

I can memorize important numbers in seconds: a credit card number in 15, social security in 12, a phone in 10, driver's license in eight.

I can quote *Napoleon Dynamite* almost entirely from memory—I still haven't mastered the scene in the dojo.

I can name all 24 students from my freshman speech class and where they sat. Josh Chase—curly hair and glasses, wore a New England Patriots hoodie to class every week, sat right in the front with the hood up. Chris Cones—curly hair, wore a white t-shirt and a University of Kentucky baseball cap every class, lived in the back row where he studied the first stage of sleep every single class. One day he wrote *I am an uncle* on the whiteboard before the professor came in. Christian Alexander—left front row, short blond hair, played on the varsity soccer team, said he knew Rihanna before she became popular, he dated a girl on the women's soccer team, they broke up, then got back together.

I can't remember everything.

I can't remember throwing up in my bed the night after a basketball hit me in the head at my cousin's 9th birthday party.

I can't remember blacking out at LaBoiteaux Woods while playing capture the flag in 93 degree weather.

I can't remember vomiting into my mom's hand one Wednesday night in the gym at Friendship Baptist Church.

I can't remember convulsing in my uncle's apartment in Taiwan at 1 a.m. after spending 14 hours in a Boeing 747. But I do remember waking up on a couch, unsure of where I was, to a flow of strange words. All I understood was the panic in the voices.

CICADAS AT LORELEI

When the aliens invaded our planet, they didn't swoop down from the skies. They emerged from the earth and swarmed the eastern United States.

My friend Liz and I stood outside her house at the end of Lorelei Drive. She was nine, I was eleven. We had the same body type: small, thin torsos awaiting puberty, arms that seemed too long for our bodies. The only difference between us—her hair, which ended just above her shoulders. We watched the invasion together as her mother taught my sister the piano. The B-flat major scale played as Liz and I walked out of the house and into the chaos.

We stood in front of the sycamore tree in Liz's front yard. Hundreds of abandoned exoskeletons clung to the bark, wrapping the tree like a winter coat.

My glasses protected my eyes from a collision with a sex-starved insect who had spent the last 17 years sucking on tree roots. The cicadas flew through the skies, not with the grace of a swallowtail or the speed of a housefly, but with all the finesse of an overstuffed Cessna with a drunk pilot in the cockpit.

The noise was impossible to miss. The cicadas only knew how to play one note, but they played it at over 100 decibels. I stuffed pieces of torn-up tissues in my ears to prevent hearing loss. Robins whistled, garage doors yawned open, car engines rumbled, my sister's attempt at Golliwog's Cakewalk slipped through an open window, but they were whimpers compared to the male cicadas' monotonous love songs.

Liz told me I would be 28 the next time the cicadas appeared.

“You’ll be married!” she yelled over the cicadas’ cacophony. “You’ll have kids!”

MY DAD TAUGHT ME HOW TO FOLD PAPER AIRPLANES WHEN I WAS NINE

Saturday mornings in the summer, we fold old church bulletins into gliders and drive down to the empty baseball field behind the College Hill public library. Valley and mountain folds, water bomb bases, squashes, reverses, petal folds. We make them with precision, running our fingers against the edges of the folded sheets to ensure a crisp crease.

We stand on the diamond, planes in hand, the front thirds of their fuselages in between our right thumbs and index fingers. We hold them by our hips, sling our arms upwards in a quick motion, launch the paper into the air.

The planes fly straight up then fly straight down and land headfirst in the infield dirt. I'm ready to give up, but my dad walks over to the planes and wipes the dust off. He adds up elevator on the trailing edges of the wings to prevent the nosedive, puts a small fold in the tail to make it turn left.

We throw them again. They swoop down into the familiar dive, then stabilize, gliding parallel to the ground below. Swoop, stabilize. Swoop. Stabilize. We time their duration in the air with our watches.

Sometimes they soar, relying on the thermal columns to carry them higher. We shield our eyes with our hands so we can see the airplanes as they fly across the face of the sun, circling higher into the sky, and we wonder if they will ever land.

ON THE MARRIAGE OF STEEL TO SKIN
(CHICKENS WALKED AROUND, EXCERPT V)

They had traveled through the night, much to Bentley's disappointment. Four hours had passed before they came to the city of Forthwall.

A boy, around Garrison's height, stood at the gate of the city as the group approached. Acne covered his face, and bangs which looked like they had been trimmed with pruning shears hung over his forehead.

"I'm Prince Gordon," he said in a high-pitched, nasally voice. "Nice to meet you."

Garrison thought he'd heard this name before, but he couldn't place it. He stuck out his hand to shake Gordon's, but the prince ignored him, walked up to Portia who stood behind Garrison. The prince ran his fingers through her hair.

"My, Portia, how you've grown. You're more beautiful than when I last saw you." He smiled as his eyes traveled up and down her body. "And more mature, too. Looking at you is like riding a sleigh over a snowy hill. Every twist and turn, every single curve just fills me with ecstasy." Gordon closed his eyes and smiled.

"What are you doing here, Gordon?" asked Portia, her face growing redder by the moment.

"I've just been waiting for you to come running back to me, just like I knew you would."

Garrison stepped in between the two. "Portia, how do you know this guy?"

"You could say we used to be lovers," said Gordon, pushing Garrison aside.

"He was obsessed with me," said Portia. "He followed me around, wrote me love poems, asked me personal questions, drew pictures of me when I was in my bedroom."

"Yeah, that was me," Gordon said proudly. "But in my defense, you shouldn't leave your curtains open at 2:00 in the morning."

"Leave my sister alone, you creep!" said Bentley.

"Yeah, leave her alone!" added Mason.

The boy balled his hands into small fists and took a fighting stance, while the old man growled and bared his teeth. Gordon ignored them both.

"Portia, if you will have me, I will have you." Gordon grabbed her arms, drew her closer to his body.

Suddenly, a harmonious shriek filled the air and six hooded figures surrounded Prince Gordon and drew rusted daggers from their cloaks. Garrison stepped back, made sure he stood between Portia and the mercenaries.

"Don't worry," he told her. "I've seen these guys before."

"Who are you?" asked Gordon, his voice quivering.

"We are from the Finisher," the six said in united voices that sounded like sandpaper on a chalkboard. "We have been sent to kill you, Prince Gordon."

"But why?" Gordon whined. "I haven't done anything wrong!"

"On the contrary," said the cloaks. "You've done everything wrong."

"Can someone please explain—"

Gordon was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a dagger in his neck. The six figures began to speak separately.

“His head’s still on his body. What went wrong?”

“We need to get new blades. The ones we have can’t cut through cold butter.”

“You just need to put your weight into it. Like this!” Another dagger buried into Gordon’s neck, failed to cut through. “Man, it was much easier in practice.”

“Come at it from a high angle,” said a fourth. “It’s all about the angles. Geometry.” He stared off into the distance, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“Can you hurry it up?” asked Gordon as blood squirt out of his neck. “This is painful.”

“Watch me, guys,” said the lead mercenary, whom Garrison recognized as Henchman I. He held his blade against Gordon’s neck and began to speak.

“Do you, dagger, take this neck, to be your wife, to love and to cherish until you perish? I do. And do you, neck—”

“I do, I do!” said Gordon. “Just get it over with!”

“Then by the power invented by me, I now pronounce you husband and knife! You may kiss the bride.”

Henchman I began cutting through Gordon’s neck with a quick sawing motion. The others began to chant. “Cut! Cut till the head comes off! Till the head comes off!”

Portia ducked to avoid a stream of blood that shot straight at her.

“This is horrid. I think I’m going to throw up,” said Mason right before passing out in the growing pool of Gordon’s blood.

“How is there blood still coming out?” asked Garrison. “I would have expected him to bleed out by now.”

“I don’t know, but who cares?” shouted Bentley, who had joined in with the chants.

After a few minutes, there was a thump, then a cheer. Henchman I kicked the head, and it rolled into a field of dandelions.

“Great execution, guys,” said Henchman I, wiping blood and flesh off his dagger. “Even though I did most of the work. Now, for my favorite part: insulting the newly departed by playing with words. I hope you practiced. I’ll start. Are you a dry plum, Gordon, because I just *pruned* your head from your body! Okay, let’s go in a clockwise order. Come on, people!”

“Sorry to *cut you off!*”

“We didn’t mean for you to *lose your head!* Oh, wait. We did!”

“You seem pretty *detached* from reality at the moment.”

“I’m sensing a severe *disconnect* between us right now.”

“We, um, we tried to cut off your, um, you’re beheading in the—”

Henchman I raised his right hand, and the group stopped. “Ernie! Do you know what you did wrong?”

Ernie cowered. “I messed up my pun.”

“You messed up your pun! We were on a roll, and you knocked us off of it! And for the last time, call me Barney!”

“What did I just see?” asked Mason.

“I have no idea,” said Garrison right before he addressed the executioner. “Hey. Remember me?”

“Oh, yeah!” said Barney. “Garfunkelstiltskin or something, right?”

“Garrison.”

“Close enough. Hey!” Barney noticed Portia and Bentley for the first time. “If it isn’t the Mercy siblings.”

Garrison sighed. “Portia, is this another one of your exes?”

“No!” Portia and Barney said at once.

“I was sent by the Finisher to protect Portia from Prince Gordon,” Barney said.

“So you killed him,” said Garrison.

“Yes. It was the only logical solution.”

Garrison shrugged. “Well, from what I saw, he deserved it.”

I DON'T SHARE MY GRANDFATHER'S LOVE FOR MATHEMATICS

I watch as he writes an equation that looks like the hybrid of the English and Greek alphabets and the Arabic numeral system, a mathematical portmanteau. He looks over at me to make sure I'm paying attention, then puts his ballpoint pen back to the paper. $X^2 \pm X - 1 = 0$.

He explains the MacLaurin series, the Mandelbrot set, the Riemann zeta function. My mind wanders. $X = -\frac{1}{2} \pm \sqrt{(1/2)^2}$.

Maybe he finds elegance in the structure of a geometric proof, with its logical steps leading to an inevitable conclusion. Maybe he sees math as the language of God because the Fibonacci sequence is found in the dandelion and the chambered nautilus. Maybe the numbers and symbols reveal to him a beauty so deep it can't be expressed with words.

Jonathan, you should name your first son Vicente, after me.

I don't even have a girlfriend, I reply.

This problem has remained unsolved for the last 22 years. He looks at me with disappointment. I am the last Gallardo.