

M

onstrosities



“I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.”

*The Great Gatsby*  
F. Scott Fitzgerald

## COMPOSITION

liquid Distribution in a cocktail napkin

$$E_{\text{electrostatic}}^{(1)} = \int \int \rho_{\text{tot}}^A(\mathbf{r}_1) \frac{1}{r_{12}} \rho_{\text{tot}}^B(\mathbf{r}_2) d\mathbf{r}_1 d\mathbf{r}_2,$$

growth and birth of an animal cracker

Manufacture of Non-Bleeding Maraschino Cherries

a story the size of a Freckle

steam Rising from a scrambled egg

StockingS

peaches

anatomy of a routine

three Notes of a perfume.

brûlée

liquid Distribution in a cocktail napkin

Several alcohols had combined to form an aged color, one that staggered at the very Westerly point of the light spectrum, into the deep end of red and brown. Although containing the combined potency of a Northern European Rye Whiskey, a Southern Italian Vermouth and a squirt of pink Maraschino liquid, the drink was cradled inside the round bowl of a mere four ounce champagne glass. Its stem was a squat three inches in length, thick and bumbling, dimensions of a transparent shock absorber, whose one goal in its short lifespan is to soak up the nicks and blows of inebriation caused by the temperament of such a drink who, aptly, inherited the name of a town riddled with disgraceful acts. To the lip of the rim, the glass bowl was filled, and its entirety was carried upon a serving disk, most commonly seen in eating establishments and hauled over a tired shoulder, approaching loud families with loud, hideous children. Yet not here. The room simmered with conversations taking place in low decibels and the random, frequent ring of stemware against the edge of a wooden table, or against the wooden tabletop itself, after a patron, having met their own lips to the rim, and sipped, rolling three or four ingredients round the tongue to the back of the mouth, where, settling as a puddle underneath the passage to a vacant septum oak scents rose in counter clockwise circles into the cavity, intertwining taste and smell. Yes, after a patron's pleasantly surprised crunch of an eyebrow, the drink returned to the tabletop with a minor miscalculation in distance, producing an embarrassing knock, lifting into the air with a delicate freedom, and collapsing with distance. The flakes and remains had dissolved by the heat flowing from low watt bulbs screwed into fixtures high above; the lack of evidence made for no cause for concern and conversations continued boil naturally. To assist in muting unintentional noises, a square cocktail napkin accompanies every drink and is placed before a patron, who, conditioned to anticipate the following arrival, squirms just slightly, with a muscular contraction in the rear, left to right, ending as the drink is set, in silence.

There, as a puddle of a mere four ounces, a labored combination of liquids was positioned. The fingertips of a middle, index and thumb, belonging to a waitress, released their porous grip from a stem, newly washed and warmed to a temperature uninhabitable for microscopic things to breed and discover themselves. A glassy blank canvas remained, plain and more than willing to accept the exciting, nauseating swirls of a fingertip, let alone three. Upon the lift, skin cells that had lost their momentum for life separated from the body, clinging to this new, foreign surface so free from dirt and impurities, deciding this, this other world a suitable final resting place. Their quantity, in numbers of billions, during the span of fractions of a fraction of a fingered release, fogged the champagne glass in three individual spots, here, there, and the other. This gray, spotty matter was the only present color against oak hues of an anonymous Whiskey, that, from its core, spat minor tremors rippling through the drink, to the lip of the rim, in perfectly scribed circles, growing in circumference as they traveled, pairing distance and girth with equal measure, matching splendidly, fashionably, and ending, with a mute thud, against a clear wall of curved glass. The impact of Stilettoes and soles parading their way to and from a single Restroom, had pushed and shoved vibrations through tiled floor, up a table leg, through the stained square cells of a wooden tabletop and into the liquidized mass of the drink. The random, yet frequent, shockwaves traveling from this end of the glass bowl to that, reflected the surrounding dim light with

echoes of white bursts accentuating the movement and luster of a fluid once stored in a corked barrel, and forgotten for nearly a dozen years, until, the time arrived for a portion of its contents to fill the milliliters of a well designed bottled. Now, exposed to the world, the fluid shook, pulsed, silently.

Enticed, a patron leaned forward at the waist, distributing weight from a balanced, upright spine, to sharp, planted elbows digging into the nicked table top. Hunched over, the sudden addition of several pounds of pressure—an accumulation of members within the torso, say, the pumping heart, excretions of a spleen and the despair of a liver—caused the loose flesh which gathers in folds round the boney joint, to slip, stretch forwards, and spill into obtuse angles over the table, until, the excess skin reached its elastic limit, thinning into a mere flattened sheet of tendons, blood vessels and minute hairs at attention, burning with friction against the wood, straining to halt the upper torso. Successful in its design, the skin is able to control the descent of the body, bringing the face directly above the vibrating vat of several alcohols. Hovering, eyes absorb the bent light of brown and the torn wavelengths of red, together forming a minor puddle that, at once, causes a lapse in time and, somehow, although only a visual, ignites a burn through the large deviated sinus of a local patron, who loyally drags their entire body—the weight of the lower *and* upper torso to this very spot—and courteously, after running a finger down the curved list of options of a menu, out of respect for the mixologist behind the bar, orders this very drink, every time, and, out of respect for this drink—aptly, inheriting the name of a city infected with eight million inhabitants all seeking the exact source of pleasure and lovely embarrassment. Nick, Knock. Nick, knock. Enticed and unified, the patron lifts the stemware at three locations, here, there and the other, using only the tips of three very important fingers. Their pressure and heat transferring through an organic body to a lifeless form, and leaving in their wake, three additional sets of loops, nauseating swirls unique to one patron of many, of many.

There is a lift, separating stemware from napkin. It is a cautious lift, traveling at a minor, controlled pace, guided laterally by a specific intension: just the perfect amount of speed is to be coursed, as not to disturb the horizontal balance of the drink by clumsily tipping the glass bowl too far to one side, ending in an awkward spill the affectionate skimming of the rim. Muscles in the right hand tighten their enveloping surface area around properly nourished bones of the middle, index and thumb. The downward force and rush of blood help firm the fingers' padded grip on the stem. With ascension, stability is gradually lost in this higher atmosphere above the tabletop; balance is difficult to obtain. There is not but stale air between the surface and a patron's face, air occupied by random, yet frequent, floating decibels knocking into one's attention so focused on equilibrium. Fingertips are not enough. This collection of glass, liquid, vibrations and meat and bone, all four ounces of pure alcohol are anchored by the forearm, composed of tendons inches long, contracting to a stubby bunch, created to absorb laborious tasks and maintain control, of drawing into a cocktail to the face for example.

The bulbous rounding of the rim's design successfully fits into the space created by two lips. Here, at the point of contact, the forearm and fingers, so desperately weighed upon, are released of their task. The satiated champagne glass rests its contents against the

mouth, forming a slight indent caused by the mass of ingredients, breaking the complete, enjoyable curved line of pink and rouge and saliva, making an appearance after a tongue had unconsciously peaked, traced a path along the parabola of the top lip, and quickly retracted when the drink had been set and released. With a friendly shove from a bicep, the stubby stemware is heaved to an angle where liquids are tossed from the safety of stability and into the slight opening of the mouth, through canines and gums, onto the tongue. There it is whipped into a frenzy, powered by a need to understand what had just entered, what has been washed into a puddle at the back of the throat and rising so accurately into scent glands in the nose. A subconscious moan blurts from a muscle contraction in the throat, as some indigenous language, primitive yet accurate, in agreement with the tongue, a moan signifying that the taste is simply very good and the alcohols' strength wonderfully numbing, says the teeth and softer things, blooming nerve endings in the neck, if for only microseconds.

Satisfied with the sip, it was time for the champagne glass (although filled with no carbonated liquids or urine colored celebration, only Whiskey and its compliments) to return to the cocktail napkin. There the round base reunited with its ghostly imprint, fitting into a vague impression that formed when the sum of the drink's parts had collectively relieved itself upon the perfect, fresh, black little napkin at their first meeting. Although stitched into a premium 3-ply tissue, the napkin still retained its premature pulpwood characteristic of absorbing any liquid or semisolid that showed it attention. Perhaps this is because of its violent past, beginning with the debarking of its maternal source, an aged and tired tree having seen many snow falls and sunrises, taking the skin of this tree and boiling the remains, reducing any evidence of fibers and sap and life, leaving behind a chewed, beige, soggy substance squirted through fine metal screens to further annihilate the presence of a solid form. Digested, the matter was slushed onto a moving conveyer belt and squeezed to a stereotypical paper-thin width, bled of excess juices, milking their way to the concrete below. A continuous wafer was formed, crude and spotty, of brown, black earth and forgotten rays of light. The sheet traveled along, its belly exposed to the barrel of dye machines firing off a hue that exemplified the philosophy of a neighborhood bar, in this case, black, yes, just black, a dye machine projected this color, a color that reflects no light, a color that is not a color in itself, yet, it was absorbed by what few pores had survived the debarking, chipping and pulp preparation process. The blackness spread through the paper's body at a speed of internal bleeding, staining the blotchy browns a uniform void. When the entire length of the conveyer belt was colored, the paper sat in its own runny pile for several days, waiting for evaporation.

Crisp and dry, suffering from a withdrawal of touch, the finished paper was wound into flamboyant rolls thirty feet wide. With a smile, it fed itself to the mouth of a slitter, designed to snip the roll into esthetically pleasing squares 25cm by 25 cm. Once inside it was torn limb from limb, smile remaining. The sound of shredding, metal spokes turning, sung for several hours. All the while, the conveyer belt moved hastily past, every so often holding in its arms an expelled, limp, tired shape, to be folded, manhandled and contorted, and folded once again, to form the infamous 3-ply. As a complete, assembled 5 in. square, it was placed before a patron, belly exposed and

relieved upon, bearing the weight of a champagne glass, and the effects of a minor miscalculation of distance, after a sip, as an arm thoughtlessly relaxed its muscles, causing a sudden drop of stemware, where, a base reunited with its initial imprint with a dull blow.

The force of the impact took fingers by surprise. Their casual grip, soft at the fingertips and slightly moist with perspiration, sweating from the heat accumulating as discussions continued to simmer, as esophagi rippled, their grip was nearly lost completely, as one harsh vibration moved in a rapid burst up the singular leg of the glass. It squirmed its way into the bowl, where three and one fourth ounces shifted, far, to the left, dribbling an aged color over the lip of the rim, in a leisurely manner, as though this blind leap had been waiting for assistance from an outside source. The long, thin brown spill was enveloped by the darkness below; the napkin had performed. Exposed, it welcomed this foreign assortment of alcohols, which swiftly crawled through the holes of the top ply in a circular outgrowth, with exceptional ease, hurdling forwards, left, right, below, invading, saturating the pores until gutted and dense. The total weight of soaked ply upon ply led to a total collapsed of the napkin's innards and structure. Hunched and concave, the site of the spill. At surrounding locations, the distribution scented the napkin's skin with the smell of bitters, curdling the paper in weak unfortunate bumps. Damp and reclined, the napkin was free to be nipped and frayed by a wandering fingernail during a bored, subconscious thought, or while ignoring the point of a long, organized discussion. Free to delight, disfigure.

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The area was primitive, and humid. Mist accumulated above a stream that had stopped flowing months ago, a body still and patient, a surrogate womb to thousands of fertilized eggs moments before completion and birth, plump with ovum of a gelatinous texture, feeding the growth of wings with hexagonal patterns, a set of matching eyes, and abdomen of curious strength. Within, tiny and furious, hearts pumped. Outside, mature and waiting, the hungry. Several dozen clung to trees, trees who, for centuries, knew of this stream when it acted more as an artery connecting to a vast pile of salty blue liquid, trees, who grew to monumental lengths into a vast pile of pure nitrogen in a blue sky, trees who have seen such creatures, knew them well, their vertical acts, and patience. This ability, to tolerate silence, the burn of stomach acid through empty belly lining for a period of time that includes the gestation of some distant form, this ability to, simply, wait has altered the creatures' natural sense of time, nearly erased the sensation of past, present and future by excluding, deep within, a certain number of genes that produce the faint, clumsy wrap around a sensitive eye. The act of patience has deleted the use for eyelids and blinking all together. A slick, convex lens, two actually, of earth tone, to absorb the lush vegetation and overwhelming accumulation of death, of simple things, say, newborns, those about to hatch from a puddle that had lost any sense of possibility, lying mute, to be dried up into a crisp empty bed for rodents to dig and fowl, yes, two earthy lenses to absorb such sights formed a permanent gaze upon the world. Minutes could not accumulate if there is no ability to blink. So they hung. They hung by their limbs and gazed, occasionally relaxing the tendons connecting a lower jaw to a green face, opening an empty pink mouth just slightly, enough, to release fine amounts of carbon dioxide to feed several surrounding fanning leaves, for the bulbous tip of a pale tongue to peak through, stretching past a pair of lidless nostrils, and up, returning to the body, to the head, where two eyes, fixed open and exposed to light, dehydrated at a rate strikingly similar to the evaporation of the dying stream. Here a wet, long tongue rubbed against a lens, two actually, transplanting saliva from mouth to eye for survival.

Moisturized, tendons supporting the eye's shape inflated, filling with a slightly acidic spit whose ingredients, plucked from entwining intestines and cell waste, dissolved foreign things that had been uprooted by a draft and hastily fumbled East to this location, sewn between tree trunks and onto the lens of a creature lacking an innate reflex. Fine grains of dirt, a leg of an anthropoid detached during panicked flight, these were either broken down and sanitized or caught between gummy molecules built into a tongue of obscene length as it licked, a tongue measuring head to tail, attached legs and all of the gecko. Upon the tongue's return into the mouth, an existing innate reflex followed, a swallow, a minor ripple unheard amongst the cackling of larger creatures, winged or pawed, amplified by a vast open sky, yet unseen, deep within foliage, a dense green drapery composed of thousands of individual plants categorized by some equally horrific Latin surname. So, too, the foreign bits disappeared, traveling now by way of forceful contractions into a stomach demanding more, more sustaining material, as poetically versed in additional contractions from its lining, telling in commanding fashion of a tasty epic taking place beneath still water, of living things growing and their proteins forming. This was sustenance, as defined by primitive need, and the need spoke so strong it drove the gecko to these trees, drove them to wait, clinging by the tip of tired toes for a birthing of millions. The need spoke so strong it altered the gecko, crafting those spatula tipped

footpads through a breeding of countless inheritances, hunger and the intimate details of tree skin, eventually leading to a profound overpopulation centralized upon the squat toes of the animal.

Their product was simply bristly hair. Cylinder and pale, a citizen of a toe stood shoulder to shoulder among half a million forms exact in appearance and purpose, their numbers in total reaching beyond the physical limits of a toe, growing and building one atop the other, piling, up, up, until from sheer height the structure spilled over, producing a flat fold of fibrous skin. Sprout from a pore that had tread ground layered with decomposed rock, feces and lost limbs, a hair grew in rationed sections mimicking age rings in the surrounding trees of the environment. Stiff, its center was a collection of flamboyant skin cells that had purged themselves of color, the green, red and native pigments inked into the populous of this region, defining it as tropical and moist; rather, the cells had taken a vow of silence, mute in hue. A cross section of the cells reveals a shocking translucent, gelatinous texture, nearly an embarrassing fatty consistency, one that playfully responds to a pinch, inflating to its original voluptuous state slowly, in giddy fashion, casually taking form as one watches and anticipates the figure refiguring. Reproduced billions of times over, the cells form a hard fat, which defines a bristle, a bristle, who, makes up the thin, naked folds upon folds of hairs bombarding a minor digit.

Curvature of the flaps act as the bulbous end of a puzzle piece, fitting into tough slots burrowed into the flesh of a tree trunk; evidence of mites, their miniature bites into wood, of their contracting locomotion south to north, guided by the propulsion of water hidden within a tree, piped from earth to elevated broad leaves providing shade from an aggravated sun. The wood is eaten and excreted, swallowed whole and barely digested. The exiting mouthfuls tumble to the dry turf below, peppering a fragile brown of the earth with dark waste. Several of these peppercorns dive into the puddle, splashing with silence, their impacts only identified by the minor ringed vibrations in the form of circular waves, signaling to the surrounding world the slow feast of trees, eaten alive yet of little nutritional value to mites that cannot digest the rough fibers; their furious activity is solely for the serious need to hydrate, sucking what liquid is to be found in the size of a mite's bite, a need continuing in decibels so faint it is drowned by the swallows of a gecko preening its fragile, exposed lens, one, then the other, in wait, as its toes clench the remaining wood of an aged tree. The movement of the water is false, caused merely and literally by droppings, not vibrations from the anticipated completion of an insect's gestation and birth, the hatching from a deep embedding in muck, and the struggle of swimming with newborn legs to the fine surface and breaking its tension in tired success. No, the animal must wait. Its four limbs embrace the trunk, four limbs with four little toes very well ribbed.

The hold is effortless, casual and extraordinarily intimate. Sinuous strands of tissue, red, threaded, one the other, through and atop, form thousands of layers of mature and well fed muscles all heaving in unison to maintain a balanced vertical hold of the length and girth of the little gecko, whose body weight, though in total being a scant few ounces, is held for hours in stillness, in the surrounding noise. Limbs barely shift to redistribute weight; green and proportionate, arm to leg to abdomen grew to a sated ratio, allocating

weight to the hundredth of an ounce to each extremity, just enough, so as not to easily develop fatigue and an accumulation of toxic muscle waste, an irritating cramp that would, no doubt, stiffen limbs and toes, who, releasing an all important grip upon the trunk would send the little gecko tumbling through the humid air, and into pile of birth below. Muscles and connective tissue, thankfully, held fast, silently absorbing oxygen marching through nostrils inhaling, exhaling at a rhythmic pace. The muscles held up the body, its organs and blood, perhaps several ponderings and, yes, a very long tongue, but it was the grip that made the vertical feat possible—those fleshy flaps folded upon a toe, four toes, for four limbs, making for billions of bristles. Flush into the gaps and against the grain of the tree, this tree, its scarring and grooves so recognizable and memorized, to be identified from a distance, as a destination, one ending hunger, the flaps expanded their surface area with a gentle push exerted from a limb, smearing the bristles, obtaining the thinnest possible width a flap could possibly obtain, in desperate hope the forced contact will not come undone.

The grip was magnetic. Swarming within the bristles, electrified particles twitched and circled an optimistic nucleus, content to sit and absorb the lush view of confusing vines, the slow death of a familiar tree. Their pace, impatient and nearly hysteric, led to a twirling of such speed, that, left in their wake, just steps behind, the watery flow of a current developed and flowed, transmitting, producing minor ringed vibrations one after the other, over filling the microscopic space with electric waves, until, the limit of their space had been met and the flood broke, leaking from the stiff bristles and out, tracing the bulbous edge of a toe's flap, to the chewed bark in pulsing, rhythmic drops. This current ran parallel, through, over and within a very different current bubbling deep within the makeup of the tree's remaining, thriving cells. Their urgency grew from a fear of inevitable death, a fear so innate and intense they circled and paced to a nauseating speed, expressing horror in a jaw line that broke into jagged pieces, expressing apprehension with mouths whose lips curdled to a sour degree. This produced a current which coiled, darkly, and inched along with enormous speed yet felt like the progress of muck; it was completely mysterious to the preceding current, obsessed with the inevitable birthing about to take place, the life about to be consumed. Their currents bonded, thriving off each other's self-destruction, forming an attraction so intertwined it created vertical feats, to be discovered from a distance, to be gazed upon as a wonder, studied and scribbled into elegant equations pondered, as to how such a living thing, so small, with four toes, for four limbs, can embrace a tree so?

growth and birth of an animal cracker

From the bosom of sixteen large, chrome ovens something between the form of a cracker and a cookie was emitted. Their numbers took the shape of large, well organized Asian armies spanning rows and columns deep, moving silently forwards with the guidance of a black, thick rubber sheet wrapping a moving conveyer belt, motorized West, toward a horizon outlining countries whose language is familiar and composed of shaped letters, a bulbous little *e* or awkward *i* for instance. At the bitter end of three hundred feet, the finished product tumbles from the rubber, forming a collective mass falling into an unknown fate, piling into a vessel of transport that has not been altered since conception nearly a century ago, when a quill pen, after a minor dabble in squat inkwell, swiftly outlined the backside and hide, paws and beaks of mammalian oddities gazed upon after paying a minor entry fee to a traveling show. Housing in steel, barred cages to protect women and children, and weaker patrons, a variety of life placed in deliberate consecutive order, emphasizing least importance to greatest capture, beginning with a boorish hen to the final and largest cages, exotics, with retractable claws. This impressive blend plucked from humid, overgrown pockets within the earth and safely, successfully exhibited before the civilized world, inspired the culinary feat of miniaturizing these beasts into enjoyable bites, cookies, no, crackers, no, edibles, although lacking the outlandish stripes and bloody gums and such colors, would satisfy cranky children with the amusing forms and abundant amounts of granulated sugar. These lifelike characteristics, though, were not lost by memory. The pen continued to scribble upon parchment, coloring up the scene of the traveling show, played out over and over, at different longitudes and latitudes, before multiple nationalities, yet, all mumbling amazements in multiple languages, all agreeing on the stupendousness of the creatures. The pen encapsulated the moment, a moment to be reproduced on the vessel of transport, a simple cardboard box advertising the delicious and astonishing contents within.

Three quarters of a mixture, a ton in weight, is simple flour, cleansed of any color or personality. This overwhelming powdery proportion classifies the animal cracker as a cracker. Carried with the strength of back muscles and an unhappy spine, frowning, succumbing to the daily loss of vitamin D, curving with each heave of a yellow plastic tub yielding one solid white brick of the ingredient measuring up to a pound, the tub is walked over to a metal bowl of industrial proportions. With a relaxing tip of a yellow lip over a metal rim, the bucket is purged, relieving the lower abdominal muscles of sweaty strain, and providing a mocking transfer of weight to faintly bronzed forearms belonging to a remedial baker. In the wake of the solid's sudden collapse is a gassy pale rise of fine particles that have, pour after pour, caked the braided cuts and personality of a palm, nestled quaintly within the path of a lifeline and exaggerated the accumulated wear that had dug between fingers. The gas eventually thins and dissipates as the body of the baker follows a Sisyphean path from a vat of lifeless powder at one end of the room, scoops, and travels to the obese metal bowl, here, all the while, in between, impacting strained shoulder to air. Enough steps are taken, enough bends and lifts of vertebrae are executed when seven hundred pounds or so fill the belly of the bowl. In accomplishment, the yellow bucket, framed with an uneven, clinging patchwork of flour, is gently placed to the floor, out of courtesy, out of fatigue. There is a moment of nothingness, then out comes the sugar.

Whittled to a fine, sweet nub, a refined grain of sucrose is proportionately square, wonderfully tiny and reflective. Like the flour, this ingredient is white, though, a shade well groomed and crisp. Its coarse, beaten surface is easily hid beneath a talent of blinding a spectator with dazzling light. The illusion formed is that of perfection, an appearance forcing one to avert their gaze, squinting a brow to shield sensitive eyes from the glare, a manner that parallels a face formed during a sampled taste, after, briefly, joining a fingertip to tongue and a minor dabble into a scattered few grains, the fingertip slightly pained upon contact with the jagged surfaces, becoming slightly freckled with a scant several thousand, reflecting, returning, a dazzling collection of white spots on a path to the mouth, past moistened lips tunneling an O! formation, where, landing upon the strip of the tongue the collection is wiped clean, filling papillae with a sense of sweetness so compact and sudden a defensive reflex is seen about the eyes and at the hallowing of cheeks. This same ingredient, totaling an eighth of a ton, joins the pile of flour, lying mute. Their union is a cascade of dull and shocking hues of white, coarse and plain surfaces. This union has made a confusing hybrid, a treat also classified as a cookie, from the high ratio of sugar to flour. Their weight is held comfortably by the strength of an industrial mixer, who, with mouth agape, lips tunneling a yawn formation, is not yet sated. The dough, something between a cracker and a cookie, is to be fully formed.

Whey is the liquid remaining after milk has been curdled. It is a by-product, an after thought. It is perfect, a lovely, thin substance which contains just enough lactose to add shape to a product manufactured on a grand scale, and just enough traces of fat for that product to survive, to sit upon a shelf indefinitely, until, the glittery colors and untamed creatures upon the package flirt with a child's imagination and impulsive nature, inducing a conditioned response, a sound, of want, so repetitive and boisterous the need is eventually, and solely, quieted with a simple purchase. Their little bodies will consume the whey's many glycos, macros, and peptides, massaging little glands in a counter clockwise manner, dripping insulin that is flushed through the tide of a circulatory system. Here, the whey liquid is poured into the mouth of the mixer, piercing a hole at the center of this dry bed of flour and sugar. From the collection's belly a muddy grey stain grows in circumference, exponentially saturating crystals and powdered flakes. Their minute forms absorbing and bloating, rounding to an enormous sticky shape that has broken natural sized bonds, leaving them to burst from their clothes and bind sugar to flour, flour to sugar. The dough is a hideous, sweet mess. Mass. To which a semisolid fat is added; a grossly pale square chunk of shortening, damp, sweating slightly at its corners, and nervously fragile. Stored at room temperature for nearly eight hours, its solid has gradually become semi; within, its molecular structure losing its passionate grip, developing fatigue from the heat. The chunk was unfortunate to look upon, but within, hid wonderfully long strands of hydrogenated oils, whose slippery charm and addictive taste prevents the dough from becoming too gummy and dense, squat and without complex flavor. Behind every good dough, a great chunk of fat.

Nearly all the mixer's forty eight and two tenths of a cubic foot has met capacity, populated with a doughy product rather boorish in terms of color, one of skin lacking pigment and life. In obsessive circles, six heavy duty tubular fingers of the mixer

massage the gigantic body, tumbling within and without itself, violently compressing fat into flour, squeezing further still the sugar, its surface hardly visible, its small size swallowed and lost somewhere in the dough's pale growth. Flowing through the mixer's hydraulics, innards and tangled wires, electricity sustains the machine, maintains a consistent eighty rotations per minute, per finger, skimming the industrial bowl's peripheral regions in a well-orchestrated score, of movement, guaranteeing an even distribution of ingredients. Clumps of segregated flour, desperately clinging to the edge of the bowl, are quickly discovered and snatched by fingers, four feet in length, and easily thrown back into service after their slick, stainless steel frame dipped into the bowl's obtuse angles. For sixty-one minutes, six tubes trek the same paths, identify the same rogue ingredients and dispose of them in an identical manner; for sixty-one minutes flour, sugar and fat are exposed to a thorough, repetitive treatment of rubs, kneading and manipulation. The recipe's measurements, weighed by a digital platform with a separate system of hydraulics, innards and tangled wires, are rounded to the nearest hundred thousand, whose period and zeros, tunneling a shocked O! formation, are displayed in an unmistakable neon red; the batterings which take place within the industrial bowl, have been timed with the same stop-watch since the factory's grand opening, a stop-watch whose numbers peek through a sheet of plastic permanently grey from countless dissipating clouds of flour particles. This repetition, dedication ensures that the giddy happiness emitted from a child eating out of one package at one end of the world will be replayed upon the opening and consumption of the fifteen thousandth box, at another end of the world.

With short, chubby fingers the cardboard cage will quickly collapse, torn open by a violent imagination, that, upon a thrusting rip here and pinching pull there, animates the drawn figures, orchestrates their wild stampede, bursting off the page and into the civilized world, making for a quick collapse of organized institutions, say, with the thrust of a horn or kick of a hoof. The fingers belong to a hand premature, its dimensions small, easily slipping into the tiny creator created in horrible, tortuous anticipation, of, of!, to grasp, yes, yes?, it is thought, as eyes are of no use, unable to see past the pulpy mix of colors and mangled paper, rather, wandering into the negative surrounding space in wondering consideration of what the solid form twisting between the digits may be, what foreign animal, what form, coming forth the box, four whole legs, and, eyes now fixed and useful, see, yellow, yellow? Yes, first the eyes see a creamy yellow, Oleum Limonis, a secret and sacred ingredient added amongst the mechanical spins and noise of the industrial mixer. Squeezed from the rind of a thousand lemons, just the perfect amount of citral, citronellal and happy little esters are distilled into sanitized canisters, measured to eye-level (what level one cannot say, whose eye one cannot admit), and poured, slowly, to a trickle even, to splosh against the toneless dough, to add a certain amount of life and zest to flour and sugar. As the oil is absorbed, the dough tans and emits the scent of fresh fruit blossoming in Sicily. For a moment. As the dough lies, limp, damp, mixed and ready to be expelled through a steel pumping device.

The animal is about to take form. A large, round, red button is pressed with the combined pressure of a middle and index finger, locking it into a squat position and initiating a suffocating phase. With forward momentum, a large, square, silver panel

shoves against the dough, passing its body through a sanitized rectangular exit, smearing, forming, out from the mixer, a thin, continuous, flat sheet, landing safely upon a speedy, well oiled conveyor. Wrapped in an impressive neoprene textile, the conveyor is fashionably nonstick and motorized, welded into a circle of eighty feet in circumference, traveling with obsessive determination back to whence it came, returning the freshly squeezed, smooth sheet of dough beneath the rectangular mouth, one more, twice more, as to create a three tiered, raw masterpiece of flour and fat, with additional tart flavorings and sweetness. Layered properly, the round, red button is jabbed with the same familiar digits, releasing it from its aching, crouched sit, and ending the circular conveyor's movement. There is a moment of nothingness, a moment taken by the dough to become familiar with its newly formed body, transformed from plump mass to thin sheets. A moment, actually, for the time it takes a thumb, neighboring a familiar index and middle finger, to jut rudely, into the open air, aiming for a large, round, yellow button. Pressed with enough forward momentum, this button directs the circular conveyor counterclockwise one full rotation, passing the entire length of the form onto an adjoining, attractive conveyor similar in appearance, except, for its track, designed to travel in one direction, to the cutter.

The rotary die is a solid, three hundred pound cylinder, composed of stainless steel identical to the miles of surrounding conveyors and equally as nonstick; it rotates in unison with the horizontal conveyor's speed, bringing forth the ready-made dough at a sacrificial pace. Held securely with various rods, bolts and screws only slightly impaired by oxidation, the rotary exposes the many sides of its face in a smooth transition. In total, there are thirty seven varieties of animal etched into the steel, placed randomly throughout, so that the tiger, cougar, camel, rhinoceros, kangaroo, hippopotamus, bison, lion, hyena, zebra, sheep, goat, rabbit, turtle and, of course, hen, do not multiply more than the other, so many others. They plague the surface of the great spinning structure, so much so the creatures stand shoulder to hoof with barely a scant centimeter between. Each cutter's outline is a multitude of eight hundred tiny teeth, eternally exposed and ready to bite, down, with the forward momentum of the rotary and all of its three hundred obese pounds upon three sticky, sugary, and the occasionally lemony sheets of dough, limp and ready to be divided, and ordained, by chance, to become, say, a monkey, elephant or donkey.

The contact point between the horizontal conveyor and rotary is swift, a smiting kiss, whose pressure, speed and sharpened angles easily snip through the faint chemical compounds of flour and the like. The thin nontoxic, nonstick neoprene skin wrapping the cutters leaves the dough upon the belt, brushing it aside once the rotary has done what was needed, a form has finally been formed, a small shape mimicking the grand power of a mammal and all its lovely innards. This cookie, or cracker, is only left with three small punctures in its body from the process, minor scars to represent an eye, belly button and quant orifice. These release points of the cracker, or cookie, actually have purpose, freeing heat that will develop internally at the last stage, where the thousands of forms, some three hundred thousand rows and columns deep, are carried to ovens of electrically charged spindles and wires, hundreds of degrees in Fahrenheit and red, waiting, ready, to bake the creatures, inflate them to their full, tasty potential, melting the fat, dissolving the

sugar, burning away the last oils of a natural fruit, to become a product easily identified within the rows upon rows of aisles in the convenience of a sprawling Mart and digested in seventeen countries throughout a great spinning structure.

## Manufacture of Non-Bleeding Maraschino Cherries

Silent and spotted, a cherry tree blossomed. Its several thousand leaves, green and bowed, formed several thousand individual shadows, black and long, tickling a nutritious earth and providing shade to plump fruit, attached to a branch, at a single point, hanged by its signature stem. The weather, chrome yellow and pleasant, maintained such a disposition over the past several months, forming a passive, stable environment where premature fruit safely developed sugars and a bulbous shape, wrapped in a thin skin bearing striking resemblance to its paternal surroundings, a fresh, pale hue of yellow signifying an absorption of light that had saturated air molecules, trickled across the palm of a leaf in excess, and dove, falling, through pores of the fruit; the trail left in its wake, a flush bright hue at rounded corners. Just below the skin, billions of entwining fibers sewed the fruits' meat, white and soiled by an abundance of sucrose, which, continually warmed by the numerous degrees in Fahrenheit, remained liquid. These minor flows and roaming lakes orbited a cherry's body, were periodically soaked and expelled, soaked and expelled within and without the porous innards, preventing dehydration, leaving the fruit's personality and curves buoyant and receptive to one's examining pinch, a gentle, quick squeeze between an index and flat thumb.

The fruit, mostly neutral in color, plump and limbless, is easily harvested with an extended reach. A metal ladder with thirteen flat, metal steps is untangled, its four long limbs dug securely into the loose, shaded soil with several twisting shifts driven by tanned hands attached at a single point to tanned forearms, hands grasping two legs of the ladder, and repeating a motion swaying left, right and down, into the earth, to stabilize the weight of an employee centralized upon a single point, stepping left, right and up, stair after stair. The ladder responds with an aching creak as one foot, then the other, makes contact and climbs, carrying a body to the thirteenth step. There, at the highest point, one is enveloped by a canopy of leaves extending throughout a field of vision, and exposed to a dozen degrees fewer in Fahrenheit when planting the ladder, a sensation felt along the outermost layer of skin, and especially about the eyes, where tears and moisture experience a dry chill, evoking a defensive blink to re-hydrate the bulbous shapes hidden snugly in sockets.

The cherries are separated from a tree limb one by one, dislocated at the brown knuckle where a cherry's stem grew from a secure branch. This requires a pinch, a tight squeeze of remarkable strength produced by a pair of fingertips. Directed by a hand, they position below the targeted fruit, yellow and unaware. Using the final step of the ladder as leverage, a pair of feet curl upon toes, providing half a dozen or so additional inches, up, following the thin curvature of the stem to its hanging place. The reach brushes into leaves, shifting and animating the long black shades far below, producing a friction in the sound of muted rustling, until, an arm has strained forward just enough to land the fingertips upon the bark, with a thumb dug into a tree branch, for leverage, and an index tapping a cherry's stem. With an inhale, muscles wrapping bone in the hand fill with blood and tighten, bearing added weight upon the skeleton, buckling the knuckle where index, thumb greets a hand. The kinetic energy travels from the joint across the length of the fingers, accumulating at the cul-de-sac beneath a swirling pattern of two individual fingerprints, which respond identically to this flood, compressing, fainting, smearing

against the bark, producing a pinch, that with an exhale, soft flesh accepts minor brown splinters, and a branch accepts loss of fruit.

Though detached from its source, the stem is retained, one end locked between the cherry's pair of rounded bulbs, and the other, flailing, independent and outstretched as the fruit is dropped, released from fingers, tugged now by gravity into a brown cloth sack hitched at the employee's hips. Here, thousands of cherries and thousands of their stems intertwine, forming clusters of hairy, earthy knots around bodies, through, around and over, looping flexible stems into calligraphic shapes. High above, lost in the chill cover of foliage, eardrums absorb the rhythmic impact of tumbling cherries, dull thuds indicating the brief yet violent collision of two dense meaty bodies. The pinch and process continues for an immeasurable amount of time as any indicator, say, the sun's angle in a harvest sky or even the convenience of a simple wrist watch is usurped by the cover of cherries or the need to pluck, as hands and the wrists to which they are attached are outstretched and functioning. There is no time, only the end of an obsessive, repetitive, manual task, to gather, until there is no more to gather, when the thudding ends, and the only sound is muted rustling of wind toying with dry leaves.

It is time to descend the ladder with extreme caution to balance, one's safety and, more importantly, the safety of the cherries, as the threat of little bodies spilling over the lip of the sack is great. The retreat is backward and disorienting, relying solely on muscle memory and a misty recollection of the general distance between each ladder's step, a recording which took place during the ascent, muffled and nearly lost underneath the blaring task of picking a cherry tree dry. Once again, the entire length of the left arm is summoned. From shoulder, to pointy elbow, to the longest tip of the hand, the full limb aligns to form a comforting arc tracing the obese frame of the glutted sac. Muscles surrounding the spine and back tighten, pulling the shoulder and its permanent appendage closer to the body, squeezing into over stretched stomach muscles the large sac of cherries, now secure from spillage and triggering the motion of descent, a left foot blindly setting upon a metal step below, gaining stiff confidence in the ankle as the ladder exhales the familiar laborious sigh of bearing weight, yes, this is where you must land.

Within a warehouse, composed of high ceilings and general sterility, hands are clasped in prayer position. Slowly flowering, the gap between the left and right hand grows, revealing the stem of eight fingers, fatigued and tanned from plucking, yet prepared for the task ahead. Wrists slightly nicked from accidental contact with bark flatten in relief, and palms are exposed, turning upwards, making visible curious forked lines and curious thoughts as to their end; with thumbs lying limp, each forming an awkward horizontal stab into the air, the hands are now soft cupping tools designed to transport disoriented cherries from their overpopulated sac into a brine bath. With a heave, the tips of eight fingers dig into the yellow, young pile, separating a small number from the rest, lifting with exceptional ease thirty or so cherries, whose long, thin stems reluctantly release a knotted grip of identical fruit that were, by chance, outside the range of the natural cupping tool. They fall a short, dense distance into the sac, producing, once again, those familiar thuds, rolling to a stop upon another cherry, and watch, as hands filled, walk over to a mountainous volume of organized jars.

The brine is composed mostly of water, clear and adequately meeting the standards of clean tap. Above the open mouth of the jar, hands separate from their cupping position, creating a divide that no longer supports limbless fruit. With palms and their untold fortune breaking away, cherries trickle and splosh into the brine. As the divide grows vast, a steady, maddening rush plummets into the jar, breaking surface tension with round bodies. Held within, the jar, their forms are silent, suspended, displayed behind a glass partition whose cylinder frame bloats each little cherry into a round, pale creature. Under observation for five weeks, their absolution of color and taste is noted, a slow steady bleeding of natural sugars and youth into the surrounding placenta, composed of a burning amount of sodium and sulfates. A simultaneous preservation and aging process, the salt tempts water from a cherry's thin layer of skin drop by drop, forming over the hours and days, minor folds and wrinkles, signs of excess flesh as the body within has begun to shrink, lacking the elements that cause decay. The sulfur stops the cherry's heart, pausing its life at this very stage of wrinkly youth, inducing a permanent sleep. Tumbling into a wonderful nothingness, carelessness, the sinuous innards of the meat relieve themselves of functional duties which keep the fruit alive and well; this role, administrative and controlled, has been passed on to the brine's measured amount of synthetic calcium, who with spectacles upon the bridge of a stout nose, reorganizes the skin's texture, making certain a cherry remains crisp, so when an assortment of teeth bite down into this treat, it will seem, *seem*, this fruit had never been touched. It will respond, under this pressure, with an exhaling snap and a minor leak of citric acid, posing as a sweet, natural characteristic that is actually injected by the brine.

On the thirty-fifth day, the cherries are completely bald, lacking hues of any color, lacking a significant amount of taste, simply white, balls, silent, suspended. They will feel nothing, as the machine used to de-pit each cherry one by one feels nothing. To prepare, jars are unscrewed, turned by a hand, warm and jointed, clockwise. Tipped horizontally above a simple metal sink, the brine filters through the pile of dead young fruit, draining to a cascade and flushing their originality through rusting pipes of an unseen sewer system. With the last of the liquid gone, the jar is then tipped to a disorienting angle, upside down, with its bottom facing the world and its mouth open, vomiting up each innard into an aluminum holding tank. Out the cherries tumbled, each limp little body falling, knocking hard against the flaccid paneling, that, upon each impact pulsed with palpations. Empty and cold, the jar is discarded, sent to an isolated room where feet are to be wrapped in Latex prior to entry; to be sanitized under violent levels of heat, the jar's mouth will first be rinsed out with oxides and industrial cleaners of biological proportions. Twice. These cellular killers, however, are safe enough, are easily washed away with a quick run under an average faucet. As such, the jar is wiped dry, its mouth open, belly empty and hungry, waiting patiently, silently for the next harvest. For now, *this* machine has the cherries in its cavernous, toothless face, funneling to a stout, single pipe. Here one cherry is held at a time and de-pitted in exceptional speed, tenths of second, by a thin metal needle of exceptional strength. Ejected and retracted by hydraulics and electricity, the needle spears its five pointed tip into the lifeless, thin flesh, past the pseudo-sweet meat and into the hard shell of a useless seed.

Anchored, the needle retreats, carrying in its claws the remains, who, obtuse and unaware, punches an exit hole through the cherry's bottom. Soulless, the cheery is discharged from the pipe; its seed is released and discarded. It is now ready to be re-sweetened.

Spit into a large processing tank, the pile of empty cherries is hosed with cold tap water, spouting from the tube of a rubber nozzle. There is to be no remaining taste of salt, sulfur, evidence of artificiality or natural yellow hues for that matter. There is to be nothing of substance, no suggestion of a past, as the cherry is now a simple vessel, to carry within its dry veins a queer concoction of coloring, a red, a lively red, a lovely red, flush and plump as a pair of young lips. It is to be the color of blood, flowing blood, alive and thick with nutrients, oxygen and lust. It is, in fact, extracted from life, drop by drop, a deep crimson, edible, carminic puss produced naturally, and harvested, from the crushed innards of an insect, a female insect.

They feel nothing. Soft bodied, with a jovial round abdomen, the shock of boiling water is horrifically monumental to such a tiny, simple nervous system. As the hundreds of degrees in Fahrenheit roll onto a wingless body all but two tenths of an inch in length, there is hardly any struggle. The insect is consumed by an over-run sensory experience, from limb to eye, and back again, the message of pain is received and sent, from limb to eye and back again, through the little body, sent and received so swiftly there is no pain felt, perhaps, only a numbing in the chest, and palpitations from the heart, a heart so frantic and exhausted it bursts, as the liver bursts, the kidneys, bowels, small intestine and large intestine bursts, organs that had inflated with boiling water and stretched beyond the capacity a little body all but two tenths of an inch in length can withstand.

The skin remains in tact. The inside, however, is liquid, a red hysterical mess of cells and digested food. This is hidden, behind the wet, green skin. It must come out.

The dead female insects are dried in the sun, for five days. Water is slowly extracted, teased away from the skin by a charming, warm sun, in a very blue sky; the weather had maintained such a disposition over the past several months, aiding in the production of thousands and thousands of dead female insects. This particular crop is composed of one hundred and fifty-five thousand dried ladies, their withered scales fold and ripple, reducing an already petite frame further still, down to more than a quarter of two tenths of an inch. Small yet necessary.

On the fifth day, a net will fish their bodies out from a burnt, weathered rubber tub, flicking each into a mulling stone. There, the insides will come out, with an exhaled pop, through the skin. Void of moisture, the collection of innards are paste, an unidentifiable semi-puddle as to what is kidney and what is liver. Nonetheless, the paste is red, a lively red, the color of innards, shocked.

It will join with corn syrup in a ceremony that re-hydrates the paste. This forms a solution the emptied cherries are to bathe in, for their skins to absorb and their sinuous fibers to swallow, to become sweet once again, to be filled with life once again, to dazzle

a drink or delight a child as a Maraschino cherry is placed upon a mound of vanilla ice cream in a Sundae.

a story the size of a Freckle

It was there a lifetime, upon a forearm, lying flat, brown and surrounded by an outgrowth of self-conscious stalks of hair. The spot was often confused as a blot of ink, those accidentally implanted by the tip of a ball point pen, say, waved about in conversation or fiddled with during a thought process, and carelessly, without thought or realization, injecting tip to pore, leaving behind a dark, bruising color that when finally noticed, imposes a sense of shock, at first, then concern, questioning this new marking's origins. The pad of a thumb would be licked, embedding its salt and finely separated loops into the papillae of a tongue, who, beating their heads against the ridges of a fingerprint, vibrate, tickling moist glands about the cheeks. Their laughter is but a scant amount of spittle, leaking through gaps of teeth, rolling down the curvature of the tongue, to splosh against the fingerprint and wash away the salt and brine, leaving but a puddle of saliva. Thoroughly damp, the thumb is placed above the spot in question, hovering, for a moment, as it is recalled when and if such a violent conversation took place, or thought process imaginative enough, that in its wake a mark would remain. Before an answer can be deduced, the thumb is scrubbing away at a neurotic pace, thrusting from its middle joint, up to down, left to right, wiping the fingerprint as a rag against the buoyant flesh of the forearm. Sensitive, it responds to the abuse with quiet red bruises, blushings, the width and length of the fingerprint, flaring brighter with each passing wipe, until the friction develops into a visual warning, of a threshold being met, of tussled stalks of hair, of a deep red smear across the skin, enveloping the spot, which, after surviving the beating imposes a sense of brow lifting realization, for a moment, that this spot is actually a lifelong freckle.

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Years ago, decades actually, during an infantile state, skin and organs settled; clumps of cells, nameless and faceless, took the identity of popular organs—a liver, stomach, a kidney—after nine months of spontaneous organic bursts. All was wrapped, neatly and plainly, within an organ itself, a package of skin seven thin layers thick. Lacking a history, it contained no marks or scars brought about by emotional stress or clumsy misjudgments in surrounding environments. There were no overlapping folds of flesh at the boney intersection of an elbow, nor any curling at the large knotty midsection of fingers; the skin was plump with sugars and lipids and young enthusiasm. Those stalks of arm hair now dark and overgrown, were then simple fine threads attempting to keep all the innards just underneath warm and dry. Indeed, the blood gracefully flowing within and without a functioning kidney and heart heated to a pink, stable degree reflected in the lips and toes, squirming. The body and its newly acquired parts were doing their part, locomotive, digesting and excreting peas, contributing to growth, laterally and horizontally, producing laughter through pink lips and an inquisitive flailing of outstretched limbs towards recognizable maternal faces. Lost in this noisy, well crafted production, within the population of organs and current of several liters of circulating fluid, a cell, whose ingredients included air, waste and a flamboyant knot of stringy proteins, an unassuming shade of grey. Crumpled, as though a discarded shopping list, it twitched.

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Squirt from a flat gland in a tight neck, a purple hormone hastily sped between capillaries, ignoring the shapes and charming demeanor of thousands of attractive cells. With undeniable intension it traveled into the chest, swallowed by the chamber of a pulsing muscle that would eventually fatigue one day, in the distance, yet at the moment, proudly thumped in between soft ribs, rhythmically propelling the thin liquid through the heart's fibrous exit and into the shoulder—a baron coastline of miles of breathing red muscle, formed to perform, to toil under command, to lift, struggle and sigh, and, only, occasionally accept the reassuring placement of a hand rounding the shoulder's boney structural support, poking through, during a dehydrated state caused by exertion. The purplish wisps moved with silence between the slices of resting meat, entwined and muted, of separated strings, yet at once an entire mass, prepared. The path curved into the bicep, a straight decline, a depth of inches fingering pressure between the ears of the hormone, a nuisance merely, ignored, buried by blind determination, blind to an extensive change in environment, composed of dry elbow bone, jointed and bulbous, a uniform significant grey dwarfing the little purple dot. Alone and courageous it traveled, slipping through deep gaps of cartilage, seeking, through this clear gunk, for a particular cell containing a particular crumpled set of proteins, whose only purpose of being, in this mammal's entire existence, of decades in length, of sorrow and sublime moments, no, they have nothing to do with success or happiness, only to produce one identifiable mark on the span of this body. It was time.

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The cell was snug and warm, tucked shoulder to shoulder among billions of likeminded Melanocytes in the forearm. By Chance, each had formed to compose the last layer of skin (or the first, counting from within to out, rather than out to in—as they are quite optimistic of their placement in the body), they chatted with nerve endings frequently, curious of the violent and exciting happenings going on beyond their fastened location, say, asking of the acidic deterioration of Brussels sprouts in the belly, or further still, wondering about what occurs in the toes, so far off and distant that only imagination seemed like a plausible way of accessing that part of the world. The nerves replied, perhaps with a smidge of pity, with electric pops and subconscious squirts of potassium that, for simple pleasures, tugged at erector muscles in the skin, puling them, simulating the glee of a draft leaking through an aged window, speckled with led paint. The reproduced chill rose as bubbles of clear soda pop from our last layer to first (or first layer to last, depending on how one looks at things in this big old world), providing a refreshing, and a tad light headed, sensation, a distraction, from being limbless and immobile, stuck shoulder to shoulder, snug and warm between billions of Melanocytes, who's eyes, chin and façade mirrored the cell's to a boorish T (what a towering letter). As the bubbles burst and faded, exhales were emitted to settle the cell's little stomach after such excitement, exhales, followed by the occasional giggle and sigh expressed in realization, of the brief event's end. As the silence settled, as the cell resumed its wonderings of toes, there was a sudden purple collision.

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Solubility occurs under dynamic equilibrium, in a cell whose ingredients include air, waste and a knot of stringy proteins, an unassuming shade of grey. Filtering through the cell's body inked a hormone, succumbing to the fatigue of travel, to the mass of speckled pores, sifting into hundreds of liquid purple columns held weightless in the cell's little belly. Separated into manageable herds, there began a dissolution of the liquid, a slow relief and retraction from the flamboyant wavelengths of mauve to anorexic smoke rings, silently, curling, fading and flailing with the exceptional aged grace of feminine hands, evaporating into an unseen presence in the distance. The hormone detached from its joints, bled from the inside out, spontaneously collapsing every ounce of its being, submitting to the creation process of a Freckle, becoming an irreversible mess for a crumpled stack of grey proteins to inhale, to revive, to awaken, to bloom. Indeed they unraveled, arrogantly stretching all appendages, twisting the waist, bending the spine, unfurling from head to toe (those almighty toes!), absorbing through their spongy makeup the invisible breakdown of the liquid, using it to feed and grow, to mix, with purple and grey, and blood and waste, with air and command, to become a brown blot, inking through from last layer to first, no, first layer to last, a blot, filling sacks of skin in its path outwards, a mark exposed to the surrounding environment for the entire lifetime of this one mammal, yes, right here upon the forearm, shaded amongst inherited stalks of hair, yes, exposed, a granulated puff of color meant to be.

steam Rising from a scrambled egg

Between the legs of a hen lies an egg, brown, bulbous and warm, snug to a ninety-eight degrees in Fahrenheit. The accumulated weight of her organs is released upon the shell; layers of gizzards, a spleen and liver, plump and heavy with circulating blood, sag and expand in relaxation, relieving their functional burdens of filtration and excretions through a splenic artery, full of purple cornish waste, to a flat kidney, who, with mechanic precision sifts the new findings, plucking out the smallest of minerals that may be of use, of iron and nickel, and disposing of the remains, of bile and seed, passing, into a nauseating coil and exit the farthest distance from the mouth. The locomotion and decay of feed within her body heats the egg; between the faint, simple digestive track goes the way of blackened tips of leek, a collection of weak, bruised carrots that went unused in the kitchen, some stale blunt rind of white bread, cracked corn shocked to a pale yellow and the occasional, accidental protein, of flies that had gathered, teased by the scent of females and their metabolic processes seasoning the overcrowded wooden coop. Perched, flies inject their hairy legs into the aged lumber, waiting for the opportunity to suck on chicken spittle or expulsion, white and void of any nutritional value, waiting, among the violent noise of wings, attached to dozens of black abdomens, waiting, for their moment during a lifespan of only several moments. For some the chance to eat and the End overlaps, for some would wait to death, their legs stiff with muscle contractions, vibrating with the last beats of an overwhelmed heart. With a loss of control and consciousness, multiple pairs of legs detach from their hold, releasing a warm, yet useless body, whose movement is now a plummeting flight through stale air, landing, in a plastic orange feed bowl of a hen she is to pluck and peck, for nutrition, to prolong her life and fuel the flamboyant processes that sustain her, to heat her and the egg between her legs.

Its shell is pockmarked with thousands, thousands, seventeen thousand pores across its small span. This is no skin but a geometric pattern of calcium repeating in an obsessive manner, a mathematical stutter reciting compounds, that, when combined in a womb, settle and fossilize, form crystals, whose limbed expansion mimes the grace of moisture glazing a pane during winter solstice, just above freezing point in Fahrenheit, producing a unique wave of happy symmetric shapes at which to point and identify as beautiful. The sentimental pleasure is lost, however, among the shell's uniform, a blazing white hue successfully overexposing the divine scribble of mathematical progression, white on white on white. Even with a brow squeezing squint there remains nothing to admire visually but the egg's awkward shape of an egg, something of a large abdomen slowly rising to an acute angle outlining a faceless skull. There is a desire to turn this body in search of features, a color, bruise, small cut or dent, a sign of life. There is nothing, a void whose echo responds in a severe series of bumps against the fingertips; a novel in Braille loudly reciting to those with sight, the arrangement of calcium to oxygen to calcium to oxygen and so on and on the pages go, the grains and bumps of these elements and their physical formation, forming a shell. A surface so plain leaves many questions as to what lies underneath so well protected, at once stiff, surprising antisocial and bland, yet, so willing to intertwine with loops of a fingerprint.

The pores of the shell breathe freely, despite their critically tight posture. Within and without air is passed, ventilating the tiny form, absorbing the environment of the coop

with thousands of yawning mouths, inhaling, the remains of a dust bath shrugged from dozens of chicken breasts, attached at the moment, the molecules released from a spontaneous, reflexive need to preen white feathers and down littered with kicked up feed and the lost limbs of insects happily hacked with stubby beaks, molecules, freckled with bodies of unthinkable size whose single celled life is to perform unimaginable damage to flocks, a hen and her little (unknowingly) unfertilized egg. She sits and nests, nonetheless. Just beneath the shell, a slick membrane has formed to protect, nonetheless. Wonderfully fibrous and entwined, the transparent braids form an elaborate hair net encircling every short inch, catching the flow of air leaking into the egg from northern and southern boarders. With unwelcoming arms the air is caught by the collar and searched, thoroughly outlined, about the shoulders, along the arms, against the chest, around the buttocks and quickly between, down the outer crest of the left leg, thumbing the knee, and around, to the inner thigh, up, briskly wristing the crotch for a swift patting of the inner lining of the right leg. A cavity search will follow if the air is tainted brown, signifying some previous contact with unacceptable filth of the coop. The smallest bacteria are surprisingly strong and hide well. Fingering a mouth and illuminating various canals expose smuggled, intentional or not, foreign things that will disrupt a certain quality of life, mostly plain and calm and white. Those unwanted forms are held for 24 to 48 hours, where, without sustenance their life expectancy is met and are quickly disposed, exhaled, exiting through yawning young mouths unaware of what is taking place just beneath. The security is unyielding, as deep within, deep below, at the center of the egg, a history is at stake, a name to be upheld, a name belonging to this farm and the generation of flocks, of hens, before this one hen, before this egg, held within this egg, 40 well crafted, exceptionally written proteins, string after string of well bred sentences, e pluribus Unum, albus, white, egg whites.

Snatched with a gentle thrust between the legs of the hen, it will seem as though the egg was never taken. With an index at the slimmest point of the shell, and a thumb flat against its more obese end, the produce is plucked, leaving the remaining middle, ring and pinky to navigate around the sixteen bones of a chicken foot, to tastefully ruffle her preened feathers in a thoughtful and playful manner, as to distract from the event, and rise, to the wish bone at her chest, where middle, ring and pinky finger strum a massaging tune, releasing endorphins that further open the digestive and respiratory tract. She will breathe and eat, and forget, and lay another, and nest, until that is plucked away, and lay another, and the cycle will happily continue. For now, this egg is placed inside a weaved basket, whose wooden edges are dulled with the dry lining of a large, cheap cotton dinner napkin familiar with stains. Passed from one corner of the mouth to the next, mopping the length of a bottom lip, sore from rim of a cocktail glass and guiding torn slices of tenderloin into the mouth, meat cooked five or so degrees in Fahrenheit more than necessary, fatigued from guiding the chew, quite chewy, with the mouth closed in a thoughtful manner, yes, the same napkin, one of thankless toil. It has now been summoned to absorb the shocks and nicks produced by the quick dash from the coop to the kitchen, to protect the protective shell from an unfortunate angle or splinter. Upon entering the home, the basket's presence is noted silently, with a slow blossoming into consciousness as its scent meanders through the fine imperfections of drywall and into nostrils; though its time in the coop is minimal, the napkin bears a fragrance. Its pores

have unintentionally soaked in the gamey smell of small living creatures, their feathers and functions. It is time to cook.

Half an hour ago, a cast iron skillet was placed pan side down within the belly of an oven, warmed to a toasty three hundred degrees in Fahrenheit. A faint hiss streaming from its mechanical stout frame announced the boiling demise of shortening, used to jam the porous surface of the skillet. Entrenched, monoglycerides and diglycerides twisted and turned into its blackened jagged peaks, slipping over and through its long history of average culinary feats, of countless mornings as this, a simple combination of items prepared in fatigue, prepared without the need for total conscious dedication, a morning where the only effort needed is the repetitious slicing of finely skinned chives and a lone red pepper, a morning when only hands have to function, reflexively toiling around the bulbous frame of a yellow onion, silently undressing its fibrous wrapping, tainted with local soil. The parchment sheds with a crisp wrizzling sound, one sheet, after the other, and the next, until, there is uncovered a pale, slightly moist bulb, limbless and faceless, providing no argument against the blade of a knife familiar with such round forms. With one swift forward crunch the bulb is halved, exposing within a unique swirl of opaque rings, identifying this onion's age and philosophy, exposed, and separated, as teeth of the knife slit open thousands of proper square cells, whose throats bleed an acidic burning scent, weightless and traveling north, into two nostrils flourishing with cilia and a fine coat of hardened morning mucus. Despite the impasse, the smell of violence sifts into the bridge of the nose, thumbing tear ducts of two distant eyes. A mist accumulates at the sore points, and a brow furls in painful disappointment, of a morning of indifference disrupted, a disappointment expressed as retaliation, through a knife, as hands are now consciously driven into the onion repeatedly, further collapsing the body and the walls of those cells, releasing a flood of sulfuric pinches about the eyelids and glands. Remaining, thrust after thrust of the blade, a minor puddle of tears upon cheeks and a clump of diced pieces producing a faint hiss.

With an index and thumb, the egg was removed from its little wooden basket and placed beside a soup bowl, chosen for its blunt ceramic rim, dabbling over as a stone fat lip, immobile. The egg was still warm, free of blemishes and, for the moment, intact; the stained dinner napkin, freckled with a variation of minor stinks, had been successful in its protective role. It was now called upon for its third function, to shield the soft, weak flesh of palms determined to bypass heated coils of the oven's innards and grasp the skillet's handle bar, heated to a snug three hundred degrees in Fahrenheit; the skillet is ready, to come forth the oven, to be wrapped securely in cotton, its boiling heat reduced to a high fever manageable to touch. With a right hand over the left, the two hands prepare for the lift. Indeed, the weight of this skillet is dense, awkward, as the large, gaping diameter of the cast iron pan is fused to a slender handle. With a tug, tendons beneath the sensitive skin of the forearm contract, muscles within and below tired shoulders curl the into strained bunches whose short, stocky numbers heave in attempt to maneuver the pounds of iron bundled at the end of a stick, all the while, sensing at the end of a life line and the loops of fingerprints, the residual heat seeping through pores of a stiff, stained barrier.

Snug in the grip of a middle, index and thumb, the egg was held against the edge of a soup bowl, and traced round the rim. For only a moment, the egg followed an unfamiliar arc, one whose hard ceramics rippled its calcium peaks and vibrated the slush within its shell, one whose friction released a sound of gurgling at the contact point, the sound of bone about to crack. With a brief plunge, with a shove exerted from a twitch in the wrist, the edge of the soup bowl cut into the mathematical progression of the egg, breaking open its pattern, leaving a nonsensical, lacerating grin across its belly, reaching out and over, into its abdomen, and past, stroking the small of its back. Along this path the shell had collapsed, imploded, its puzzled shards poking into and through the nutritional goop composing of a yolk sac, bald, horrifically orange and wounded, its hair thin mucus lining slit at the yolk's rounder extremities, causing a slow and silent deflation, bubbling through the many cracks and misshapes, the opaque of the whites and the orange of the yolk, bleeding into the other and out, through forced exits a yellow viscous substance. Painfully slow the bulbous drops hang and sway, flicked by a cool breeze seeping from the holes of a mesh screen; a force not nearly enough to pull the innards loose. A second hand is needed for its fingertips, to pinch, with the index, middle and thumb, the narrow end of the shell, and with a quick twist, drive this end up, into the breeze, further laying down this divisive path, whose crunching snaps pry open the belly completely, extracting the whites, the bleeding yolk, the nutrition and waste, all of its innards out, with a humiliating splosh, into the mouth of the ceramic soup bowl.

In the distance there is the dying cough of a sliced red pepper, added to the hollow bodies of chive and bastard onion, frying away in their own liquid and a dab of shortening atop a stove, medium low. The yolk and its whites are to be fully broken and entwined, to be mixed with the prongs of an average silver fork, dented slightly during their many years of use, their hybrid use in dinners and lonely brunches. The action is all in the wrist, a frantic spasm of twelve bones who never have seen the light of day shining down upon a bunch or expelled from a wick highlighting a proud dinner, arranged no doubt in part to the cast iron skillet humming away. Flat against an index, held down by a thumb, the body of the fork is positioned, its head and all four of its blades knifing what form remains of the oval orange yolk. Silence. A pause, as the bones are to prepare, brace themselves for a sporadic spurt of diagonal and clockwise twirls, a momentum dissolving the innards into a foamy, pale concoction through the gaps of prongs and against the curved walls of the bowl. A pinch of salt, a smidge of black cracked pepper, and the withered egg, its generations in the making are now prepared for the exceptional heat to be found at the bottom of a skillet. Indeed, with a less than graceful pour, the slosh cascades from the lip of the bowl and into the pile of diced produced below, slightly caramelized, their sugars brown and watery, all which upon their union with degrees in Fahrenheit, scream, a rabbit's scream, high, long, signifying the complete destruction of organized layers of protein, written by some rational mathematical progression, now, erased, reorganized into a curdling retraction of ingredients, a handsome bright new yellow pairing well with a blinding morning sun.

StockingS

The parking lot of a vast department store had finally (!) unchained its gates, allowing early birds to flock, park and waddle to a small particular air conditioned corner of the sprawling establishment where twenty-five percent was to be taken from already low, low prices of selected items (at the register, all sales final). For sixteen consecutive weeks, the sale was advertised on airwaves and various streams of various media, scrawled upon circulars with dizzying fonts and announced, broadcasted nationwide with slow clarity (and a slight English accent) to accentuate *the two* and *the five*, a simple pairing of numbers that, when combined, formed one entire quarter of a whole, and *Yes!*, indeed, this entire portion of a price tag was to be removed, at the register, all for the patron, all to experience a burst of opulent savings (percentage deducted prior to city and state taxes, where applicable). Upon a Mall Map, brown and snug, a one-dimensional color-coded rectangle found itself between the thick thighs of a larger red square and an even larger purple circle. It was here, the sale, found with a brow tweezing squint and the tip of a curious index finger. One level below, surrounded by a plush wrapping of salmon carpeting, the air conditioned corner waited in silence for the coming droves, who, in their numbers and forward propulsion, driven by excited shaved calves, would beat a permanent dent into the twine, transferring the loosened bits of the parking lot's asphalt and its filth onto the cotton, slowly dying its shampooed loops and happy light pink hue the sole of a shoe. For generations this slight shallow depression will be seen, it will be felt in the toes as one transitions from the buoyant shag lying outside the purple circle to this dirty little area on the Mall Map, one will feel a slight drop in altitude when stepping onto the flattened coarse carpet, into a route dug by the many who once sought a sale, *Yes!*, this will be identified as the trailblazing path leading to the hosiery department.

Arranged by the distance between hip-to-hip, row upon row of packaged garments fit side by side. A brand's signature wrapping, a repetitious composition of cardboard and cellophane, is separated only by the inches of a shopper's girth, as identified in white block lettering in the upper right corner of the item, *SMALL, MEDIUM, LARGE, X-LARGE*, hovering, above the color photo of a figure, watching, as a lidless gaze upon a Brunette, reproduced several hundred times over, inked upon the cover of every package of hosiery whose waistband dwells anywhere between the boarder of twenty-four to thirty-eight inches. Though nameless, this figure is easily identified by its figure and shoulder length hair, wearing nothing but skin and a pair of these particular stockings, hands and arms dramatically, strategically positioned over this and that, exposing only fine blonde hairs tickling an abdomen and the sharp angle of a collar bone, jutting forwards, once towards a camera lens, now towards the eyes of stocking-less shoppers famished and full of need for exceptional support. The figure's choreography is deliberate, simple, a twist at the waist, one loitering between *SMALL* and *MEDIUM* at most, gracefully ending with the knee of one leg bent, the arch of a dangling foot flexed, stiffening toes to a point, a position commanded by a photographer's vision and corporate enticement, and innovation, as snug between the stockinged thigh and calf of the Brunette is a perfect square cut from the cardboard. Two inches by two inches, or say, the distance created by a fingered partition of Venetian blinds, this revealing window allows for a peep, a small, yet clear view of the hosiery's coloring, a shade lighter than the brown smudge of the department's location on a Mall map, a shade darker than an average tan

gained at poolside, during a nap induced by laziness; a distance wide enough for an index and thumb to enter and pinch the garment, to fondle with an examining clockwise roll between the tips, to determine the fabric's thickness, and to feel the slick manufactured elegance of nylon.

With the rub of fingers to and fro, thoughts are propelled, beginning as a soft growl deep within quarantined areas of the mind, who, being fed details of a smooth, soft texture, excite, and pace, from one wall of the cage, a short distance, to the next, and returning, creating heat with its repetitive, needy movement, rising and entwining with the low, throaty vibrato, lulling the more rational areas into action, justifying the want for such a product. Yes, indeed, the quality of what is being considered, rolled and pinched is a monument to science and thighs alike. It is wondered, between the left and right waxed eyebrows of potential buyers, how billions of fibers now stretched out upon fingers, squeezed tight underneath the calcium ridge of a nail, so suggestive and alluring poking through its tiny window, began as a highly toxic clump of urine hued crystals, infamous, for sudden combustible changes in mood, at one moment pale and unassuming to the next, taking layers of skin from the lips and cheeks of manual laborers. Such unfortunate moments have deemed glass masks mandatory with factory use, to be worn at all times to protect the face from these violent, random slaps. Standing several yards from a beaker, pouring crystals into a sanitary lab container is enough to stir anger in the molecules, enough forward momentum to collapse their structure, to cause an implosion whose remnants is a collection of dissipating dust, a fluffy burning cloud, light enough to travel along a draft filtering through vents in the ceiling or a decaying window treatment, light enough to scald flesh. It is to be quarantined. The only friend such a compound could have in this world is something just like it, in habit and with such historically bad manners. An acid is its only companion, white, nearly featureless except for its apparent gluttony. It is enticed, slowly drawn out of fat itself with half a dozen plump oxygen molecules. Stomping after the treat as a greedy child, it eats them up one by one, becoming a rotund little acid, the perfect playmate to be combined with our angry little crystals, in the oven of a reactor.

Such is the origin of nylon, within a cylindrical metal chamber, dimly lit from above, shedding a scant amount of light on the reactions taking place inside. Swimming through gallons of murky grey water, the two previously named delinquents skinny dip, exposing their jagged bodies to the solution with every wading motion, with every paddle and playful splash, guiding water under and through fingers, around soft ankles and the sensitive curve behind the knee and the like, bathing carelessly inside a heated tub, that, slowly dissolves the figures with a faint sizzle, a faint sigh misinterpreted as the other's joy, until, upon mid-breaststroke, all has completely fractured and collapsed. Silence remains, and a mild current carrying their chunks into the distance, into the center of the reactor, where memories of limbs and awkward laughter combine to form a simple, poisonous salt. *This* is to be harvested, to be drained by increasing the reactor's temperature from the casual, massaging temperature which numbed the youngsters to their happy doom, to hundreds of degrees in Fahrenheit with the press of one orange button. With a quick clearing of a throat, *a-hem*, it is pushed and coils begin to heat, burning the scene, and the useless parts, the heart, muscles, lovely dark eyes, the youthful

hair, all of it, evaporating into a fine, toxic, mist, sucked into a vent whose tight paneling twists and turns and exits into an unknown location.

Inside the Ladies fitting room, a cold breeze filtered through the gapping teeth of a ceiling vent. Cool and dense, the air sunk with heavy speed, past shoulders slouching over hands, busily fumbling with the hosiery's packaging, past charm bracelets which jingled with every forced vibration, past a waist, whose *SMALL, MEDIUM, LAGRE or X-LARGE* status was in question, sinking further still, past thighs, to settle as a puddle around naked calves who bubbled in defense from the chill. Underneath the bloating, countless nerve endings numbed, stunned by sensation and, immobile, drowned in the accumulation of a puddle building every passing moment, flooding around a body exposed to the elements. Faster, faster hands work their way through the soft spots of the cardboard, into perforated lines, that with a mild thrust open upon a crunch, releasing the sight of brown withered folds of nylon. Extracted with a delicate grip, the garment slowly flowered, unraveling its two deflated legs with caution, waking with a stretch, pulled by the gentle tug of gravity and ten fingertips. With brow raising concern, it is wondered how a goose pimpled, fatigued and, quite honestly, fleshy calf will scoot into what appears to be an unfortunate fruit or legume that has been forgotten at harvest, left to rot underneath the rays of harsh sun, laying in a field for days, to dry and die, quietly. With an examining stretch, the waistband is pulled left to right, doubling its expressionless gaping mouth in size, open and waiting, for a foot, left or right, either is nourishing at this embarrassing moment in time, to enter and fill its empty, chemically engineered belly.

A toe is dipped into the open hosiery at a hesitant speed, slow and controlled, guided by a knee bent uncomfortably at its hinge, straining thousands of ligaments bearing the weight of a shaved calf, foot, balance and all in between. The descent is awkward, maintained with genuine concern, or fear even, of jamming one or several toes into the unassuming fabric from a loss of control, a complete unhinged fumbling thrust at the knee driving an unclipped toenail or two or three through the product, with such shocking force the entire arch of a pointed foot, to its heel bone, is revealed upon the exit of an accidental hole. Purely accidental. So, fueled by curiosity and an unspoken bowel tingling need to deter embarrassment, the garment is tried on inside a room wholly unfamiliar except for the partially naked reflection in a full-length mirror, returning a stare of brow furrowing effort, mimicking the descent and a pleased expression slowly filling a face from lips to relaxed scalp, as the toe, foot, (the heel bone), calf are successfully, safely swallowed by the nylon esophagus. Surrounding the flesh, the hosiery conforms, inflating to a human shape, rubbing against skin and warming it back to life as it travels, up, tracing the body, easily past a straightened knee, over thighs, to a waist no longer in question. *MEDIUM*. With several quick pinches and pulls, the hosiery is set into place. An index and thumb peck here and there, and in excited eagerness, mistakenly grab a bit more than the fabric, squeezing sensitive layers of capillaries, who, under a sudden burst and release of pressure, pop, as fully mature grapes, and randomly ink through skin, producing spotty blushing, red, ecstatic, yet clothed, all for a reduced price.

peaches

It took only seven hundred and thirty days to grow to such lengths. Roots, deep, thrusting and gluttonous, burrowed into a mixed breed of clay, sand and silt, which had dehydrated after two entire years of a continual, slow suck. The soil, once a densely rich brown, plump with moisture, had faded to a sickly shade of yellow, whose anemic loss of water left each grain coarse and fragile, a hollow shrunken bead which easily succumbed to the weight of footsteps, that upon forward momentum, crushed billions with a *crunch*, a forgettable weak sound traveling into the air, up, up, against blinding sunlight, within a field of towering peach trees whose individual foliage weaved a vast, dramatic canopy. Unusually warm and pleasant, winters came and went with no concern; under normal circumstances, days upon weeks would develop into months where Northern winds flirt with the freezing point, innocently massacring countless buds, one at a time, with their courting process, a slow wander through photogenic acres of aligned trees whose branches, exposed to this suffocating weather, turn solid, from a liquid cellular center, out, to the tip of a green immature fruit. The frost would exit casually, within the arms of cool temperatures, who with backs turned, leave in their wake the faces of young peaches sealed shut, or open, perpetually awake but very much deceased. Limbs heavy with the dead would detach, falling to the earth with a frozen thud, or elaborate shatter. Upon spring, bodies melt, hydrating the granulated soil, feeding what had survived. Under such normal circumstances, there is no need to thin the harvest, to actively reduce the number of peaches being born, to seek out buds overpopulating wispy branches, who despite their exceptional length, cannot feed and tend to all. For two years, migrants from Southern lands, further south, a little more, to the left, and south, yes, there, burrow their way up, up, to these hyper rich fields to preen branches by hand. No tools are used except for the twelve bones in each wrist, twisting with the demand of pinched fingers around buds on the verge of a blushing, lively hue. With a forgettable *snap*, their necks easily separate from branches after one clockwise turn and the bulbous remains are tossed into a burlap sac tied around a familiar waist. Those taken and discarded simply ended on the unfortunate side of a leapfrog pattern of leave, twist, leave, twist, leave, as to give the attached room to grow, to expand into mouthful of proportions.

Humidity is the distinguishing factor between winter and summer, moving into the land upon a warm, constant breeze from the West. Its sudden, rude arrival is announced with various sizes of condensation beads dotting the landscape, a deep green collection of fanned leaves every now and again intersected by twigs and developing fruit, whose two swelling globes meet at a tucked crevasse running from top to bottom; a broad smile it seems, expressing delight, as a plentiful supply of sweet water filters into its sinuous flesh, a syrupy mix of rainfall and synthetic vitamins. Their range of vowels and consonants spell out vitality, to hurry the maturity process, helping the skin fade from a newborn green, to an awkward red, fading, to a yellow twilight wrapping all three hundred and sixty degrees about the peach, and even out, out and around more curvaceous corners, say, dipping into the nook where this large peach dangles precariously by a thin stem, covered in soot and dead earth uprooted by the uncomfortable breeze. This elegant display suggests the fruit is ripe, the meat within matches the dress, and it is ready for migrants, those from the South, yes, there, no, a little farther still, yes about there, to gather in impressive numbers upon the field, to swarm, pinch and twist. A system of harvesting rotates the laborers, a leapfrog pattern,

deploying a quarter of the workers for a quarter of a day, wherein a tree is identified, approached, and arms are extended, straining at the shoulder blade to fill each open hand with fruit. As a palm makes gentle contact with the arc of a peach, fingers clasp, respectfully, as not to leave any marks or imprints of this event. Driven by muscle memory, the wrist twists.

Detached, the peach is now a valuable product, released from fingers with a conscious, courteous effort into a worn burlap sac. For six continuous hours, arms are vertical, wrists rotate and the sac bloats with weight one detachment at a time. Tied around one hip and the other, a thick rope of tan straw digs into flesh, beginning as a noticeable burn near the spine and comic poke about the abdomen. Not until the third and fourth hour, after six or possibly seven peach trees have been left vacant, the incremental weight of the sac squats upon muscles in the lower back, muscles every now and again intersected by capillaries, clumps filled with pale green and oxygenated blood, suddenly, silently, burst, releasing their contents into an organized body as a spill, inking out and sideways and into the other, wandering into layers of skin frayed by coarse straw, filling pores and the space between veins their combined color of bruise. The sac's nagging tug has become a continual jab along the lower vertebrae and the path of the large intestine, a jab here and there and here felt as if, say, a pair of index and middle fingers were tapping a rhythmic melody, gaining in speed and ingenuity, that upon the sixth hour all possible combination of notes have been played, and the muscles, the skin, its layers and the innards below those, are marked up with commerce. The sacs are carried off, into an aluminum warehouse, hugged between arms moistened with fatigue and sweat, an acidic smell easily identifiable among the pleasant, sugary fragrance of well grown peaches, a gathering which will increase in six hours, as the following round of workers exits to swarm, pinch and twist.

A constant mechanical moan emits from the belly of a narrow conveyor belt, covered discretely by a roll of thick, black plastic. Its recycled movements are plagued by a pattern of dry spots, periodically disrupted by several feet of damp material, slick with a syrupy liquid all too familiar, clumped with chunks of fibrous, attractive yellow steaks here and there. Vacant and repeating, the belt awaits, where at the foot of this conveyor, cascading from the bottom lip of a sac, peaches pour, strewn about; their limbless forward momentum held back only by a series of latex hands attached to female workers, sitting along the length of the conveyor, in silence. The moan is too great to gossip over in a native tongue and all concentration, then, is placed on the produce thrusting forward. Left and right hands extend above the forward momentum, clasping each digit around a mature fruit and placing it, upside down, with its rounded bottom filling the air, its filthy steam dug into the plastic, awaiting a file of machine knives pulsing at a speed swift enough to deceive the useless human eye, a comic blur to mouth through the thick, dense exoskeleton of a useless seed found at a peach's very center. With intelligible, pitched squeaks the vibrating knives, up to down, down to up, saw through the smug grin connecting a peach's two globes, releasing upon the plastic mat below two years worth of liquid stored inside the sugary flesh, liquid soaked from soil whose only purpose in its hollow existence was to carry a rain drop.

Laytexed and sterile, fingers of silent workers nudge the separated globes, making certain the mechanical teeth successfully chewed through the flesh and earthy brown seed of a whole peach. The tap is gentle, a polite nudge into the remains, as though inquiring, after witnessing such a physical event, if all is well, despite the obvious visual of a knife slicing through thousands of bellies and strands of yellow innards caught between steel little teeth. The globes, bled and physically handicapped, shrunken in size from bulbous fruit to awkward sliver, welcome the touch, yielding slightly to the minor pressure point of an index finger. A dent is absorbed by the skin, a final intake of the surrounding world before sheets of cold solution rain upon the halves, discharged from nozzles hung above the conveyor. Their wide, thin spray pattern condenses water molecules, releasing a compacted stream with such force the impact against the produce swiftly undresses the flesh, ripping away the skin and twilight colors in shoved tears, a constant beating that leaves the wrappings as scattered puddles of wet clumps along the belt. They are collected and discarded immediately, plucked by familiar hands whose dampened gloves have tainted from their original shocking white to the mild rouge coloring a peach. Or the color once coloring a peach, as now, passing through the aluminum warehouse, before the eyes of indifferent strangers, the fruit is an exposed chunk of flesh for sale, flesh bordering between a pleasant yellow and deep orange.

To dry the flesh and rid of the broken seed embedded within, the conveyor spasms violently. The additional movement elevates the moan to a growl, an aggressive sound produced between the clenched teeth of a focused mammal. The vibrations from noise and the irrational motion shake the flesh free of excess water droplets, leaking over what curvature of the fruit remains, and down the side of its naked cheek. The seed, split, is of no use and slips out, onto the plastic sheet of the belt with a hollow knock, a sound to signal an additional removal by palms and the inner padding of fingers stained red. Empty and naked, dry and halved, the fruit is quartered, knifed one additional time by a team of slicing blades peaking up and through the conveyor from below, spinning counterclockwise. The backward direction of the blades and forward progression of the belt forces the fruit into a devastating corner. The bits created are industrial bite size morsels, easily slipped into a glass jar for viewing, for a shopper to witness the color and health of the product suspended within, whose shine and plumpness persuade thought patterns into more optimistic areas of the brain, lulling a convincing argument for freshness, though the bits had been jarred weeks prior to being stacked, say, in aisle five along side distant cousins as canned tomatoes and pineapple slices. After their quartering, the divided fruit were carried off, several additional and final feet into the distance, where, meeting the end of the conveyor's length, the bits unevenly cascaded into a line of open jars below, clinking along a separate conveyor schematic. Side by side and held tightly at the waist, jars are led by a series of rolling rollers stepping to a set waltz whose 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 3 is in exact relation with the time for a bit to drop from a designated height. The result is an equal distribution of weight, a piling of chunked peaches from the base to neck of every jar, adding up to sixteen delicious ounces.

The sweets are made sweeter still, farther down this new path, where into the mouths of jars an injection of sugar syrup is squirt. The needle, thin, long and bulimic, hurls a swift shot of liquid, flooding what elbowroom had existed between layered pieces of peach.

The liquid is clear and a thin consistency, resembling pond water; the jar has become an enjoyable aquatic moment, a world for peaches wade though blindly, paddling naked and free, spinning rambunctiously with laughter until it is time for air, where, upon rising to the surface, a panicked mob of peaches is crushed against a lid. Floating silently and immobile, their sinuous fibers are to be continually washed with brine, flowing within and out, loosening their yellow hues and tenderizing the meat, until, after days upon weeks, the pond water is a thick orange of polluted goop. Its goal is preservation, sealing the fruit at a youthful age, a time of purity and taste, as meat exposed to an outside world of horrors and disease leads to swelling, weakness, discoloration, various contractual conditions where flesh slowly decays, as bacteria, continually draining minerals and life from its host, leaves pock marks and fowl smelling holes throughout the body, with infection paddling freely from tip to tip. Inside the jars, time has stopped, encapsulating a grove of trees flowering at their peak, a harvest plucked after two continual years of direct exposure to sunlight and suckling of rainwater, a product prepared by many Southern hands and twisting wrists, a little farther, south, and left, yes, there, assembled, to arrive in aisle five without a flaw.

anatomy of a routine

With an exhale, the dial of a shower stall was turned to the left. Countless mornings such as this accumulated into months of wear upon the handle. Twist after turn of its neck released a pulsing cascade of tap water from the showerhead, whose porous metallic face has clogged with an unfortunate coating of green mildew. The obstructions, visually unappetizing, were also a nuisance, redirecting a watery path originally designed in product development as a pronounced stream, to a stuttering moist spurt speeding towards various angles, obtuse and acute alike. Somewhere between, the dial's neck protruded, exposed to a random series of shots that shattered upon impact, seeping into the handle's fine gaps, where, hidden well, lay an organized skeletal structure of screws. This daily barrage has taken a physical toll, oxidizing the system, slowly layering it with heavy sheets of orange rust nearly immobilizing movement. The dial must be turned with force, a collective heave from muscle and bone in the wrist, an energetic gasp of wind from the lungs to rub cut metal against decaying metal, a point of contact whose friction is converted into a heightened squeal reverberated by the surrounding linoleum, and signaling the beginning of a reassuring routine.

With a surge, several streams pummeled their way through the mildew and fell in a minor arc into the bathtub below. The resulting percussion, unorganized and violent, beat to no defined rhythm, slamming against the acrylic in a spectacular sacrificial display. At this time of morning, black and still, the thunderous shower is left at peace, to pour continuously and relieve itself of these first few gallons, who most certainly are exceptionally cold to the touch. The boiler, hidden well, somewhere between a dank and forgotten area of the dwelling, has just awoken, nudged by a determined current. The metabolism of such a beastly structure is slow and its internal temperature rises sluggishly out from hibernation, pacing up the Fahrenheit scale in a daze. With fatigued blinks its twined copper and metal skin inflate with warmth, eventually heating the water circulating through its veins, chest and out, through a mouth, where begins an elaborate collection of organized pipes to pump the liquid up, against gravity, in a fine act of transpiration, up, hidden well, between walls coated in an unfortunate contact paper and tiles alike, up, eventually finding a way through the punctured holes of a shower head. Leaning the upper torso towards the arc, an index and middle finger extend in the name of science and curiosity. It is questioned whether an appropriate amount of time has elapsed for the water to transition from numbing to pleasurable, and as such, the two fingers sacrificed are chosen due to their small stature and role, yet sensitive and expressive nature.

With a shove, the fingers are completely engulfed by the cascade and its forward, fatal momentum. Muscles in the shoulder tighten their hold on an elbow swiveling, attempting to maintain control of a hand slapped and forced aside. Arms, very much aware of the early hour, strain their sinuous, yawning fibers to a stiff unyielding budge and the subjective thermometer has been planted successfully in the center of the arc. Within the aggravated noises and bustling motion, a sensation is felt in spasms against the skin, stuttering a nonsensical language only nerve endings can dictate. Shattering against an index and middle digit, the shards seep into modest pores, inflating dried skin with moisture warmed to a flirtatious degree, making direct eye contact with lonely cells, who, upon the attention, excite, and blabber mindlessly on and on, to the next cell, about

a wonderful water droplet just outside their reach. The chatter is extensive, reaching up, past an occupied elbow, up, through a tired bicep, through its sinuous fibers, hidden well, beneath layers of goose pimpled skin, who have already reacted reflexively to the wondrous surprise of tap water warmed to a level of casual comfort, not too hot and argumentative, or cold and disregarding. There is something welcoming about this droplet, the manner in which speaks, with a luke warm smirk, slowly rising at the corners of its lips.

With uncharacteristic grace, a step into the tub begins. A right foot is pointed, exaggerating the arc from ball to heel, mimicking the design of Roman aqueducts, or rather, a simple frown, a collection of bunched muscles expressing the burden of weight summed, first, upon a big toe whose nail has been neglected far too long, then equally distributed to four remaining digits shrinking in height, to index, middle, ring, to, lastly, a stubbed little piggy anchoring itself to a damp surface, providing balance to a lengthy frame several clumsy feet in height. Secure, the arc relaxes, the frown flattens to an unimpressed expression, lowering the heel into tap not yet drained. The rest of the body follows, a second foot, hip, shoulder and consciousness, surrounded by familiar thunderous impacts and a new member, slowly rising from the collecting puddle at the ankles, stifling and moist, steam, massaging the skin in clockwise turns. Self-propelled it gathers about the face, coating nostrils and lips, who, react with a gasp, inhaling heated air into the lungs with a tickle.

With a shrugging cough, a bar of soap is gripped. Several weeks of use have whittled its frame to a manageable size, fitting snug within a palm. Limbless, silent and mauve, its characteristics were originally designed in product development as manifestations of lavender's affects, visual representations of mental clarity, physical release and, yes, even, relief from gastrointestinal disorders. Such was stated on the soap's informative packaging, and, such, perhaps, has been true, as upon gazing into its attractive purple bits there was a conscious attempt to recall the last gastrointestinal episode, a memory partially fogged by the rising mist and a fragrance leaking from pores of a moist bar. Hands have already begun their repetitive circling about the soap, fueled by a dutiful subconscious area of the mind consumed with sanitation and, of course, time. Spun headless over heeless, the bar is manhandled, held under the cascade whose forward persistence against the dizzying rotation quickly waters down the fine outer layer which had dried to a crust, sealing oils, fats, and oily fats like rendered beef fat within its body. Massaged into a white foam, the layer dissolves, insolubles are released, and hands are allowed to fumble the soap's innards, to touch its dyes and perfumes, to grasp the hours of preparation and rendering and undo their meticulous tailoring, to take advantage of PEG, a slim, soft spoken ether with a tragic need to please, to dote over details, making certain the ratio of surfactants to detergents to emulsifiers is beautifully distributed from headless to heeless tip. And, certainly, the flowering scent entwined with steam, the pastel uniform coloring are enticing, enough to use the bar, and PEG, repeatedly, to rub each against the body until clean.

With a rinse, suds and steaks of lavender are washed from the skin, swept aside by a warm current forced by gravity, down, down limbs, past hips, over calves, to settle as a

foamy gathering at toes. Sweat, dead cells, fatigue are carried off by liquid circling clockwise, self-propelled to a pocked drain whose scattered pores sift the mixture, allowing only water and finer waste through. Left to wait for a proper Sunday cleaning is a ring of various hues in the brown spectrum, fading from a deep Brunette (hairs detached from a follicle. Concerning.) to a pale tone (dried skin and such. Concerning.). The pummeling cascade upon ribs at this point—a cleansed body from head to heel—is unnecessary, leaving only a peppering of small red marks surrounding an empty belly button. In defense, the shower dial is turned to the right, rotating bones in the wrist and tendons sewn within and out towards a direction revealing a familiar squeal, emitted from an unfortunate fixture, pained by rusty arthritis. In the name of compassion, the turn is swift and effective, sealing off the entry way to the shower head, allowing the boiler, hidden well, to relapse, comfortably, until this time again tomorrow. Silence remains, a thicker, more apparent coating than the steam misting the linoleum, traveling clockwise in wisps through heavy air, up, circling, dampening a ceiling. The bathroom is small and suffocating on a normal basis. Now, with the additional company occupying breathing space, a tortuous panic knocks, hidden well, behind a belly button. The pulses rise, up the stomach, through the lungs and out bronchial nodes, where they are jettisoned around a shoulder to a left hand. Puppeteered by claustrophobic fears, it grasps a door handle, turning it clockwise.

With a tug, the door is opened, slightly ajar. The gap between the wooden frame and its counterpart is minor yet detectable, enough space for warm air and moisture to whistle through, continuing their smear campaign into new territory, on to hallways, oil paintings, across pedals of seasonal bouquets. The neglected air between these walls and flora is desperate for escape. Chilled and clawing the ground, it silently crosses the border separating the room from the rest of the dwelling. With apprehension it enters, slowly curling around a pair of wet ankles who respond, at first, with sudden goose pimpling shock elevating small hairs, still attached. The stranger is a cold, stark contrast, a presence magnifying self-awareness, of the skin, the body, standing naked and exposed. In defense, a white cotton towel, limp and hanging from a brass arm of the shower door, is cut loose and used as a barrier. Its misshapen loops of twine are pushed and pulled, forward and back, rubbing against forearms, the skull and across abdominal muscles pained by sores. The cotton bloats, consuming droplet after droplet, fading to a used grey hue, until, extremities and crevasses are dried, and the chill and warmth are easily disregarded, their exits and entrances of no matter. Now, attention (and concern) is focused upon a set of teeth. A forced smile lifts a pair of lips, revealing an accumulation of eight or so hours of mucus and paste achieved during sleep. Tucked between pink gums (of no concern) and yellow enamel (of some concern) the buildup loiters comfortably unaware of a pending ejection, driven by bristles of a handy toothbrush, familiar and aged well passed six months (a forgettable concern). From tip to tip, each is dolloped with a thick white gel, struggling through the belly of a tube squeezed with a tight fist. With strenuous relief, the head of the brush is smeared by a wonderful assortment of anonymous chemicals with whom taste buds upon a tongue play a flamboyant game of charades. Two words, tastes like, cooking? No. Baking? Yes. Drink? Water? No. Soda? Yes, baking soda! Okay, next. Two words. What's that sour face? Sour? Foul? No. Sweet? Yes. Sugar? Sodium saccharin! Of course. Spit.

With a heave, a foamy collection of saliva, tartar and chemical reactions slap into the sink with a splot. Thick and bubbly, it sustains its own weight and round happy shape, clinging to the porcelain as a mild benign tumor. A shot of cold tap water into the mouth, propelled by fluxing cheeks, rinses massaged gums and flushes away any remaining gel and loosened buildup coating teeth, who, revealed by a forced smile have returned to their average dull yellow. Slicked by a tongue, papillae finger the smile's uneven terrain, shifting and worn to this day by an unflattering habit of nail biting and teeth grinding while unconscious (still not aware of this). The enamel, however, is smooth and several sweet patches along the tongue excite and depress, excite and depress while stumbling upon the gel's minty artificial flavors. Posture improves slightly and shoulders relax as it is realized a freshness of breath has been gained and foreign things will not hinder an already hindered smile. It is with a certain, brief, confidence attention is placed upon the hair, flattened here, awkwardly jutting towards angles, obtuse and acute alike there, a sculpture pressed and molded over eight or so hours of twistable, turnable sleep, allowing blood flow to arms, hands and fingers, fingers whose goal it is now to undo what force and dreaming have done. With conscious effort, an attempt to recall this dream is made, it is wondered what took place, with whom, and for how long, as an awkward aluminum can is grasped at its belly.

With a jiggling forearm, the can's liquid innards jumble and splosh about, a violent awakening for ethers, alcohols and various flammables with which it is advised to keep a safe distance from heat, fire or flames. As such, the self-proclaimed Professional Hair Spray with Fresh Fragrance and Extra Super Hold is isolated, cloistered atop a toilet tank and called to action once a day, at this time of morning, black and still, when the can's nozzle is placed ten to twelve inches above a targeted area of the scalp. With an aggressive push of an index finger, the aggravated contents within funnel up, up, into a suffocating plastic dip tube and mix, twisting, turning within and out the other, violating what personal space exists in these cramped quarters. Toes are trampled, elbows jab into ribs and no apologies are uttered, no forgiveness is granted in laughable sighs. The clash is simply a clash between compounds too different to accept the other, especially when land is scarce; a sticky copolymer staring in the face of a waterproof molecule is turbulent situation, one of heat, fire and flames. The result is a fine moist mist sneezed from the valve at exceptional speed, a sneeze with enough force to jump a ten to twelve inch gap, and land, miraculously, directly on a troublesome spot, where just below, the mind continues to question imaginary scenes. Fatigued and torn, the bloody mixture runs down several hair shafts and accumulates into open pores—plots—accepting the dead and dying chemicals. In their post mortem state, the several thousand droplets harden, their sheer numbers shifting the hair, moving it to a more physically attractive location, a visual manifestation of mental clarity, physical release and yes, lavender.

three Notes of a perfume.

The perfume is Italian, but its name is in French. It is spoken, first, with a soft *T*, with the tip of the tongue placed gently in the nook behind a pair of front teeth. The jaws are shut, but not clenched, as lips are relaxed, paused in an open position, a visual announcement words are about to be uttered. Air is exhaled from the lungs in a puff, warming a moist esophagus and traveling over, up a tongue to collide, head on, with well groomed enamel. Through fine, yet noticeable gaps in the teeth, an organized sound slips between, rising as a mist straining to maintain its delicate frame, two letters heard briefly as *Te*. Quickly following its release, the bottom jaw line drops, slightly, to an angle sharp and ready to sculpt the next sound, bubbling from a diaphragm in the chest. It is a growl, blunted and cut to a flattened submissive *-int*, a small and welcoming house pet to greet a listener at the front of the mouth. Combined, the two sounds are understood as a word, *Teint*, a simple, single word, unusual enough to stir expectations, entice the need to end this word with a concluding thought, to answer the curiosity brewing, wondering, the color of what exactly? It is at once powerful and weak, lacking the skill to maintain a listener's patience. It is to be followed by a shrugging noise pumped from the back of the throat, towards puckered lips, suggestive and of no real informative value—it merely prolongs the anticipation, grasping at one's attention with a sticky *de*, an additional curvy question mark to trace over, down its spine, to a point, a period, acting as a little individual snowflake. Indeed, we are led to a third and final act, the last word of our series. It begins in a familiar manner, with lips relaxed and a tongue at its previous proper place in a nook. Now, however, there is forward momentum, of the jaws, mimicking a crushing chew puzzling cliffs and valleys of upper and lower molars together. Dropped from a septum, slightly deviated yet noticeable, a nasal sound falls into the mouth's clutches, where it twists and turns into scattered pieces, additional flakes, covering the ears and faces of the listener in a deep chill, in a word, *Neige*.

The glass bottle is frosted, a wonderful parallel to snow and winter's condensation. Gathered between fingertips, the body prepares itself for the biting shock of freezing point, for its rabid jaws to snap at curious, young nerve endings, for their pain to be expressed in teary screams, flushed pink cheeks and hyperventilation. The mind is prepared, to wrap its arms around the wounded, exasperated after a limb flailing scamper away from the scary monster, to feel the weight of their impact against the chest, an accumulated heave of fear, relief and sighs, prepared to wipe away any tears which had rolled down a huffing face, clinging to a bottom lip. Yes, the mind is prepared, as fingers curl around the bottle's hexagonal corners, jutting into the skin with a point, a pinch, one after the other, and an other, and an other and so on, several mute exclamations ending blunt statements, there is no cold, no freezing point, only corners, the frost is merely an illusion, and so on, and so the mind relaxes its guard in relieved disappointment. There will be no hugs, only the tingling weight of one hundred milliliters in the center of a palm. Through the glass, the perfume is a hazy green, pale, a manifested attempt to recall a shade of green seen decades ago, sewn into the dress of an attractive woman, walking away. This was to squirt from a sterling silver nozzle, pressed by the downward momentum of a curved index finger. Released in a mist the liquid meanders, held in space, waiting, for a transatlantic breeze to take each molecule by the elbow and escort each molecule to the sensitive patch of skin at the inner wrist and forearm.

The perfume diffuses evenly, across faint blue veins weaved within and out the arm, landing upon the skin as cold, wet droplets. Their absorption is casual and random, as droplets here deflate and roll into pores with slightly more enthusiasm than those there. The alternating damp and dry patches tickle the skin, who responds with pimply laughter, a contagious joy inviting the face to lean forward and engage in conversation. With cautious speed the head begins to bow, as tendons weaved within and out the back of the neck relax, releasing their attentive grip on the skull. Burdened with its own weight—a collection of neurons, eyelids and muscles—the head and all of its parts tilt, dropping the chin into the chest, slightly constricting the throat and a useful breathing passage. A gaze, usually forward and confident, has been refocused, down, upon a flat stretch of skin across the forearm, who, aware of the attention carries itself gracefully several steps, up, up, just inches from the tip of a nose. The introduction is actually silent, allowing concentration to center upon the warmth emanating through veins and layers of muscle, warmth heating pores and their innards, a fragrance, evaporating, rising to flirt with a pair of open nostrils. There is no gluttonous inhale, only a controlled, rhythmic breathing to draw in a scent whose thin frame suggests care should be taken. Yet there is more here, a layering, to be understood with not only a first impression, but also several inhales to unravel its complexity. Filtering between stocky hairs, the initial inhale, curiously enough, paints a visual, of women in Southeast Asia, adorned about the neck with white flowers whose five or six slim pedals emit a tender jasmine. At their bare feet, red rose pedals are strewn, limp, crushed under the weight of occupied servants. Their scent is squeezed from the cuts and bruises, gathering as a bundle at the back of the throat. Overseeing the action, and inaction of the ladies on this summer day, ylang ylang flowers hung from a flamboyant tangle of green palms, quietly sipping acidic soil, nurturing their yellow hue and sweet, innocent scent.

With an exhale, the scene dissolves, the top note had played its floral, elegant tune. Knotty clumps of carbon dioxide, dead pedals and femininity wisp through a nasal passage and exit, where at the tip of the nose an effervescent tingle tingles. Hidden snug, deep between grey and white matter of the mind, an other Septum, long, thin, deviated as well, (yet always welcoming of sunlight and tasty chemicals) sighs in pleasure at the bubbling massage. Brows lift, nudging back skin upon the forehead, rolling it into folds expressing satisfied surprise. The sensation is enough to yield a second inhale, to draw the face in to an intimate distance two or three inches from the wrist, enough to constrict the muscles and diaphragm in the chest consciously, driven by need and curiosity, pulling open the lungs whose vacuous suck drags in a heavier tune, of sharps and flats, of dissonance, of black wrinkly Tonka beans. They resemble pits of marinated olives after an unfortunate romp in the mouth, as though, unbeknownst to a consumer, a pit still tucked within the seasoned meat is chewed casually, with hundreds of pounds of pressure per square inch crush down upon the bitty thing. But a very dense bitty thing, dense enough to sustain its shape, sacrificing its outer skin to the topographic points and gaps of an individual tooth. With an index and thumb, the pit is removed from the mouth in a pinch. Its deformed face is examined with a squint and in slight disgust buried within a white napkin. Indeed, this resembles the Tonka bean, but the bean's misfortune is not caused by a lack of attention or clumsiness. It is born with such features, stuffed inside the belly of a legume tree, birthed by knives, axes and bloodied fingers ripping open the

bark, a struggle raining splints of wood into the eyes and face of day laborers. From the gapping hole leaks silence, and a creamy scent of vanilla, tempting famished workers to cup the bounty into damaged hands and lift it to the mouth—only to witness the hideous, natural contortions of the bean and its muddy hue. In desperation, with eyes shut, one may collect enough courage to place a bean on the tongue, an unfortunate mistake, an ironic lack of attention as the bean is lethal, especially for those whose cuts are numerous. The flesh of the bean, dark and brooding, thins the blood of its victims to a watery level, preventing life saving clumps and clots to catch against tears in the skin. Deep within the neotropics, with only a native tongue to call for assistance, a young man torn from hours of work would bleed to death, his life pouring from his hands and forearms.

With eyes shut, a third inhale sweeps aside the vanilla and death. They are buried under an enveloping black canvas, who, still and horrifically silent, waits patiently for lungs to expand to their full plump capacity. The collective strength of thousands of healthy purple nodes is needed to gather our final note, elaborate and from a distant time. It enters as a populated swarm whose numbers overwhelm the inner lining of the nose. With each landing sting, a streak, dot and dash of vibrant pastels smear upon the canvas, puzzling a European scene of peace and tranquility, of untested leisure, a river, a picnic. Flamboyant reds, wavelengths between green and blue, and a blustery yellow compose 19<sup>th</sup> Century French fashions in thick, oily excretions of paint. At an intimate distance from the face, the assortment is a chaotic tangle amusing for its playful movements and contrasts. Several footsteps backward, however, to allow for the field of vision to expand, for eyes to envelope the scene entirely, the mind connects this dot to that, that dot to this and the form of several women is understood. Frozen in conversation, several lips are paused in an open yet relaxed state, circling a young mouth. Pupils, slightly dilated, perhaps from the open bottle of wine and sliced cheese strewn about a wool blanket, are tilted, focused upon the speakers. A spectator can only assume their topics, their excitement regarding the automobile, aeroplane, or phonograph or something more scandalous, as a collection of dots, dashes and streaks upon a canvas. For each, though, their skin is a thin wisp of fresh, white paint stroked in a uniform direction, clear, clean and certainly powdered. Applied with a puff upon the chin and cheekbones, residual spots of talcum dust and crushed rose pedal extract rise in clockwise swirls, dimming the afternoon sunlight with their foggy presence. Fanning out into a thin swarm, their scent is fine yet apparent, an airy tickle in the throat, drying the eyes who squint in defense. The tip of the tongue finds itself burrowed into the nook behind front teeth, and with forward momentum, and back, and forward, scratches away the annoyance. Nostrils, however, flare, allowing the fresh, white accumulation to enter and entice, leaving the mind to wonder how it is possible to have something so foreign resemble snow.

brûlée

On a sanitary countertop, five large eggs waited patiently. Each reclined upon a plump waist, a composite of calcium and shell a fascinating white, as though void of any history and disease. For several hours, a refrigerated chill slowly diffused from orange yolk at their centers and through a porous membrane, spilling onto the surrounding marble, accumulating as an invisible puddle. The release left air between the shell and innards vacant, a small yet comfortable space for the kitchen's degrees to enter and nestle within the translucent goop, massaging its thick and viscous bonds in deep clockwise kneads. The movement relaxed the egg whites, allowing their internal temperature to rise, allowing their hues to blush from a lifeless clear to a struggling yellow. In a few moments, with several knuckling presses, the eggs, their yolks and all of the et cetera will sweat, slightly, emitting a fine wisp of condensation, coating within and out the shell, that, beneath the cascade of florescent light, glares and pops, a visual dramatic announcement of a transition from stored food to important ingredient. The flares easily gain the attention of a patissier, who, trained upon such cues, extends a left hand, applying the looping pads of an index and middle finger against the nonsensical grain of a shell. Thousands of sensitive, curious nerve endings beneath the flattened skin sit, and fidget, waiting for a comfortable heat to leisurely stroll from the surface of the egg through dense calluses buried in the fingers. Upon their arrival, the degrees hurl themselves in relief, sprawling out, upon the bed of nerve endings, reclining upon a plump waist. The sensation is hardly excitable, hardly a concern to snatch away the hand in pain. The degree is equal to that of the room, equal to the three cups of heavy cream whose surface tension meets the exact height of a blue line circling round the belly of a measuring cup. It has been left isolated, off to the side, away from scampering elbows and the forward momentum of garcons to and from the service area, where a population of specials and classic dinners waxes and wanes. Poured from the papery lips of a chilled carton, the cream has sat alone since a loin had been stuffed with garlic and slipped into an oven at four hundred and fifty degrees. After several pokes and prods of an index finger into the meat, the resistance felt was interpreted as satisfactory, medium rare, and the dish was plated on a round, sanitary cut of porcelain; the measuring cup, belly full, witnessed the preparation to birth, and during this span, it slowly exchanged its dense, cold molecules for the warm comfort of the surrounding environment, transforming into another ingredient in tonight's dessert.

The head of an electric stand mixer is gently tilted backwards, allowing access to a gapping bowl whose lip curves to a stainless steel pout. Blunt and glistening, the lip rounds the rim of the bowl, empty, silent and patiently waiting, watching, as one large egg is plucked with a three fingered grip and separated from its flock. Limbless and blind it is carried over to the bowl, and up, until its plump waistline aligns with the precisely cut steal lip. They touch, briefly, a point of contact whose metallic knock is enveloped by the surrounding boiling mix, a constant motion of arms and legs, blue flame spewing from aggravated burners and shouted languages, smeared by regional accents. Attention is placed upon grilled swordfish, as to whether parsley or basil is most flattering as a garnish, the water level of several pitchers (to be carried in the right hand only), the number of peeled potatoes soaking in a slightly seasoned bath—there is no concern on what events are taking place on the corner of this room. Surrounded yet alone, the waistline is forced upon the lip of the bowl with a thrusting push. The thin,

skeletal shell shatters with a crunch and several thousand illogical cuts run across its frame. Through the uneven gaps and pieces, a yolk at room temperature leaks into a lengthy orange arc, stretching into the mouth of the bowl, and snaps. Following slowly behind, thick blushing whites roll out of pre-made exit wounds and fall with a plop against the sanitized steel, collecting as a mass at the bottom of a ditch fourteen inches deep. The empty shell, its shards, is discarded, leaving the hand free to grasp the remaining eggs, one at a time, to carry each to the lip and force an opening blow. These last four, however, are not needed entirely. Exposed and draining over a plastic container (clear and sanitized) the patissier elegantly fingers the falling goop, allowing the bumbling whites to slip through the spaces between a middle, index and ring finger (with no ring, for sanitary reasons) and faint into the storage box below. The whites are to be frozen, and then defrosted, when called for, when an order for a Baked Alaska is uttered and a peak is to be whipped up quickly. For now, for this brûlée, only the binding orange yolks are wanted, captured by the flat pads of a middle, index and ring finger, and dropped in a ditch with a plop. The eggshells are discarded, and with slick fingers the plastic container, properly labeled WHITES, is fitted with a sanitary plastic cover and forgotten, into a freezer.

One scoop of sugar was measured and leveled off with the stroke of an index finger. Shoved over the measuring cup's ledge, the excess fell a dramatic distance, returning to the glass jar of granulated sugar below, landing with a soft fizz. With the ingredient's surface tension meeting the rim, the amount was officially one half cup, allowing the innards to be carried over, and above, the open mouth of the steel bowl already clogged with fats and bleeding egg yolks. A twist of the wrist unloads each grain, billions, coating over the disturbing broken scene below it with a uniform white crystallized shine. For a silent moment, it is as if nothing had occurred, as though a weather pattern had moved in from the north, from the mountains, and flurried quietly, quickly overnight, during a deep peaceful sleep. One can imagine, upon waking, titling its head forward, the tickling joy in the belly of the electric stand mixer after absorbing the pleasant surprise of snowfall, one can imagine the uncontrollable urge to make the first imprints, to dip its paddle attachment into the crusty layer with a crunch. For a silent moment, the paddle (sanitized) merely dabbles the tip of its plastic stubby frame in the sugar, forming a toe print. It waits patiently for the patissier to pinch a lever with an index and thumb, for a gentle push to the right, for a surge of energy to run through its veins allowing expression, an excitement conveyed in embarrassing twirls, flailing a short limb through and through and through the sloppy yolk and thick whites, folding sugar within and out the semi-liquids, until, the coarse skin of each grain successfully cuts into the goop, burrowing internally, filling it to a yellow, pasty consistency. Thoroughly incorporated (as the patissier is trained upon such visual cues), the lever is pinched with an index and thumb, and with a gentle pull to the left, the paddle is allowed to relax, panting, covered in patches of creamy, sugary yolk, standing within the chaotic tangle it had created out of impulse.

A knob of a stovetop was turned to the far right and held, until, after several snapping attempts a blue, aggravated flame flowered. The foul odor of sulfates rose from the burner in wisps and dissipated, lost among the sizzle of deep fryers and aerating salad

dressing. Angled at medium high, the knob was released and the bottom of a saucepan burned away. Within, three cups of heavy cream vibrated slowly, shifting left to right, hopping to and from here to there, tolerating the rising temperature from below just enough before swift pinches attack more sensitive areas. Through the Teflon walls of the (sanitized) pot several hundred degrees in Fahrenheit leisurely pass, dipping a toe into the warm milky bath before them, approving of its comfortably thick texture with raised brows. They enter with a splash, a backstroke, and equally elegant paddling. Through and through and through the cream they stir the ingredients with their swim, pushing and tugging each blot of fat forward and back, until the friction increases the internal temperature of the cream itself. The twirling motion of self-indulging heat, of tossed liquid, pumps air bubbles to the surface, bubbles whose thin, fragile membranes pop upon exposure to the world, leaving only a puff of steam as proof of their existence, to rise, in clockwise turns, dissipating, swiftly, lost among evaporating sulfates. The patissier, trained upon such visual cues, plucks the knob with a familiar index and thumb, to twist the knob left, far left, until with a thud the blue flame is extinguished. Any degree higher than this, than the steaming, the ingredients will burn, the fats within will bloat and curdle into unappetizing white chunks. The cream has been heated perfectly, to a memory, a time during childhood when cow's milk had been poured by a loved one and heated slowly on a stove, within a less sophisticated pot than this one. Upon the rising steam, the saucepan was gripped at its handle and carried over, and above, an empty glass. The drink, hot and comforting, was poured until its surface tension leveled just centimeters below the rim. Through pores of the glass, the drink lost its heat, burrowing into young hands, into young lips expressing satisfaction with a smile. Here, the cream and all of its heat is poured, slowly, in a lengthy arc into the mouth of the stainless steel bowl. With splashes and spatter, liquid levels rise, flooding the gluttonous scene of sugar twisted within yolk, yolk in extreme danger of scrambling due to its sensitivity to high degrees. Trained, a patissier stabs the bulky mixture with the wire arms of a whisk. Rapid, semi-circular turns of bones in the wrist—though stressful on such small things—drive the instrument back and forth, from here to there, disrupting any scrambling taking place, evenly distributing heat through and through.

Four ramekins were placed on a baking pan, two by two. Cobalt blue, their robust color expressed the cookware's remarkable strength; cast in thousands of degrees in Fahrenheit, the ramekins can withstand the environment of an oven, a broiler and even the (slight) radiation of microwaves all without absorbing the odors and flavors of the food cooking inside their two inch depth. Such is stated on the cookware's packaging and such, so far, has been true. The finish remained bright and, held an intimate distance from the face, forcing an inhale through the nose, no scent from a previous dish can be identified—say, a potpie or onion soup. Their rippled surface and uniform coloring emits a well groomed, proper appearance allowing the ramekin to perform as, not only an instrument, but a serving dish to be placed before a patron with the highest of standards. Now standing two by two, the ramekins wait patiently, empty, for the patissier to lift the mixing bowl with an exhale and with strained, fibrous muscles in the biceps, with a twist of the wrist, tip the mixture to a controlled pour, filling a ramekin to its rim, and the next, and the next, and the next in one elegant motion. Hovered above the last ramekin, muscles burn with fatigue, waiting, for the last drops to fall from the bowl's steel lip.

They impact with ripples, waves exposing hundreds of small dark freckles—vanilla extract added quickly, quietly by the patissier. As the innards bake in hundreds of degrees, the signature scent of vanilla slips through the fine gaps of the oven door, entwining with steam of the evaporating water bath boiling away at the knees of each ramekin. In clockwise wisps, the flavoring and steam rise, up, and out, of the kitchen area and into the chatting atmosphere of a dining hall, where for thirty minutes the senses of patrons are tickled, and hunger is enticed by the invisible, distant scent. Expectations are high, higher than the tempting mist and rising ever still with each passing moment. They wait patiently, fidgeting. Upon such visual cues a trained patissier will cover the right hand with the cleanest oven mitt available, the oven door will violently speak as it is pulled open, and, despite the flamboyant puff of the glove, a thin side of the baking pan is pinched. With a gentle shove from the shoulder, the ramekins vibrate from front to back, back to front—a slight enticing jiggle signaling liquid, its yolks and sugar, had joined to form a thick custard safe for ingesting, enjoyment.

Upon a sanitary countertop, four ramekins waited patiently, slowly losing their heat. Through the tight pores of cast iron, degrees found their way, lifting into the face of a patissier whose forehead and chin have dampened slightly under the exposure. The dishes have sat for ten minutes or so, off to the side, safely tucked away from the continuous organized panic of garçons hopping to and from here to there. Some return from the dining area with patrons' inquires upon their lips, Where is the brûlée? And when? A patissier, trained upon such verbal cues, responds by merely lifting a teaspoon pinched between an index and thumb. Its metallic (sanitized) head is to dig into a pile of granulated sugar with a thump, driven forward with a quick twist of a tired wrist and lifted up, and over the solid, uniform dessert. (The boiling water bath was a success, maintaining the internal temperature of the mixture throughout the cooking process. There were no sudden spikes in degrees or premature cooling notorious for causing dents, cuts and unappetizing scars across a surface.) It was a pleasure for the small mound of sugar to be held an intimate distance from the soft, pale dessert, to observe its sunrise yellow coloring. It is enough to induce a fainting spell, enough to infect billions of grains, who, losing consciousness, collapse, falling a dramatic distance to the dessert below, covering the surface with a coarse white shine. The embrace is to be permanent, fused chemically, as a spoon in the hand is replaced by a match. A violent strike ignites its tip with a pop and the faint, foul odor of sulfur rises in a mist. The wood burns away, emitting a pleasant orange glow hardly strong enough to form a bond. This task is left to a silver propane torch whose entire existence is to caramelize sugar. From its spout a flammable, invisible gas leaks, waiting, silently for the tip of this match to stumble though its gathering propane. With a quick twist of a wrist (whose twelve bones have lost all patience) fingers pinching the remaining splint dash across the open spout unharmed by the aggravated blue flame pumping away with a hiss. Grabbed at the waist, the burner is lifted up and carried over the reclining granules, still dormant. Held an intimate distance from the sugar, the grains begin to sweat, slowly, glistening, until with something of an adieu the burner is waved to and from here to there. The hundreds of degrees in Fahrenheit swiftly burn the sleeping bodies to an amber, pimple the surface with bubbling sores whose thin membranes bloat and pop. Burned tip to tip, side to side,

a ramekin waits patiently for the caramel to cool, to lose its heat, solidify, to a glassy covering, to be broken with a crunch.