

2013

Infintitesimals

Brandon Richard Peters
Northern Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.nmu.edu/theses>

Recommended Citation

Peters, Brandon Richard, "Infintitesimals" (2013). *All NMU Master's Theses*. 484.
<https://commons.nmu.edu/theses/484>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All NMU Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact kmcdonou@nmu.edu, bsarjean@nmu.edu.

INFINITESIMALS

By

Brandon Richard Peters

THESIS

Submitted
To
Northern Michigan
University
In partial fulfillment of the
requirements
For the degree
of

MASTER OF ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

2013

ABSTRACT

INFINITESIMALS

By

Brandon Richard Peters

This collection of short stories deals with themes of fantasy and desire. Often centered around relationships at or near a transition, these stories feature characters and archetypes struggling to understand the world around them, as they develop into adults. Some of the characters are teens, and some adults, but all of them are growing up.

Copyright by
Brandon Richard Peters
2013

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family. Whatever I am that is good, I owe to you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This author would like to thank his thesis director, Matt Bell, for the spectacular insights, flexibility, and dedication. Thank you for helping me shape my sentences and stories with an eye towards both aesthetics and content. Thank you for helping me cultivate the discipline to sit down and write.

I also owe thanks to Prof. Matthew Gavin Frank, for his time and advice. Thank you for agreeing to be my reader. Thank you for your interest, encouragement, and for pushing my writing to a higher level.

Professors John Smolens, Jen Howard, and Beverly Matherne, thank you for your patience and perception both within and without workshop, and Gabriel Brahm, thank you for introducing me to Theory with enthusiasm.

Furthermore, I would like to express gratitude to the Department Head, Ray Ventre; the MA Program Head, Russ Prather; and the Director of Composition, Laura Soldner, for their unending support. I could not have asked for a better Graduate experience. Finally, I want to recognize my peers in the Graduate Program for all their feedback, and for producing work that has surprised, inspired, and changed me as a writer and as an individual.

This thesis uses the guidelines provided by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CTA.....	6
PARADISE	13
UNMASKED	29
THIS MOMENT.....	43
A GOOD LIFE.....	46
INFINITESIMALS OR LINES V. RAYS.....	50

INTRODUCTION

In this collection of short fiction the common themes lie in the space between individuals, and it is here that I hope readers will direct their focus. This space separates and binds us. In this space lives desire, fantasy, love, and fear. In this space our potential takes shape or falters, and we discover the boundaries by which we define and delineate ourselves from those around us. In this space we discover the internal compulsions that inform our choices and actions.

How we think about this space, and what exists there, affects how we live. How we think about this space determines how we tell our stories. In the title story of this collection, *Infinitesimals or Lines v. Rays*, the narrator is a rational thinking being capable of action. However, he only really acts in a meaningful way once at the end (or the linear beginning) of the story, and when he does, it almost feels like he is the object rather than the actor. He imagines himself to be paralyzed by an irrational set of fears, though he is clearly not. He imagines he is an impossible distance from the people he cares about, and from achieving his goals. However, it might be that the way he thinks about fear, or logic, or love, or desire; the way he defines the world around him and so himself, makes him unwilling rather than unable to act to in his own favor.

Similarly, in *This Moment* the two archetypal protagonists are aware of the habits and patterns which have kept them from connecting to others in the past. In their first conversation they outline their faults for one another. They have read the very post-modern theories that explain the way they act as individuals. Yet, they are either unwilling or unable to reach out and touch their desires. Instead they hover in a realm of

fantasy. One could read this story as both a victory and a loss for both or either of the characters depending on how one interprets their struggle. It raises a question central to my purpose in writing this collection of stories: do we desire to fulfill our desires, or maintain them?

Other stories in the collection look at the same question from less direct angles. The narrator of CTA remembers a summer romance, but gives the distinct impression that even while he lived in the moment, he was already viewing it from some distant future. By focusing on the hyper-reality of the experience, the reader gets the sense that he experienced the present as though it was written in past tense. He experiences a map of Chicago as if it were a Borgesian artifact, contemplates the beautiful artifice of a man-made sunset, focuses on affectation and representation in art and humanity, and yet somehow creates for himself a vacuum of responsibility. He seems to believe some external force will end the relationship, as though it were linked to the passing of the seasons.

All my stories are populated by the ghosts and shadows of people I've met. The things that haunt me also haunt my protagonists. In *A Good Life*, I stole the most from my real world experiences. The main character, like myself, is grappling with his own lack of direction after a divorce and, once again like myself, becomes fascinated by a pair of very loud and wild but perhaps admirable young girls. While his lack of direction is linked to his concrete wish to be a father, my desire, both as a writer and as a Midwestern twenty-something, is a more abstract one that I believe rests heavy in the bowels of my generational peers. It is a desire that has probably haunted every generation since the acquisition of language, though it is often disguised by more superficial wants or more

basic needs. It is the longing for the Real, the raw unfiltered truth that seems to exist beyond signifier and signified. It is the desire to understand that part of existence that hasn't been named despite the efforts of philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, and priests. This, I think, is a big part of why so many of us are driven to write, and sing, and film, and paint, and dance, and photograph, and tell stories in a number of inventive ways. This is where the liberal arts become more than just self-interested and masturbatory. This is why it is important to write about desire, and the spaces between people in the hope that our stories will affect someone, who will go on to affect someone else, and through this process we will add to the knowledge and understanding of our race.

While the stories in this collection probably don't go a long way toward clarifying or answering the questions that haunt them. Hell, they don't even really define the keywords in a convincing way. These stories, like so many of the stories I have read while writing them, have helped me to pose the question in many different, vague, and helpful forms. Writing these stories has somehow brought me closer to understanding what I want and need in life. It is my hope that reading these stories will do the same for others who read them. Of course, if I hadn't been reading while I was writing I likely wouldn't have written at all.

Reading is inextricably linked to my writing process. Without the guidance of authors struggling (much more effectively than I) to answer or ask the same questions, I may as well have been head-butting the keyboard over and over. While writing, I took inspiration from the theory-laden, stylized dialogue of Don DeLillo; the elegiac, yet hopeful, symbolism of Stuart Dybek, the form and humor of David Foster Wallace. I

learned tone from Sherman Alexie, and juxtaposition from Aimee Nezhukumatathil. Cormac McCarthy taught me brevity with a cattle gun, and Maruki Hurakami taught me the long way around while it rained fish and leeches from the sky.

Yet, the stories that I've written aren't mere regurgitations. Rather, reading and learning from these powerful voices, has given me the confidence to use my own proudly. Though the authors listed above have contributed a great deal to my understanding of words, writing, and the world. I have also been affected by the formative events in my life: friendship, education, death, marriage, divorce. I have taken inspiration from the cities, nature, and people of the Midwest. I am utterly confident that my voice stands out on the page, and this is probably the most fundamental and important debt I owe to all of the authors I have read while writing.

In *Unmasked* I attempted to illustrate with humor, the neurotic tendencies I bring to writing through Nicholas's urge to compose, frame, and direct whatever scene he is a part of. For Nicholas this is a result of his desire to put that space between himself and the world around him. Mateo also has this space which is symbolized in his mask. He symbolically sacrifices a large part of what has defined him against everybody else in the world to be with and love Nicholas's mother. As a writer, I often create this space for myself. I view the people around me as characters, I think about setting, and symbols, and tone. Sometimes I wonder if this results in a lack of authenticity in my life. Am I ever really giving my all to a heartfelt conversation, if I'm looking around the room for metaphors? However, it is partially by this distance that I delineate myself from others. I am a writer and a student. We define ourselves by the space we create between ourselves and everything around us, and yet culturally we try to close this gap at every turn.

In *Paradise*, the two lovers are successful, smart individuals in their daily lives. However, they find that it is not enough for them. They enter to an affair, and cultivate the fantasy that they are living in a picturesque film love story. However, when they encounter each other's true hidden selves in a fantasy paradise away from society they find themselves once again dissatisfied. They no longer have anyone for whom to perform their love, and so they create in their fantasy a listener, but their need for this listener taints their view of each other.

All of the stories in this collection have added to my understanding of the space that exists between myself and others. All of these stories have helped me to understand my desires, and the desires of those around me. Most importantly, these stories helped me to glimpse how desire is itself separated and connected to fantasy, love, fear, and a hundred other signifiers that describe the spiritual, physical, and temporal spaces between individuals. Through these stories, I have gained a better understanding of others' stories. We all have stories that we tell in some way, and it is through the sharing of these stories that we can progress.

CTA

There was a schedule, a timetable. We were supposed to be looking at schools, meeting with recruiters, picking up pamphlets from long lines of folding tables; our futures tri-folded. Instead we looked up. We pointed. *Mies van der Rohe*, you told me, *skin and bones, plate glass and concrete*. I answered in guttural sounds, noises of awe and bewilderment.

We consulted a map we'd found on the floor of the transportation center, abandoned at the top of an escalator. You reached down as though it had been left for us, slid it into your front pocket and we pressed our way through the revolving door and into the Chicago air. We followed the map. We couldn't not follow it. It led us down city blocks pressed tight in your front pocket. We took it out at intersections and it popped and snapped in the breeze, directing us. We moved quickly, kept pace with the men in ties and jackets, the women in boots and scarves. We stopped for coffee, viewed window displays, ducked into department stores we couldn't afford. We ate hot dogs smothered in neon relishes and took photographs of parts of buildings, faces of strangers. We cringed as we walked past the homeless. They knew we had money because we kept looking up. If they had been visible on our map, if there had been a spot in the key between historic building and hotel, we would've taken meandering routes to avoid their close postures, their layered clothing, their McDonalds cups almost empty of coins; monuments we did not want to acknowledge.

The map marked museums with dinosaur skulls, outlines of paintings. We paid for admission. Watched each other observe with simulated interest the displays of ancient

dead things, and with simulated understanding irrevocably postmodern works of art. We laughed at each other. We laughed with each other. We touched things we weren't supposed to touch. When it became as clear to us as it was to those around us that we did not belong we left through the gift shop and hurried down the steps outside.

There was a man at the bottom holding a painting in one hand. His other hand was missing; the sleeve tied at the elbow. The painting was an image of a pipe. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, the man cried in what to our unpracticed ears seemed perfect French, *This is not a pipe*. His eyes followed us as we pushed and pulled each other down the steps. By the time we had passed him and reentered the city streets he was laughing. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. He hollered after us, the sound sacred like a blessing or a curse.

It had been a day when summer contrives with fall to move the air almost imperceptibly. The scents of the city rose up; mixed and stirred in the corridor streets. We pointed to the windows of million-dollar flats where we imagined ourselves sleeping, eating, making love on oversized beds. The city had opened up to us. It unfolded like the map we carried in our pockets. We opened and closed it. We slipped our hands beneath each other's clothes searching for it. We spoke with bold authority.

Green Line. I said and started walking.

Red Line. You stopped me and were right.

I folded up the map and slipped it into my back pocket.

It wasn't until we reached the lake that the questions started. Before that we had both silently agreed to remember only as far back as the summer. In the beginning, our

grand narrative read, it was raining and cold. Our bellies were full with pasta and sauces. I slipped my hand over yours in a forest green Chevy, and it was good.

We walked out on Navy Pier. The Ferris wheel was still and empty. Seagulls fought over discarded fast food remnants. Maybe it was the sunset – made more spectacular by the city skyline, the chemical run-off of city life – or maybe it was the surface of the lake; unrooted, horizontal, like a wide road to everywhere.

How many were there?

I don't remember who asked the question. Three was my answer, yours two. The pier, nearly deserted moments before, was suddenly overcrowded with people. The noise washed over us both, cacophonous. We turned from the sun, and the lake's open expanse. *What were their names?* The questions followed us. We did not want them asked. We did not want them answered. *Vince*, you said, *and Pedro*. We pushed and sidled our way through the horde. I thought I saw the faces of old girlfriends - *Tricia, Rachel, Ashley* - turned from them.

I held your hand tight to as we made our way through the streets. The crowd became too thick, too unyielding, and we lost our grip; you pulled one way by the horde and me another. Couples came between us with tall ice cream cones. Children darted through the legs of strangers. They shaped new paths, making our map useless. *What was it like?*

Disappointing. Exhilarating.

Boring. Numb.

Questions were asked. Questions were answered We fought our way together again, kept moving, trying to outrun the questions.. The city towered over us, rumbled

under us; skin and bones architecture, roads crossing over roads. The L ducking in and out, over and under. Everything following the map, as though they hadn't heard it was useless. *Did you love them?*

Yes.

And, *Yes.*

We made our way to the station. We fumbled in our pockets for the passes. The train lurched forward, and for a moment we thought maybe we had left the questions behind us, outrun them, lost them in the grid. Maybe they'd missed their connection. Maybe they were circling the loop. We breathed deep. We extended our diaphragms. We basked in the white noise.

How young? The question hung there between us, our hands still latched.

Young, I said.

I'd told you already how fragile it had been. I'd told you more than I wanted to, more than I'd meant to. How in a moment of violence it was over. The girl's name was Ashley, I'd told you, and she was only a girl then as I was only a boy. She was anorexic, fleeting, with shallow breasts that dimpled for want of weight and no ass to speak of. I was matchstick thin, and waiting to be struck. I'd told you how I'd been ashamed afterward and how I'd blamed her, how she'd believed me and been ashamed too. I'd told you how she only ever half smiled. Secret smiled, just for me. How the smiles had stopped. We were young and childish. I'd told you that.

How young?

You answered the question, *Fifteen.*

I said, *Old enough.* I was drawing a line.

Well, how old then? You asked the question.

Old enough, I said, *I'd tasted liquor and vomit. Old enough I'd seen death.* You were pressing me, and pressing against me. I was tired. The train swayed and creaked. The electric lights flickered.

The train slowed as we entered the suburbs. Most of our car exited, filtered out to their respective lives. One stop, and then another, the soulless voice of the PA asserting *Prospect, Park Ridge, Arlington Heights* over the static shuffling of feet and crush of shopping bags .

Were you in high school yet?

Young enough I still wasn't sure what was second and what was third. Young enough I caused more harm than good every time I reached another base.

Across from us sat an overweight man and woman. The man was wearing a Cubs hat, and the woman had very large hair. The hair of a starlet from another era. They both scraped handfuls of cheese and caramel popcorn from oversized bags they'd purchased in the station and read magazines about celebrities. On the cover of the woman's there was an image of a blonde actress, I couldn't make out. *This is not a person.* In the far corner of the car there was a girl in a tank top with yoga pants and soft boots. Her hair was conspiratorially tousled, and her make-up carefully concealed itself. I pretended not to notice when she leaned amply over to slide her phone from a pocket of her satchel.

Please?

You looked up at me then with a face you'd taken from the movies, practiced in the mirror, meant to be somehow indisputable. I kissed you, and you rested your head on

my shoulder. We followed the rail from the underground of the city to the town where we had parked. The only passengers to get off at the stop were us, the girl with soft boots, and an elderly couple who had been in another section of the train. I left the map on our seat. It expanded itself without the pressure of our bodies and fabrics. When I looked back it had opened. It read Chicago Transit Authority in a bold crisp font. It highlighted the museums, and landmark buildings. It looked just like the city, but without the homeless people and McDonalds cups. When we stepped off the train, we stepped off the map.

We made out in the front seat of my car in the parking lot, as the elderly couple waited for someone to pick them up, and the girl with soft boots drove away. I thought about her shape as I tasted your cherry lip gloss, the alcohol from your lotion, your salt-sweat. I pinched the snap at the back of your bra and it sprang open with a satisfied pop. You pulled my pants down below the knobs of my hip bones, and then below my knees. Enthusiasm substituted for elegance. It was still warm out and our exertions made us sweat. I peeled your pants down your thighs, and then your underwear.

A van came to pick up the elderly couple, their headlights shined in through the windshield lighting our bodies and our faces, accentuating our angles and clefts. I wondered if they were watching us. I wondered if that made us more or less real. You stared into my eyes trying to guide me. I leaned forward as our bodies absorbed the shock of each other, whispered in your ear. The van drove away leaving us in darkness. Its motor sounds fading. Our breaths condensed on the windows, isolating us. We were alone, together.

I imagined myself thinking back to this night, this summer. The train, the man-made sunset, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. We pushed and pulled each other, hair and hands, skin and nails.

PARADISE

This is New York. It is raining the way it does in old movies. It is a rain that chills lovers and causes them to press closely together, it is a rain for moments of emotional intensity, for rifts between friends, or for the healing of those rifts, for moments like this one, the moment of their leaving.

It is a cold, gray rain.

He and she both signal for the cab together. She stands in front; smaller, compact, smiling eagerly. He behind her; outlining, protective, sturdy. They are George Peppard and Audrey Hepburn. They are all aura.

Her right arm is extended, palm open as though pressing against an invisible wall just in front of her. Her eyes wide, and her cheeks blushed red, in part due to excitement in part due to careful application in front of a mirror. The rain-drops splash against her lips and pour off of her chin, brush her eyelashes, make her blink. Her chest is prominent, pushed out, shoulder blades inching together, her stance is wide, and one leg ahead of the other for stability. She stands as though for a camera, an audience. They both stand for each other. They will hold this moment in their memories. Their future selves have lenses trained upon them in the here and now.

How they compose themselves will affect the rest of their lives.

His arm, the right one, is held above and behind hers, shadowing hers, palm turned casually, shoulders spread wide. He lends himself to her. His eyes are focused intently on the traffic, the headlights, the windshield wipers pivoting desperately. His face is pale, and thoughtful, he appears younger than he is. They both wear coats and hats

appropriate for the rain, the moment. His attire: beige, brown, noir-academic. Hers: black, trim, chic.

Every few seconds he grips her left wrist between his thumb and forefinger. His intention is to reassure her. The act soothes his psyche at a basic level.

This... them... their meetings started years ago and innocently enough. At an art gallery – he spilled her glass of wine, while miming a Chaplin gag with a friend’s hat. Her husband was in Wisconsin visiting family, his fiancé was there, drinking resolutely at the open bar.

Then, again, at a popular coffee shop near campus. They started chatting when they ran into each other, then sitting down to conversations. Soon the two of them were *planning* to run into each other. They exchanged phone numbers and e-mails, then exchanged coffee for wine and wine for dinner. They exchanged saliva and tears, then sweat. They exchanged casual banter punctuated by laughter for desperate clinging pleas to run away, to be together, to find paradise. They exchanged their separate lives for a shared desire. They exchanged their word, his for hers, to leave everything behind.

Now they stand here.

By their word. By each other.

He, an Associate Professor of Gender and Film Studies, is leaving behind:

A tenure track position at a prestigious university

A generous body of peer-reviewed publications

The opportunity to teach his first graduate level seminar

A weathered brief case that was the sole survivor of a fire in his great-grandfather's Connecticut home

The same brief case which also endured his grandfather's fall down three flights of stairs

The same briefcase again which his father gave to him, patting his hand gently once the leukemia had spread, had become inoperable.

She, an Italian Language translator and Artist, is leaving behind:

A 2-Year Academic Fellowship

Three book length essays on the legacy of the Futurists in Italian literature and art

An extensive body of e-mails planning a collaborative visual art installation in High Line Park

A seven year old Yorkshire Terrier with luxating patellas

A husband who loves her, a husband who has worked a steady stream of menial jobs (forklift operator, kitchen manager, sales associate) to support her through six years of grad school

The knowledge deep inside her that she has been leaving him farther and farther behind for a long time now.

They both are bringing with them:

The clothes on their backs

Each other.

This is a New York City taxi cab: yellow, metal, motion. It cuts off two lanes of traffic to reach them. It pulls up to the curb, idles in front of them.

There are no bags to load into the trunk. He opens the curbside door for her, and then pulls it shut behind himself. There is a photo, a name, a long number vouching for the existence of the driver. The driver is pale, balding, and appears only mildly overweight in his photo I.D., which expires in fifteen months. He does not turn to look at them, but makes eye contact in the rearview mirror.

Where to?

They must sense each other's gaiety. Paradise, they say almost in unison, and laugh at their own sentimentality. They are impulsive infatuation. They are like teenagers.

The driver says nothing, does not visibly move. The driver's eyes blink in the rearview, displaced from his body.

JFK, he says and she nods. The driver turns into traffic, enters the start and stop flow of the city. He and she, the two of them, look into each other's eyes. They do so aware of the complexity of the action, of each other, of their undertaking. They take in each other's features. Their eyes flit about, geometric patterns; absorb the topography of nose, mouth, eyelash, wrinkle. The muscles of their faces spasm and tic. Their lips twitch in smiles which demonstrate varying levels, of joy, wonder, asymmetry. Their nostrils flare, and retract. Their breathing shifts. Their glands salivate, throats constrict, organs settle, postures relax and tighten as the driver accelerates, brakes. They are participating in an act of self-hypnosis. Their eyes lock. Pupils widen, and contract as light and endorphin levels rise and fall.

They stare. They really stare into each other's eyes. They see the outline of what they can never really see, they see the edges of each other's consciousness, they see the night of the world. They don't allow themselves to fall into it, but they feel the pull. They resist it, as though to pull it out from its secret nesting place within each of them until it is hanging between them like a small black bird.

It appears from nowhere or everywhere. A split consciousness. The stuff of both of them. It hangs upside down between them, its claws secured in the fabric above their heads. It ruffles the black feathers of its back and wings. One eye attending him, the other her, both of its eyes wrapped by a broken white ring. It spreads its brilliant under-plumage: blue, teal, cinnamon. Its tail ends in two long ribbon-like feathers that arch impressively before them, like doors to walk through. They lean into the arches, into each other...and then the bird flies. It flies away from them, and their bodies shudder, their lips press together. Something in them from somewhere very far away expects to hear the sound of a small hollow-boned body cracking against the partition, but the sound never comes.

Sound is distant.

They cannot hear the traffic outside the window, cannot hear the engine of the car they are riding in, cannot hear the incessant talk radio turned so low it was only a suggestion in the first place. Then the sound comes back in a wave. It is the sound of a wave, and then another, and another. They feel the tidal pull, and open their eyes.

He and she, now more than ever *They*, stand on a beach. The ocean ebbs and flows to on one side, the jungle breathes heavy and humid the other. The bird of paradise,

sings not far away, hidden in the abundant foliage. They both turn around take in the panorama slowly until their gaze settles again each onto the other.

Paradise, she says.

Paradise, he echoes and they kiss and kiss.

They press their mouths together in earnest. Trail their lips and tongues and hands across each other's skin. Strip each other of the heavy rain-soaked coats. Run their fingers through each other's hair, displacing their fashionable hats, and tousling their carefully styled cuts. They pull at each other's buckles, and buttons, and sleeves, stretch the fabric, trip over themselves until they collapse naked onto the beach.

Sand in their mouths. They trade it back and forth with tongue and lips. It grits, works away at the enamel of their teeth, exfoliates their backs and shoulders, gets caught in the grooves of their fingertips. Their armpits and inner thighs become caked with sand. Their scalps and hair let loose a cascade of sand into the nose, eyes, ears, mouth of the other every time they tumble over each other. They revel in its invasive presence, as much making love to the sand, to the earth, as to each other.

Afterwards they bathe in the ocean, the salt stinging their raw lips, drying in a film on the hair and skin of their bodies. They swim like children splashing and pulling at each other. They laugh at themselves.

I want you, he says.

You have me, she answers, and neither of them really notice the shadow that passes over them both. It is gone in a moment. It may have never even existed.

When they come back to shore, the sun is setting on a distant horizon. They stare up at the sky in awe, fall asleep under the stars.

Paradise, their bodies whisper to each other.

In the morning they awake, naturally with the sun. Neither of them can remember the last time they have awoken without an alarm, without somewhere pressing to be. The bird of paradise still sings. They both wonder, though neither says so out loud, whether it stopped singing at all.

No more meetings, she says.

No more e-mails. No more phone calls, he agrees.

Their breath is sour, but they kiss anyway. They walk into the ocean to wash themselves, steal glances at each other's outdoor nakedness. When they come back to the beach, they stare at the pile of their dried clothes. He grabs his underwear, and she hers. There is sand stuck to the cloth, but they are covered in it anyway. They look at each other, deciding, then they watch each other dress. She kicks at the remaining pile of clothes.

We should burn them, she says.

Let's go find food, he says.

They pause for many minutes, listen to the breeze and the waves and the singing of the bird.

She smiles, takes his hand, and walking slightly ahead of him heads up the beach to the jungle. It stands before them like a wall, impenetrable. But as they step closer, the vines and trees seem to part making paths where there at first appeared to be none.

The jungle swallows them, surrounds them in green, smothers them in musk, and heat and cool and sounds of growing things. They feel the gravity of growing things; are

pulled to textures, and colors, and sickly sweet odors like insects walking into a trap. They brush against the foliage.

I'll have to learn to hunt, he says. We can gather fruits and edible plants.

Insects fly thick around them, but at a distance, never landing. The sand grinds into their recesses and crevices as they walk, but their memories of the previous night are young, and besides, the irritation is slow; a steady, gradual thing. It is almost imperceptible to them as they push and pull their way deeper into the plant life.

I can hunt, she says, her tone round and playful. I was a farm girl once.

They walk slowly, at first, and talk continuously before they become accustomed to the sounds in the air, before they settle into the textures of the path. As they relax, as they learn which plants will bend, and which will break, where the path is firm, and wear it gives way and sucks at the soles of their feet, they become more confident. They point things out to each other. Describe everything.

Look, their tongues click continuously.

Look at this plant.

Look at this frog.

Look at that bug.

But something creeps slowly at the edge of their consciousness, hovering just out of their reach, until... *Ho-ca-hoah*. Both of them are startled. Both of them stop. Yet, the sound is familiar to them. A deep guttural call, ceremonial, ancestral. They have been sensing it all along but only now are they hearing. The canopy above them sways in a breeze that does not penetrate the thick underbrush. The treetops creak and sigh above

them. *Ho-ca-hoah*. The two press on along the path, and then off of it. They sway between great ferns, and climb over, slide under, the giant woody roots that shape the earth. It sounds always far ahead of them, and yet eerily near.

Ho-ca-hoah.

It seems like it's inside of me, she says. She presses her hand to her stomach as though she is pregnant with the sound, as though it might burst forth from her womb to be cradled in her arms as it reaches for her breasts. She looks up, continues to speak. She says, but it's clearly coming from just up ahead, just around that bend.

He nods agreement, and she rightly interprets his silence as listening. *Ho-ca-hoah*. They walk onward now, pass the first bend, and then another, completely forgetting their hunger, their need of sustenance. They become quiet, hush their footfalls. They stalk the sound. Their natures become predacious. Emboldened by each other's presence, they become not two but one thing, a pack on the prowl. *Ho-ca-hoah*. The sound grows closer, or they grow near to the source. No longer do they bend back the faces of large ferns, or snap the branches in their path. Rather they bend themselves to the contour of the jungle. They quicken their pace, still their breath. The path closes in around them. The vegetation becomes a dense wall, a defensive force. They crawl on all fours like animals, slink like felines. *Ho-ca-hoah*. She, ahead, stops. He listens. It is close. There is a turn in the path then a great rock wall, almost completely hidden by vines. Just beyond this lies the source of the call. Their beckoner. They feel its presence.

Slowly, tenderly they move forward.

But what they are greeted with is no primal force, no visceral beast, but daylight, a clearing. The sky opens above them. Light spills down like a waterfall. They see that

half a day has passed already. The sun is almost directly above them, it awakens their need to measure. They rise on two legs, and recall their humanity, their hunger, their clothes draped over their secret places, and piled in the sand, and their desire to burn them, to do away with secrets.

Ho-ca-hoah.

The call is faint now that its origin is clear. As their eyes adjust to the light the sound draws to something near the far edge of the clearing. They clasp their hands, and, together, walk toward it. The clearing is small, but it takes several minutes for them to near the far edge. The ground is hidden by an ocean of swaying long grass, and all about them small animals seem to dart about just out of their vision. Moth-like insects, and little toads continuously fly and hop about their feet, startled by their presence. As they draw closer, they are able to make out that what they are approaching is a small hut crafted of animal hides. Smoke rises from a hole at its peak, and the bird of paradise is perched on a pole in the earth near the entrance.

Ho-ca-hoah, the sound comes from the hut. The bird watches them draw near. Then flies straight up, high above them. They try to follow its flight path, but lose it in the sun.

They approach the hut, cautiously.

Hello? he says into the entrance.

Hello? she echoes a little louder. They both duck their heads to enter. They see a man sitting cross legged on the ground, in front of a small fire. He is facing away from them.

Hello, she says, Sir?

The sitting man does not answer. It is much too hot inside the hut. They begin sweating almost immediately in the enclosed heat. Smoke settles on their skin, and against the back of their throats. She crouches down instinctively, and begins to walk around the sitting man. Excuse me? she says, though it sounds very quiet, very far away to him standing near the entrance.

When she reaches the other side of the hut he cannot hear her anymore, though he does see her lips moving as she raises her arms reaches out, but does not touch the sitting man. When she approaches him again from the other side, she asks, Well?

Well, what?

Did you see his face?

I didn't see him. His back is to me.

His back was to me, she says, and they both look at the sitting man, the one who faces away from them.

He sets off the same way she did, but more urgently. The man's back remains turned toward him. He walks all the way around the man, until he comes back to the entrance.

Did you see him? He breathes heavily from inhaling the thick smoke.

She shakes her head, wrinkles her brow.

He says, the fire is always on the other side of him.

Let's go. she says.

His back is always toward us, and the fire is always away. He breathes in deep.

Come. she says.

He comes, and neither of them speak on their way back to the beach. Neither do they hear the haunting sound. When they reach the place where they slept, they find the indentations of their bodies have been washed away by the tide. They hear the bird of paradise singing again, the way it had been that morning. The sun is already over the horizon, but it is still light. They lay in the sand near their pile of clothing. They hold each other for comfort, and then their lips brush together. They kiss. They make love for the second time in their paradise. They allow themselves to become entangled in the moment, in each other. The sand works its way deeper into their skin as they thrust and grind against each other, then collapse exhausted from the days exertions, they haven't eaten but neither are they hungry. They sleep, and the waves and the birdsong wash over their dreams, and somewhere beyond their hearing: *Ho-ca-hoah*.

Days pass. Weeks pass. They hunt and forage. They are never hungry, but they eat anyway. They make love. They swim. They start fires with friction. They burn all of their clothes, they've no more need for them. The sun doesn't burn them. The rain is warm, and the ocean, only cool. They learn to predict the weather. They create a small shelter, from dried and salted animal hides, and logs and branches which they culled from the jungle. They rarely venture in too deep except together at first. They never go out into the clearing. They barely remember Gender Studies, or films, or art. Sometimes she still speaks in Italian.

Ti amo, she says, *Il mio paradiso*.

I love you, he says, my paradise.

Their bodies become hardened. The sun and sand become a part of their skin. They form muscles that their bodies had forgotten. They are happy. They craft tools, knives, slings, nets. They both become proficient. They knock fruit from the high branches with slings and pebbles. They cut the throats of rodents, wild hogs, snakes, and fish.

Siamo Felici, she says, we are happy.

Months pass on the island. They name the plants and animals, they do not know. They stay away from the clearing. But the more they name, the more familiar they become with their new home, the less they hold each other, look at each other, touch each other.

Siamo Felici.

Then. One day he awakes, to find she is missing. He eats alone, bathes alone, he waits alone. When the sun reaches its zenith, he stands. He stretches his muscles and enters the jungle alone. Something is different, so everything is different. He feels unsettlingly like prey. At first he moves cautiously, like the first time. Every vine hanging low is a serpent, every call that echoes through the canopy is alerting the predators of the jungle to his presence. He should go back. He thinks this, but his body moves forward. Slowly, he becomes confident. He had forgotten this feeling, aloneness, this rhythm of a heart beating far from any other heart, everything feels faster, the path feels less sure beneath his feet. His body functions with confidence. His senses heighten. He feels eyes on him from somewhere very far away, maybe from another time. He enters the clearing.

She is distant. She is footfalls in the clearing. She is movement in the long grass. She is outside of the hut. She is a heartbeat, creeping into the hut. She is crouching, whispering in the ear of the man who faces away. She tells him secrets in hushed tones. She tells the man who faces away, about her journey through the jungle alone, about her home on the beach, about her lover and the way he feels inside of her. The man does not respond, does not turn, only listens. She leaves the clearing.

They pass by each other, at the border to the jungle. If either notices the other, they make no sign.

That night they make love, sand-scraped, and wave-washed. They make love like they once did in hotels. They make love like their first night on the island, and fall away from each other. Neither can remember when the last time was. They do not sleep in each other's arms.

They spend less and less time together. They go into the jungle alone. Neither he nor she asks where the other goes, but they both know. Neither of them hears the bird song anymore. Instead they hear only the cry:

Ho-ca-hoah.

Ho-ca-hoah.

When he is gone, she waits. When she is gone, he waits.

They make love almost every night. Sometimes in the middle of the day, sometimes they entwine themselves in the ocean. They hold hands, but they never kiss. He turns her away from him; she turns herself away from him. Their skin hardens against each other. Their actions are automatic. The sand cuts deeper and deeper, cakes thicker and thicker. Sometimes it feels like they are burying each other.

They go to the clearing, to the hut, to the man who faces away. They speak to him. He listens. They speak harder, faster, louder. He listens. They desire him. They desire nothing more than for him to face them, to see his face.

They never ask each other what is said to the man who faces away. They never ask if the other has seen his face. They find they cannot, or will not, or should not. They say nothing and nothing and stare into the ocean, and their fire crackles, and they think of his fire. Their animal hides shift in the breeze, catch the smoke, and they think of his animal hide hut, and the smell of his smoke, and the taste of it, and the bird of paradise hasn't sung in as long as they can remember, and they pull back from the kiss...

This is New York. This is the city they dream about leaving. This is a city where they can only ever long for something more. This is a New York taxi cab: yellow, metal, motion.

Which gate? The driver asks, his eyes in the rearview mirror.

Here is fine, she says.

The meter reads fifty dollars and nine cents: a flat rate, plus tolls, plus rush hour surcharge. He pulls out three twenties, hands them to the driver. No change, he says.

He opens his door. Then he jogs around to open hers. She steps out. He shuts the door behind her. The taxi pulls away. They walk off in separate directions. Neither turns around to see the back of the other. There are fellowships, seminars, opportunities. There are families and friends.

There is cold rain.

UNMASKED

That she could be someone who married a luchador, that Nicholas wouldn't know this about her, felt like a betrayal.

He glanced at his mother seated beside him. She was staring at the ring in the center of the coliseum. Rock music was pumped through the loud speakers. Around them, thousands of people whooped and shouted, shuffled to the bathrooms and nacho stands. At the side of the ring, sound techs checked microphone levels and camera men secured their cords, planned their angles. His mother didn't belong here. She had played Ophelia, had toured the world, performed on Broadway. This didn't suit her, he thought. But she looked at him and smiled.

Behind them somebody had started a chant he couldn't understand. The music was getting louder, as was the crowd. People who were sitting stood up around them. Young children were lifted on shoulders. The arena lighting faded. Spotlights and strobes directed the audience, showed them where to stare, slack-jawed and hollering. Mateo was part of the opening act. The headliner was a belt match starring two longhaired, greased-up behemoths that Nicholas couldn't tell apart. The announcer stepped into the ring, lifted the microphone to chest level.

The day before at the bar, was the first time Nicholas and Vera, his mother, had seen each other in three years.

As he swallowed the last drops of his second beer, she passed by the windows of the bar for the first time. He was not surprised when the bar door did not immediately open. His mother had a history of backing out of these sorts of things. Last time she had arranged to meet him he had sat in a coffee shop alone for eight hours, not because he had expected her to show up after the first hour had passed, but because he liked the idea, the thematic elements, of waiting until close. On this day she was already twenty minutes later than they had agreed upon, and he had no reason, despite her protestations on the phone, to think she had indeed changed. He turned to the bartender, an inauspicious, but attractive blonde and ordered his third. His mother passed by the window a second time, she was moving in the opposite direction now, her head down, her hands in the pockets of her billowy dress.

The bartender grabbed a clean glass and poured. Nicholas took the opportunity to stare deeply, boldly at her face. Her nose was only just too large. It was stern and slightly pinched. The lighting in the bar was warm and low and made of her face a chiaroscuro. There was, he thought, a beautiful honesty in her features. The first time he had seen her he had fantasized about reaching out and with the back of his index and middle fingers lightly caressing her nose, drawing her face near to his, pressing his lips into the hair that curtained her ear, and whispering that he wanted to trace the curve of her nose into the unknown. It was a fantasy that he cultivated. He liked the cinematic quality of it, and often tried to approach it from the film noir angles and camera work of a Curtiz or a Lang.

A low rumbling brought Nicholas from his reverie. The sound differentiated itself and reformed into a heavy banging. It intruded on the atmosphere of the bar and disrupted

the rhythm of the jazz playing over the speakers so that the patrons all looked up and then around at each other, before finally tracing the disturbance back to the bay window, where Nicholas's mother stood peering in, her left hand acting as a visor, her face nearly pressed against the glass. Her right hand was held open, clapping against the windowpane in short arrhythmic bursts. When Nicholas turned towards her, the banging ceased. She motioned with her right hand for him to come out to meet her. She scooped at the air, in repetitious circles drawing him towards her.

Nicholas turned to the bartender apologetically. "I'll be right back." She didn't acknowledge him. He stood and turned to the other patrons, whose attention had shifted from the spectacle of his mother to him. "Sorry," he mouthed, patting the air with his palms down, as though he was quelling the upward flow of their agitation. He turned again and walked to the door. Most of the customers shook their heads and resumed their conversations or consumptions behind him. Those who had run out of things to say to one another, and who had finished or were awaiting their entrées, watched as Nicholas went outside the glass. What took place, Nicholas imagined, appeared to them as a sitcom exchange. The movements and gestures of he and his mother were exaggerated, marionette-like. He held his arms high implying the role of both victim and inquisitor. She shook her graying hair violently, a voluminous frizz in the humid street. He, jabbed at the air in her general direction brandished an accusing finger as though it were a fencing foil. She, shrunk into herself, advertised a defense of fragility. From her lowered posture she gestured towards the door, palms up and together, like she were cradling a bowl of soup. It must have been some kind of peace offering because the greeting

culminated in an awkward hug, a too-gentle, grasping gesture that would not have stirred a studio audience.

The mother entered, and the son reentered the bar. Nicholas retrieved his sweating glass of beer from the polished surface and escorted his mother to an open table nearby. He sat with his back to the window. She sat across from him.

They studied each other in silence for a moment. Both had aged visibly since the last time they had seen one another. Nicholas had been twenty-three then, his mother forty-two.

Nicholas imagined the scene as he would frame it. A camera mounted just behind the fan. 16mm film, three lenses. First, a blurry close. Nothing in focus. Motion in the foreground. The audio would be mechanical. Fan buzz. Faded voices, fighting to be heard. Then a cut to something else – the chewing lips of an overweight patron, maybe – framed just below the nose, picking up the stubble, the pores. Back to the fan, focus the close lens. Catch the dust motes caught in the metal casing that surrounded the turning blades. The oscillation would be a direct reminder to the audience of their mediated experience. The cuts would be intimate, grotesque, sensual. They would jar, disturb. Then the scene would shift, come into clear focus. Medium shot, 25mm lens, placed over there, behind the bar. It would have to be centered between the two profiles, his and his mother's. Cut. A close-up. His mother's face. Framed slightly askew. Her lips mouthing his name, *Nicholas. Nicholas*. Back to profile. Audio would shift. Levels fading on the fan motor, rising on his mother's voice. *Nicholas*. One more cut. The long shot. Chicago rooftops; a fog at rest amongst the observation decks and corner offices in a nebulous mass, like a tongue nestled between teeth. The audio thick with white noise, heavy and

hot breath, distant traffic, voices; pungent human noise suggesting a libidinous stench of bodies in mass transit. Then crisp and clear, her voice. *Nicholas*. Levels drop to no sound. Blackness. Nothing. Return to the medium shot. The angle would be the core of the scene. He and his mother in profile. *Nicholas*.

“Nicholas,” his mother said.

“Can I buy you a drink?” Nicholas asked.

She shook her head, allowed herself to smile. “It’s so good to see you.”

Small sounds filled the space between their words, “They have appetizers here.”

Forks against plates, distant car horns. “How is school? It’s been so long.”

“Yeah, well...” Nicholas swirled the beer in his glass. Set it back down a few centimeters further to the left so that there was a crescent of condensation visible on the dark wood of the tabletop. “Have you heard from dad?” He asked.

She said nothing for a few moments.

“I went to see your last film. It was very dark.”

Nicholas ran his index finger along the rim of his glass. His latest short film had been about an abusive relationship set in the fifties. It ended with the antagonist’s gun hand trapped under a garage door, while a twelve-year old neighbor boy sawed it off at the wrist.

“Very dark,” his mother continued, “but I liked it.”

If the man would’ve dropped the gun he could’ve pulled his hand to safety, but the hand wouldn’t let go of the gun, even after it had separated from the arm entirely.

“Thanks,” Nicholas said.

“You look good. I like you in a sport coat.”

“It’s hot.” Nicholas allowed himself a glance in the blonde bartender’s direction. She was facing away from him.

“Mateo liked it too, your film.”

“Tell him thanks for me.”

She had told Nicholas about Mateo on the phone, when she had arranged this meeting. “I’m seeing someone,” she had said. “His name is Mateo.”

There was another silence. Nicholas’s mother looked around the bar. Nicholas considered her gray hairs. They were sturdier and more bent than the others. His eyes rested on her shoulders. Her posture was still good. It reminded him that he was slouching his own shoulders. “The world is a stage,” she would say when he was young. She didn’t look that much different than she had when she posed for the Hamlet advertisements. He thought back, he must have been eight then. He remembered watching her in rehearsals: the funeral scene. Her parents had explained to him that she would act dead. He had cried not because of her unresponsiveness, but because of the way Laertes held her. Nicholas was inconsolable. His father had carried him outside. He was not allowed to any of the public performances.

He waited for his mother to restart the conversation, sipped his beer. He hadn’t wanted to meet like this at all. He liked the way his life was, or at least, it was easier. He had friends, he had school. His shorts were winning prizes at festivals, his name was out there.

“Nicholas,” his mother said.

“Why wouldn’t you just come in?” he asked.

“I was anxious,” she spoke loudly, but her hand motions were intimate, understated.

Nicholas nodded.

“I wasn’t sure I would recognize you,” she said. “The way you used to dye your hair and dress yourself up. You really do look nice.”

Nicholas felt the moisture under his arms soaking into his shirt. He wanted to take off his jacket, roll up his sleeves, but he was afraid of what the gesture might mean.

“Nicholas, I’m going to marry him,” she said. “I’ve asked your father for a divorce.”

The stadium was almost full. Thousands of people. Nicholas’ mother was to his right. The seat to his left was still empty while the announcer explained the rules of the first match, Mateo’s. It was a tag team. He had been asked by a young, relatively thin, wrestler called Marcus Palo to join a team on a WWE program that aired weeks ago. They were matched against two men in heavy red and black face paint who were supposed to be brothers. The Azul Angel and his partner entered to a generic metal song.

The crowd went wild. All the cues told them that these were the good guys. They high-fived the crowd surrounding their walkway and entered the ring by a set of stairs, vaulting over the ropes. They circled the ring, pumping up the audience, and pounding fists and elbows together. Then the music changed. The other tag team entered. Their image was shown on four screens suspended from each of the corners of the stadium. The text read *Blood Brothers* in a dripping red font. They came out spitting and making obscene gestures at the audience. The air was full of booing and hissing. Nicholas looked

at his mother. She wasn't looking at the screen. She was watching Mateo in the ring. She leaned forward, taut with energy, seeming so young.

When Nicholas had entered Mateo's dressing room with the mask, she had had her arms wrapped around Mateo's neck. Her back was to Nicholas and the door. For a second, before either of them noticed him, it reminded him of something from his childhood, not quite a memory, but a feeling.

The Blood Brothers propelled themselves into the ring, under the ropes. One immediately drew the referee aside, while the other ran up behind Mateo and elbowed him in the back of the head. The crowd booed and the referee turned just in time to see Mateo's partner retaliate.

When his mother told him, Nicholas didn't say anything. He wasn't surprised or angry. He felt disconnected from the whole affair.

"It's been over two years since your father left." She straightened the condiments at the edge of the table. Mustard, ketchup, hot sauce in a line. "I have a right to move on."

"Mom," Nicholas said. "It's fine. I don't care."

She looked hurt, recovered. "We want you to be in the wedding. Mateo wants to get to know you. The two of you have a lot in common. "

"I doubt that," Nicholas said.

The door opened and closed quietly. Nicholas felt the pressure of the room change.

"Don't be mad," his mother said. "I didn't think you would agree to meet him otherwise."

Nicholas turned to see the looming figure of a man, backlit by the bay windows. The bartender stared. The man stepped forward, and his features resolved themselves. His face was not attractive, but distinct. His eyes were farther apart than expected, the nose wide and flat. He was clean shaven, wore a Hawaiian shirt and cargo shorts. He stepped again. A big man, but his muscles did not bulge. Rather, his body had the attributes of proportion and athleticism. He held out his hand to Nicholas, who took it out of instinct.

“Nicholas,” he said.

Nicholas didn’t say anything, but stared, his lips parted. He felt the presence of his tongue against the roof of his mouth, his hand in a firm grasp.

“This is Mateo,” Nicholas’s mother said. “He’s a luchador.”

The two released hands. “Nice to meet you.” Nicholas said. He had not yet recovered, had not reconciled himself to the reality of the man standing before him.

“Well, I’m going to order a drink,” Mateo said. He looked Nicholas in the eyes, pointed. “Would you like another?” Nicholas shook his head. Mateo stepped over to the bar, and Nicholas heard a smile in the bartender’s tone when she asked, “What can I get for you?”

His world fell back into place. He whispered to his mother. “A wrestler?”

“A luchador.”

Nicholas shook his head. As Ophelia, she had brought tears to the eyes of everyone who saw her descent. She had won awards.

Nicholas looked at Mateo’s back leaning against the bar. He was bantering with the bartender. She was laughing. There wasn’t a hint of gray on his head.

“How old is he?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“That’s only four years older than me.” Nicholas felt like he was making a point, but his mother seemed unfazed.

She said, “He studied postmodern literature at the University of Mexico City. Then he got cast in a luchador film. He was an extra at first, but he fell in love with the art form.”

“Art form?”

“The only truly postmodern one,” Mateo said, stepping back to the table. He set another beer down in front of Nicholas, and a glass of cranberry juice in front of Nicholas’s mother. He looked at her and said, “You have to drink something,” then turned to Nicholas. He said, “Your mother has a urinary tract infection.”

Nicholas stared into the full glass in front of him. He still held half a glass in his left hand.

Mateo continued, “Only in Lucha Libre do the theories of Lyotard never go out of style.” There was a moment of silence and then Mateo guffawed, patting Nicholas on the shoulder.

Nicholas smiled weakly.

“Has she told you about the wedding yet? It’s going to be the party of the century. Don Carlos himself will rise from his grave to be there.”

Nicholas nodded, though he didn’t understand the reference.

“I’ve wanted to marry your mother for a long time, Nicholas. She is an amazing woman.”

“Why didn’t you?” Nicholas asked. In his head he was wondering how long after the separation his mother had waited before throwing herself into the dating ring, and where she could’ve possibly met someone like Mateo? He was so young. His shirt was too bright. He didn’t fit in this bar, in this city.

Mateo continued, spoke with a kind of authority that Nicholas resented. “Your mother would not leave the city where you were.” He reached over and grasped her left hand with his right. “She has seen every one of your films, you know. And I, I was not sure I would be able to stay. Last week we got good news. I got a contract with World Wrestling Entertainment. I proposed immediately.”

Nicholas laughed out loud. He couldn’t help himself. He tipped his head back.

He looked to his mother. “This is ludicrous,” he said, slapping his hand on the table.

“You shouldn’t laugh.” His mother said. It wasn’t scolding, it wasn’t a reprimand, it was an indictment.

Mateo looked over to Nicholas’s mother, waves passed between them. He turned back to Nicholas. “I have seen your films,” he said, “with your mother.” Nicholas stopped laughing, but the muscles of his face remained contracted in a tense smile. “They are good, but you take yourself too seriously.”

“In every one”, he took a sip of his beer, “you kill your father.”

Nicholas didn’t argue.

“You should try a happy ending.” Mateo opened a cargo pocket and laid a mask out on the table.

Nicholas wasn't smiling anymore. He stared at the blue and white fabric. The fabric stared back. "This is my mascara," Mateo said. "Soy el Azul Ángel. This mask is a part of me. When I wear it I am the Blue Angel."

Nicholas poked at the nose hole of the mask. The fabric scraped against the tabletop.

"No woman, no one has understood this like your mother does. That is why I will give up my self for her."

Nicholas looked at his mother, looking at Mateo. Her eyes shimmered.

"In the WWE I will be a villain, it is part of the contract. Tomorrow night I will be unmasked. You should come. You will see me die."

The thought did not sound unappealing to Nicholas.

"You take my mask." Mateo said. "Bring it with you tomorrow night." He placed two tickets on the table as he stood. "If you do not bring it, I cannot fight. I will lose my contract. I will not marry your mother. I will go back to Mexico. I am a rising star there. My films make money; *Azul Angel y Los Vampiros de Guanajuato*." He held his hand out to help Nicholas's mother up, and the two left the table. Nicholas felt his mother bend down to kiss him on the top of his head. Their steps were in sync as they receded towards the door.

Nicholas stared at the blue and white mask. He stared seriously, blank-faced, for he wasn't sure how long. Then a memory stirred in him. He was in one of his undergraduate courses. His mother and father were still together. In class they were playing a Mexican luche film. The hero, in a white mask was wrestling a horde of

zombies. The whole class was laughing at the absurdity of it. The man had no right to survive. He was a wrestler. He was not a superhero. But they all knew that he would.

Nicholas knew that he couldn't keep his mother from marrying this man. He didn't even want to. He picked up the mask, lifted it to his face, looked through the eye-holes. It was surprisingly heavy, like a camera or a gun. He slipped it into his jacket pocket.

He picked up the two tickets, held one in his hand and dropped the other one on the bar with a wad of bills. Nicholas exited the bar, and entered the flow of human traffic outside. He imagined the bartender looking up at him and smiled as he passed by the window.

She probably wouldn't show up, but it was worth a shot.

She hadn't shown up. The match was in full swing. Mateo as the masked Azul Angel, launched himself into backflips from the ropes, caught his ankles around a Blood Brother, and reversed momentum, sending him flying out of the ring. The downed wrestler tagged his brother. He came in and picked up Mateo by the waist, slamming him into the mat shoulder first. Even though Nicholas knew what was coming. He felt a little sick at the impacts inflicted upon the bodies of these men. He had to admit it sometimes looked quite real.

Mateo had told him. He would be winning. They would go through three tags. He was to showcase his aerial and gymnastic skills. Compared to the grounded and more brutal style of the Blood Brothers, his would seem elegant, athletic. He would fly through the air like an angel. They would fight like beasts.

This was it. The other Blood Brother came into the ring without being tagged. He took the referee down with a metal bar that had been on the ground near the ring. The two of them double-teamed Mateo. One held him, while the other caught momentum off the ropes. He was arm barred. He was slammed against the mats. His neck was pressed into the ropes. All the while, his partner seemed unable to enter the ring, held back by honor. He pounded his chest and screamed, as though in agony. Nicholas almost joined in the shouting of the crowd. His mother reached for his hand, grasped it tightly.

The Azul Angel was kneeling on the mat. One of the Blood Brothers held his arms. The other stood before him, his fingers curled underneath the blue and white mask. When it was pulled from his face, it would cause a split in his identity. It would drive the man beneath the mask crazy. He would become a villain, and the Azul Angel would die. Nicholas squeezed his mother's hand. The crowd had become almost still. The mask lifted away slowly. It peeled like flesh.

THIS MOMENT

This moment. It is the movement of air over a stubbled jaw. It is a fan blade turning – a motor driven by electrical charge. It is light, soft-white, 60 watts. It is a circuit flipped open, electrons traveling over bridges. They met on a bridge. This moment is her finger on the switch. Tactile and functional. Her hands are adept. Her fingers have made a fool of him. She's been flipping switches for years.

This moment, it is the moment of her leaving. It is the moment of her disappearing.

A function, a fundraiser. Chicago. The Bloomingdale Project. It is a certain kind of person, and a searching for the same kind of person. These people reduce, reuse, recycle. Waste not, want not. These are downward dog people. These people inhale, and exhale, open the hips, lengthen the spine, feel the space. These people wear stretch cotton, socks with toes, moisture wicking. These people sweat on mats made of newspapers and tires. These people speak out against GMOs, have co-op memberships, subscribe to newsletters, drink locally-sourced red wines by the liter. Their teeth are stained red, and they whiten – with baking soda, and sesame oil, and banana peels. These women keep personal massagers on their nightstands; shared tools. These men ask for a finger on their prostate when they cum. It is fall, and every one of these people wears a scarf.

She says she is an expert of disappearing. He says he's an expert at being left behind. She likes that he talks about his mother. She is attracted to his incestuous urges. They agree on a social responsibility not to have children. This is their first conversation.

They leave the fundraiser with their wine glasses. Later they'll leave them at a coffee shop in exchange for biodegradable cups of fair trade coffee spiked with Stolichnaya and agave sweetener. He will want to have kept the glasses, but they are a certain type of people. The thing is to nurture the fantasy.

This moment, the moment of his waking; it is an accident of free will, a brush of air, a shift of shadows, a tired-muscle body in waves of white sheets, a conscious breath, a contraction and expansion, a coming into focus.

Her finger on a switch, a gentle hand, a thin wrist, lean muscle, a curve and a shape, tousled and knotted hair. A memory of scent; of citrus, spice, and sweat. An open door, closing quietly, gently. The fan blade moves in circles. This moment is the retelling of an old story. Of a mother's breast hidden away. So many doors are shut quietly, gently.

They walk, they enter and exit galleries, pass by street artists. They cultivate an intimacy and a physical closeness over Door County wine and conversation. A warm-lit bar with multilevel floors. They lean towards one another in oversize chairs across side tables spread with journals and art circulars. They compare degrees, membership cards. Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. They pronounce foreign names, Delueze, Irigaray. They've an acute awareness of representation. Their sexuality is broadcast. Derrida, Baudrillard.

They walk to the lake at dusk. They let it get late, chill. Their bodies speak loudly. They talk quiet. He says it's fitting they met on a bridge. They could've met in a tunnel, she says. The way out is through. She asks if he lives nearby. He lives a few blocks away, just around the corner really.

This moment is a chance. It is a finger on a switch. She could be gone already but the room is dark and unfamiliar. She gathers her belongings in this moment; her purse, and her sweater, and the bits of her self that she has mislaid during the night. She is looking back. Almond hair, and chestnut eyes, freckled skin.

He could speak. He could stop her. Breakfast, he could say. Coffee.

The door is open and then closed. A door is either one or the other. She is leaving. He is silent. Conscious breath. This moment is not over. He could still find her for a time. She is still in the building, still on the street. This moment stretches. After a certain time, it is over.

Maybe he will see her again. There are café's and bars, galleries and functions, bridges and tunnels. The city is an open space. Their maps intersect. They might find each other. She might say his name and how has he been? They might smile and sip wine. But even if they do it will not be the two of them, and he will remember the glasses and how they walked with them from the bridge. He will wish he had kept them.

A GOOD LIFE

There are two girls upstairs, their hair cut short and their teeth falling out, Addie and Lydia. One might be nine, the other seven. Small, they are made up of lean muscle. When one wakes, it is the custom to push the other out of bed, and then to jump after in Lucha Libre fashion. In the apartment below Steve hears this, and reaches for his robe and cigarettes.

These girls are sent out into the world clean-cheeked, but return with their faces war-painted: red from exertion and often blood, brown and green from dirt and grasses, yellow from dandelions in the early summer. They are a strange tribe as independent of their tired-throated parents as they are of the other little girls that roam the neighborhood on pink bicycles.

Steve sits on the front stoop on a Friday morning. It's fall, a warm day – t-shirt, shorts, and a robe. The older girl, Addie, approaches him.

He has bags under his eyes, and small scars scattered over his arms and hands. He looks mid-thirties but is younger. Morning joggers and early risers don't nod or speak when they pass. This is a nice looking neighborhood and people would probably prefer it if he just stayed indoors. His eyes are too sunken for the architecture here.

Addie grins, gap-toothed. The girls have only just tumbled down the stairwell and around the corner into the morning sun, and already her hands and shirt show green stains. Steve smothers his first cigarette in an old coffee tin and lights another.

This is how it works, one distracts him while the other slinks along the side of the house, sneaks his pack off the stoop. They only take one cigarette at a time, and think he doesn't notice. Hell, who knows how many times he hasn't.

He smiles now, on the stoop. The bags below his eyes crease. Addie walks towards him carefully with her hands together. The little one, Lydia, is out of sight somewhere. He looks over his left shoulder, but doesn't see her.

The way he figures it they steal from everyone. He knows they steal from their parents. There's an evergreen in the back, He's not sure what kind, but it's got very low hanging branches. He watches them from his bedroom window with the blinds mostly shut so they don't see him. He watches them pull the dirt covered board loose. They lift out an old cigar box, and stuff a few cigarettes, jewelery, a knife inside. There is a wad of one dollar bills.

Addie holds out her hands like she's cupping water, makes an opening with her thumbs. Cradled inside is a tiny pink object. It shifts slightly in her palms, and Steve sees that it is some kind of baby rodent. There is a circle of bluish haze where its eye must be. Addie is giggling.

The bus announces its impending arrival with engine sounds and a hiss of brakes. It sounds, Steve thinks, like a very large very angry mother rodent. Addie crouches down next to the stoop. He can tell she means to set the rodent down gently. In her hurry it falls several inches to the ground. Steve stares at it, writhing in pain amongst the woodchips.

He stares at the rodent. It'll probably die there, he thinks, away from the mother. The tip of his cigarette glows as he inhales. The bus pulls away. He watches the thing struggle there until his cigarette is finished.

When he comes out again in the afternoon, it looks almost dead. It's noticeably more gray and curled in on itself. It looks, he thinks, like a child's thumb resting in the woodchips. He doesn't want the girls to see it. So he takes it inside and drops it in the trash. He stares at it.

Tricia's pregnant now. He found out in a text from her mother, his ex-mother-in-law. She just started her second trimester. *Don't worry*, the message said, *it's not yours*. He's not convinced. *Don't worry*. They weren't even having sex at the end. It embarrasses him that his ex-mother-in-law knows that. It embarrasses him that he has an ex-mother-in-law.

The girls have probably completely forgotten about the rodent. The world is too big for them to remember something so small. He reaches into the trashcan, between a balled up tissue and a used paper plate, and grips it between his thumb and forefinger. He lifts it up to his ear. He can feel a faint rapid heartbeat in his fingertips. He thinks he can hear it breathing. He takes it into the living room, and lies down on the couch. He rests the tiny animal on his stomach, and cups his left hand over its body. He falls asleep as the contestants of a game show are called jumping and screaming from the studio audience.

When he awakes the TV is static and the rodent is dead. He puts on his robe and carries the creature outside. The old house creaks around his departure. In the backyard he gets on his hands and knees and crawls under the branches of the tree. The hidden space they create is more than big enough for two children to crouch under. It's like a natural fortress. He feels the moist earth pressing into his forearms, and soaking into his shirt, traces his fingertips across the ground searching for the edges of the board. He lifts it aside, opens the box. He pulls out a cigarette and sets the dead rodent in its place. It

looks naked resting amongst the trinkets and cigarettes, its head lying against the wad of bills.

When the girls awake, he will be on the stoop in his robe with the cigarette and the lighter. He will light the cigarette and inhale, and he will take them to the backyard. They will have a funeral for the rodent. It will be a celebration of its short life, and a mourning for the passing of that life. It was a good life and they are strong, these girls.

INFINITESIMALS OR LINES V. RAYS¹

Points, P and Q

It's 9:30am. I am leaning against the glass counter next to my register, reading passages from the latest *Cosmopolitan* out loud. *31 Days of Sex He Won't Forget*², I say.

She turns the page of a *People* from best to worst dressed, *We should ask Mr. Watanabe to pick up some Chinese food today.*

Her hair is wet. When dry, it is a golden wheat field blonde. Wet, it is brown and gray like fallen leaves. She always comes in with her hair wet. She's a biology student at UW Madison. It is summer, but she still lives in the dorms and walks down State Street from the University to The Corner Store each morning to stand next to me, behind a glass counter with two cash registers, reading magazines.

Day 14: No-Hands Nooky

The rules: you can explore each other's bodies with your lips, breath, hair, knees. No hands. The restriction will force you to be imaginative and get creative. You'll be amazed at what you can come up with.

Chinese sounds good, I say. I can smell the citrus shampoo she rinsed out of her hair hours earlier. She is short, and lean. Her hair is styled in an uneven bob, long in the front almost boy-short in the back. She wears thin fabric shirts that drape off of her shoulders and small breasts, hinting at her shape. She wears an expression of perpetual

¹ An autobiographical case study.

² The same article every week, but with a different title and in a different order.

boredom, but it is a hopeful, searching kind. Her boots are like the ones on the covers of the fashion magazines in the rack.

Day 15: The Sensual Shower

Fog up the bathroom mirror by sneaking up behind him in the shower. Bonus: the soap and warm water will make your skin glisten. Start by washing his back and chest, then move on to more intimate zones. Getting dirty in the shower is always a good idea.

My parents tell people I'm a student. I haven't been for over a year³. I took some time off from it. I told my parents I missed the deadline this semester, but that I would apply for the next one right away. That I have the financial aid papers sitting on my coffee table, all filled out. I stopped eight credits into a Master's of Philosophy.

Day 16: The Long Tease

When you wake up tell him what you are going to do to him when he gets home from work. Take breaks throughout the day to text him, elaborating on the details. Get specific. Spread the teasing out. By the time he gets home, both he and you will be ready to explode.

She says, *Are all these supposed to be in a row? Sounds exhausting.*

I laugh, shut the Cosmopolitan and slip it back into the shelf as I head up to the roof for a cigarette.

³ After six years of higher education. I found it began to disagree with my digestion.

I'm a cashier at The Corner Store, off of State Street in Madison, WI. I commute from Fitchburg, a fifteen minute drive if it's not rush hour⁴. I'm 27, a little overweight, my hair has started thinning, and I wake up at least once a night to take a leak.

The Principle of Induction

In the mornings the contractions of my bladder⁵ call me to consciousness before the alarm goes off. This is really the only time I have to think without distraction. Often, while my brain is still intoxicated by sleep, I am drawn to contemplate the dangers of inductive reasoning. This might be the result of my receding unconscious. Maybe I'm secretly a much more anxious person than I let on, even to myself. Who's to say, after all, that when I breathe in, the air won't have congealed into water, the oxygen molecules binding with twin hydrogens? Who's to say that when I set myself behind the wheel of my rusted out old Buick and drive to work, that some other motorist won't swerve into my lane⁶? Who's to say that when I lean out of bed and set my foot to the floor, that it will support me. What if the floor buckles, what if there's a gaping wormhole?

No one can say any of this won't happen for certain. Cars and planes crash every day. Our understanding of the guiding principles of the universe is limited. I base my feeling of safety from wormholes on the fact that one has never observably appeared in a person's bedroom while they slept. It seems funny to me that someone who cannot summon up an illogical faith in the infallibility of induction is referred to as having an

⁴ An hour if it is.

⁵ I often wonder if this is old age settling in early, or the acquired habit of a brandy nightcap?

⁶ At 7:15 am Peter is travelling from Fitchburg to Madison at 55 mph. At the same time, Paul is traveling from the University Campus to his job at the Fitchburg Qdoba, while texting his girlfriend Mary about meeting up after work. He is going 70 mph because he is running late. Peter veers 15° into Paul's lane while attempting to emote with a semicolon and a closing parenthesis. How long will Paul bleed out before he dies at the scene of the crash?

irrational fear⁷. It seems like the same sort of loss of faith people experience everyday; in god, in each other.

Still, when the alarm buzzes I will inhale deeply, lean out of bed, shower, shave, and drive to work. I might die during any of these, I guess. For the time being, I'll lie in my bed, and she in hers; separated by distance, concrete and pavement; well-spaced trees; apartment buildings and three bed, two and a half bath homes with manicured lawns. Blissfully ignorant motorists strapped into their cars⁸ are pulling out of parking lots and driveways, entering the stream of traffic.

No matter how much separates us, though, between us is a straight line. We are connected and separated. It is a problem of geometry. I am P and she is Q. We are two points; pure location, no extension.

Logic

Every day I stand right next to her, but, as is always the case, I am here and she is there. We are both behind the counter of The Corner Store, which is, as the name would imply, a store on a corner. It is mostly a news stand. We sell magazines, newspapers and tobacco, as well as the occasional candy bar or over-priced bag of mixed nuts. We have cold bottles of Coke and Pepsi, a cappuccino machine. It's a six-way intersection roughly four city blocks from the Capitol building, and eight from the university. We have a mixed clientele; students, political aides, locals. From above, the corner store looks like an acute isosceles triangle⁹ with the entrance at the most acute point. Mr. Watanabe, the owner, lets us go up there, to the roof, to eat or smoke. It's a beautiful view of the city.

⁷ Remember that Twilight Zone episode with William Shatner on the airplane?

⁸ Seatbelts are a rhetorical trick we play on ourselves.

⁹ In truth it's a triangular prism, but who ever really sees the shape of things.

Today, a man walks in with a pompadour and a leather jacket. He thumbs through the magazine racks, keeps his aviators on.

She looks up, squints her eyes for a moment, says, *Car and Driver, FHM.*

I say, *Popular Mechanics, Penthouse, and a pack of cigarettes.*

The man takes his time in the racks, browses, lets us know he's not in a hurry.

I'm reading a Popular Science article about the big bang. They throw around the term infinity like it means 'really big number'¹⁰. Like it's a problem that's been solved. When I was young, I used to use infinity like this to win arguments. *No, I called it first... to infinity*¹¹. I don't use it like that anymore.

Pompadour walks up to my register with a *Car and Driver* covering a *Perfect 10* underneath it so that she won't see¹², and asks for a pack of Marlboros. She sees. When he leaves, we look at each other. I shrug my shoulders. She goes back to her article.

Several other customers come in, make transactions and leave. We guess at their purchases. Mostly, we're wrong, sometimes we're right. We count how many come to each of our registers, keep score. Winner gets a dollar at the end of the day.

These things pass the time. I listen to her laugh. Glance at the titles of the articles she's reading. She skims most of an issue of *Smithsonian* devoted to Georg F.L.P.

¹⁰ As in ...1,2,3,4,5...15,973⁵⁵, ∞ .

¹¹ The only response that could trump this was of course '...infinity +1 or the more demanding equation ($a \times \infty^{n+1}$).

¹² There are three kinds of porn purchases:

- a.) The customer goes to the register belonging to a member of the same sex and tries to hide it from view by all others in the store; this is the most common transaction.
- b.) The customer goes to the register belonging to a member of the opposite sex with a small stack, never just one, and looks the cashier in the eye. This customer challenges the cashier to judge them.
- c.) Two people come in and by porn together. They usually say something awkward to each other or to one of us. These are the only ones who smile

A lot of people come in and either lose their nerve, leaving the magazines resting in the racks behind a Newsweek, or shove it into their coat and walk out quickly. But these are not technically porn purchases.

Cantor, a 19th century mathematician¹³. She reads a quote from the piece to me with all the luster of a Shakespearean monologue. *You'd be interested in this*, she says, *this Cantor guy went crazy.*

Yeah, I say.

So there's this quote, this guy Chesterton says this: Poets do not go mad; but chess players do. Mathematicians go mad, and cashiers, but creative types very seldom. I am not attacking logic; I only say that this danger does lie in logic, not in imagination

Who said that, I ask.

Chesterton.

He must have been a cashier, I say.

Her laugh sounds like droplets of water¹⁴.

Infinitesimals

We go to the roof for our lunch break. Mr. Watanabe watches the register because it's slow today. He's a good boss. When she asks, he will go on a food run for us, free of charge, unless the weather is bad. We sit at the rickety card table he has set up on the roof. She has a cardboard container with cashew chicken, I have sweet and sour pork, we share an order of fried rice. We chew our food, make appreciative full-mouthed noises. There's a breeze off the lake, but it is not too cold.

It's much better on days like this. Most days we have to take our lunch breaks separately. If it's cold or wet out, which it is most of the year I just sit in the break room where Mr. W. keeps the TV turned to The Weather Channel. It ruins my digestion,

¹³ Really *THE* 19th century mathematician.

¹⁴ I hear it when I shower, or run the sink, when I boil water, when I pour a glass of orange juice.

listening to correspondents make a big deal about whatever meteorological event is happening somewhere in America.

There's a low ledge up here. OSHA would probably have a fit, if they knew Mr. W. let employees come out on the roof. We can watch the crowds of pedestrian shoppers, jam up at the intersections, and intermingle, and split off. Watching them like this from above, gives you a sense of perspective. They all cross the street so easily, they interact, link-up, hug, hold hands. Unaware of the infinite series of tasks they are completing by doing so.

I glance up at her. She has a mouthful of cashew chicken and rice. She smiles, her lips puckered slightly to hold the food in. I could kiss those lips, if I could only get half way there, I could get halfway there if only I could start moving in the first place. Sometimes she invites me out, there's a band. But I'm busy.

Abstraction

When I'm at home at night, I try to not think mostly. I turn on the radio while I cook. I watch TV while I eat. I play computer games, keep stacks of last month's magazines in the bathroom. There is a time, though, when I lose control. After I set my alarm, hit the light switch, before the sleeping pills and brandy shut down my mental processes.

She is there, and the line between us. I feel her; out with her friends at a bar, making laps in the swimming pool, reading a book by lamplight in her dorm room. I try to reach out to her. But the line opens up the points are infinitesimal. It is infinite by division, between every pair of points there is another point, and another. I think of a night. We close the doors of the corner store. I owe her two dollars: one for getting more

customers at her register, and another for guessing how many pornographic magazines we sell that day.

She uses the money to buy two Cokes, and we go up to the roof, together. The sun sets over the city and the lake. The water, and the sky, and her hair are golden rays. We are smiling, and laughing, and looking at each other. It is an impossible moment. A beautiful moment. I want to take hold of her. I want to kiss her.

I open my eyes and the sunset is gone.

When math was subject to Aristotlean logic, everything was shapes. Everything touched. It wasn't until our desire to reach the end of the world that abstraction came to power and distances became infinite.

Chesterton is wrong. It's not logic that's dangerous, it's abstraction.

Lines v. Rays

When the man in the ski mask came in screaming, it was two minutes before close. She had been describing and reading the captions from political cartoons in the most recent *The New Yorker* out loud.

A man with a suit and briefcase talking to an elderly angel, St. Peter, maybe, at heavens gate: 'Archibald Monroe – I'll be heading Mr. Billings transition team.'

I was recounting the cash in my register to record in Mr. Watanabe's book.

A man sitting up in bed next to his sleeping wife: 'My God! I've awakened a Republican.'

One more, she said, but was cut short by the masked man. Later she would tell me that the panel she had turned to featured a crook with two bank bags full of money slung

over his shoulder, pointing a gun at another man. She doesn't remember the caption and we haven't looked it up since¹⁵.

I remember thinking, how close he seemed. How his brownish-red beard hairs and spittle seemed like parabolic extensions, curving around the fabric edges of his mask. The mask was a mustard yellow, and he wore a t-shirt covered by a mostly-zipped navy blue hooded sweatshirt despite the warmth of the day. Outside it was dusk. The sun was setting over the buildings. The clouds seemed pink and purple because of the bending rays of light reflecting prism-like off of their molecular structures. Beside me, she ducked down behind the glass of the counter as he pointed his gun, a small pistol, around the room. There were no other customers.

The *Wisconsin State Journal*, and *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* both called me a hero.

The truth is I didn't do anything. I just stood there. We three were the points of a right triangle. He shot me in my arm, so easy, like he didn't have to think about it. The bullet just sank into my arm, deflected off of my humerus. I don't remember moving, but I was standing in front of her. She was crouched, she told reporters, the bullet would have bit into her skull. Somehow our triangle had closed into a line. Then just like that, he was gone. He didn't take any money, just ran. I don't think he expected to shoot anybody. I could still feel the ray from where the pistol had been, to where the bullets trajectory disagreed with my bone. My sleeve turned red, dark, wet. I remember watching him cross the street, He took the mask off as he crossed, parting crowds of people who wouldn't really remember what he looked like.

¹⁵ We wouldn't understand it anyway.

When the ambulance came, I was still standing there, and she was standing beside me;
her fingers closed around mine.