



Collected Things

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VOLUME I



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For Shivani

Collected THINGS

VOLUME I



THE ABSENT ONE

We could not eat the salted one; it burned our tongues. We submerged it in cold water to rinse away the salt. It drowned.

We could not eat the drowned one; it made us sad. We buried it in the earth to alleviate the sadness. It ceased to be present.

We could not eat the absent one; it was not there. We departed for lack of one to eat, unsatisfied.

THE ANSWERER

The phone rings. The person on the line says their arm is cut, badly, and they are bleeding to death.

You instruct them to apply a tourniquet. Before you is a knife—you always have a knife, just in case—and you cut your thumb off and let your blood pulse into the mouthpiece of the phone. The person on the other end gulps and gulps. They drink your blood so fast they can't breathe.

Your bleeding slows to a trickle. The person on the line says they need more blood. You cut your wrist open and pour yourself into the mouthpiece once more. Glug, glug goes the phone.

You grow faint and realize you need help. In your haze, you hang up on the caller, then dial with fumbling fingers a random number. The phone on the other end rings. A person picks up. You tell the answerer your arm is cut, badly, and you are bleeding to death.

THE ANTI-CODE

The code was not entered correctly, and the beeping has begun: the alarm counting down the final minutes until the end of the world.

People run about frantically in search of the anti-code, but it is nowhere to be found. They turn over rocks, they rifle through drawers, they scour books, they pray for intervention.

Where is the anti-code? Why hadn't they accounted for this predicament?

The beeping is more insistent now, quickening to the cadence of a cricket's chirp. It turns out that the sound of doom is almost cheerful.

Where is the fucking anti-code?

One by one, people give up the search. They fall into each other's arms and weep. They lick the salty tears from each other's cheeks. They rub their swollen parts against each other's swollen parts.

The beeping can no longer be heard for all the moaning and sighing. It turns out that the apocalypse smells like sex.

THE ASSEMBLY

“We gather here to gather here. We come together to come together.

That sounds icky? Oh, it *does* sound icky. But what feels good feels good.

And it would serve us well to serve us well. For we are all made whole when we are all made whole.

And now let us rise and begin to rise and begin.”

THE ATTIC BABY

The baby in the attic cried out. It wouldn't stop.

The woman gave the baby sour milk to drink.

Still the baby cried.

She stuffed a slice of pizza into the baby's mouth.

Still the baby cried.

She gathered all the cobwebs within reach and rubbed them into the baby's hair.

Still the baby cried.

She grabbed a spider from a nail in the rafters and let it crawl into the baby's diaper.

Still the baby cried.

"Ah!" she said. "Your radio has died." She found fresh batteries for the radio and tuned it to the station that played only lullabies.

The baby sucked its tongue and fell asleep.

AT YOUR SERVICE

A baby in a cowboy outfit rode a deer into the yard. The baby's hat was too big, the brim of it resting on the baby's shoulders, completely obscuring the infant's head and face.

She went outside. "Can I help you?" she asked. "Are you lost?"

The deer stared at her. The baby didn't make a sound.

"Here, let me see that," she said, and lifted the baby's cowboy hat. There was no head underneath. "Oh my," she said. "That's not good."

The baby reached into the pocket of its vest and produced a business card that read, *The Headless Baby Cowboy at your service*. The baby retrieved another card: *What can I help you with today?*

"Why are you riding a deer?" she asked.

The baby produced another card. *Howdy, pardner! What can I do you for?* it read.

"Why not a pony?" she asked.

Another card: *Giddy-up!*

"You're going to get Lyme disease!"

Another card: *Goo goo, gab gab.*

“You’re going to get shot at by a hunter!”

A final card: *Time to hit the lonesome trail, darlin’.* The baby jabbed the deer with its spurs, and the beast turned and trotted into the woods. The baby gave a wave of its hat, and then they were gone.

BIRTHDAY GIFTS

A child was given a knife as a birthday gift. It cut off its hand, and the knife was taken away.

The same child was given a saw as a gift for its next birthday. It sawed off its leg at the knee, and the saw was taken away.

For its next birthday, a spoon. It scooped out one of its eyes, and the spoon was taken away.

The next year the child was given a pirate costume. Everything fit just so: the hook, the peg leg, the eye patch. It was the greatest of birthday gifts.

THE BLACK TRIANGLE

A black triangle floated about the house. It was as big as a standard adult human face.

“What should we do?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said.

The black triangle hovered over where they sat on the sofa.

“It seems harmless enough,” she said.

The black triangle floated down the hall and into the bathroom.

“I think it might be lost,” he said.

“It appears that way,” she said.

The black triangle floated back to them and hovered, then floated upstairs to their bedroom.

“Maybe we should put up a *LOST* sign?” he said.

“I think that’s a good idea,” she said.

The black triangle floated back downstairs and into the closet.

On a piece of paper they drew a black triangle and wrote *LOST* above it. They made a dozen such signs. The black triangle hovered over them, then floated downstairs into the basement.

They hung the first sign on the refrigerator. The others they posted throughout the rest of the house.

Meanwhile, the black triangle floated back upstairs and out the front door.

THE BLANKET

He was sitting in his chair. His brain was cold.

He stuffed the blanket that covered his legs into his ear.

His brain warmed.

He pulled the blanket out through his mouth and over his chest to cover his legs again. Cozy, he read what he found in the folds of the blanket: a museum map, a Chinese food order, a train ticket, a two-dollar bill, a death certificate, a comic book.

But now his brain was cold again, and he was sitting in his chair.

THE BLOOD

Blood rushes down the street, a flood of it, soaking our shoes. Our socks and pants drink it up like vampires, and soon we're knee-deep.

Eggs float by, some pecked open from the inside, others green and rotten. Sodden cats, some alive, some dead, drift past. A giant truck plows through the river of blood and drenches us all.

Soon our fellow humans fight one another for space on makeshift rafts of doors. Gunshots ring out. More blood.

The sewers are outmatched. Manholes burst, sending their covers into the air on geysers of gore. And that's how you die: your skull is flattened by a falling disc of iron. For you, the flume ride is over. You're just debris to be held onto in the rapids by someone praying for a tranquil sea ahead.

THE BOAT HUSBAND

She decided to turn him into a boat. She made him lie face-down on the ground and molded his body into the required boat-like shape. Then she turned his arms into oars. She took him to the shore.

“Where to, my queen?” her boat husband asked as she launched him into the water.

She boarded him and took up the oars. “I’m thinking we should go somewhere nice.”

It was a beautiful day, blue sky, brilliant sun. The gulls squawked.

“Where could be nicer than here?” he asked.

“You’re right,” she said. She capsized her boat husband so he, too, could enjoy the full sun on his face and chest. Together they drifted.

THE BOWL OF FRUIT

It started with the bowl of fruit. Left uneaten for several weeks, the black bananas went white with mold. Soon the bowl was covered in fur. The fungus spread to the counter on which the bowl had been set. And then the walls abutting the counter. And then the ceiling adjoining the walls. And then the joists behind the ceiling. And then the floor above the joists. And then the carpet covering the floor. And then the bed that occupied the room. And then the woman occupying the bed, who in life had eaten bananas daily for her health.

BRAIN WATER

This one's brain water turned brown from all the shit he thought about. This one's brain water turned brown from all the whiskey she drank. This one's brain water turned brown from all the chocolate he ate.

This one's brain water turned green from all the marijuana he smoked. This one's brain water turned green from all the money she made. This one's brain water turned green from all the envy he harbored.

This one's brain water turned blue from all the sadness he kept. This one's brain water turned blue because that's the color she imagined it to be. This one's brain water turned blue because he couldn't breathe.

THE BRUISE

The bruise began dripping black blood onto the floor. Cold air seeped from it. Bats flew out.

He felt dizzy and lay down.

The bruise spread across his thigh, a dark pool. He turned off the lamp and opened the shade to let the moonlight in. The pool glinted tranquilly. Out from the tangled jungle of hair on his leg came two lovers, naked and holding hands. They waded into the bruise and kissed. Steam rose around them.

BURNING GUTS

He met the day with burning guts and fought a mountain lion for a cup of coffee. Rowed his boat to work, with only one good armpit, and swallowed a banana whole once he got there. Made monkey sounds, did his monkey dance.

“Can I work now?” he asked aloud to no one.

Work, then. He decoded a seemingly meaningless string of text; when translated it read, simply, *SOS*. He got a laugh out of that.

His lunch ran away before he could stab it, so he filled up on swallowed air instead. He belched loud and long.

Messages were crumpled up and thrown at his forehead, and he answered them individually: *Nope. Nope. Nope. Fuck you. Nope. Nope.*

His guts still burned. “Somebody give me a glass of milk!” he cried. Nobody did.

He rowed home, still in want of two worthy armpits. The mountain lion was sleeping; he was tempted to spear its heart once and for all, but then what would he have to contend with every morning? Burning guts only?

He curled up beside the mountain lion, felt beneath its fur for a nipple. He began to knead the cat's teats. The lion raised its head sleepily and yawned, its great yellow teeth clicking when its jaw closed once more. Then came the milk. He drank.

CADAVERING

In fall they ride cadavers down the hill into great piles of leaves they have gathered. Whoever scatters the most leaves takes the seat atop the hill; the rest build a bonfire. The cadavers are then led in an elaborate waltz that cannot stop until the flames die. At the end of the dance, the cadavers are kissed goodbye and rested on the ground.

Everyone takes up arms and joins the one on the hill to wait for the vultures to descend. The children are excitable in anticipation of the feasts—of cadavers by the vultures, and of vultures by them. Already they are arguing over who will collect the most shot from the flesh of these homely birds. They are summarily silenced and don't breathe again until the first report rings out.

CAHOOTS

The cat intends to vomit in the night. It heaves at the end of your bed, waking you from a dream in which you were at an Italian restaurant eating endless breadsticks and meatballs.

You bolt upright and throw the cat off the bed so it might puke on the floor instead of your blanket. The cat convulses as it tries to free a hairball from deep inside.

You manage to fall back asleep. The breadsticks and meatballs are gone; in their place is a snake-penis wolf running you up a tree. In the tree is your cat sitting at a red-checked table, pouring itself a glass of wine from a straw-wrapped bottle of Chianti. The cat whispers over its shoulder to the wolf, which is now dressed in a black suit. The wolf steps forward, takes you by the collar and belt, and throws you from the tree.

You land in the chair at your desk in the office, unshaven, unshowered, exhausted, and not having shat.

It is Wednesday.

A CAKE

He comes home with a bag of goodies he's collected from the side of the highway. It's his wife's birthday, and he's going to bake her a cake with what he's found. He's got a coil of turtle guts, a puff of skunk tail, a pancaked squirrel paw, opossum kidney tips, half a deer hoof, a fat groundhog ass, a garter snake stripe, and jellied dog blood.

His wife is out. He looks about their home for a cookbook, but there isn't one. What's more, he can't read.

He'll wing it.

He starts for the cooking utensils but remembers they don't own any—they usually just eat together at the side of the road. Also, they don't have an oven. And while he can do a great many things, he cannot start a fire.

His wife returns and asks him what's in the bag.

He tells her, "A little of this, a little of that."

"Oh," she says, "that sounds wonderful. I'm so tired of eating out all the time."

"Happy birthday," he says.

They kiss.

A CARROT

A man wanted a carrot, so he buried his child. He crossed his arms and waited for the child to turn into a carrot.

His wife asked him what he was doing.

“Waiting for our child to become a carrot.” He pointed to the freshly turned soil beneath which their child was buried. The child poked its hand above ground and waved.

“That’s not how carrots are grown, dear,” the woman said. She unearthed the child, flipped it over, and buried it again, this time headfirst. The child poked its foot above ground and wiggled its toes.

“That’s going to be some carrot,” the man said.

“I agree,” the woman said.

They crossed their arms and waited.

CATERPILLAR WIGS

In summer we don our caterpillar wigs and tempt the birds to eat our heads. We capture the birds for a cookout. The young and old pluck the feathers, and then we roast what's left.

We admire our caterpillar wigs as they wriggle and dance upon our heads, as we ourselves wriggle and dance on the lawn. The charcoal wafts; fat sizzles on the coals. It's the best time of year.

We continue dancing and eating until our caterpillar wigs become chrysalis wigs. Then, exhausted, we collapse on the lawn and sleep for days, only to be woken by the sound of butterfly wings flapping around our ears. The butterflies take flight and the wind turns orange and black.

CHAIR AND TABLE

The empty wooden chair shakes. It skitters away from the table that is its mate, making a racket as it moves. It approaches the top of the stairs and tips. The chair falls to the bottom, end over end, a thudding, cracking jumble of wood-sound. Then silence.

The table shakes. It judders toward the stairs. But it does not tip, for it cannot pass the jamb. The table judders back and then forward again. But it cannot make the stairs; it won't fit.

The chair lies in a heap below. The table shakes.

THE CHAMBERS OF HIS HIGHNESS

A room no one exits. One million tiles, made of baby hair and imported mud, set in the floor. Chandeliers throw shapes of light through the pendants of sliced eyeballs. Blood fountains bubble serenely. A mattress of peacock feathers waits beneath a bedcover of human leather. The wailing of the tortured drifts up the corridors and through the open window.

All is as ever.

But where is His Highness? Where is the gruesome one himself?

Slumped dead on his cold, golden toilet, with a still heart and a tail of shit.

THE CIGARETTE STORE

Mother goes to the store for cigarettes one summer morning. She doesn't come back. Not because she has abandoned her family, she explains via postcard several days later, but because the store that sells the cigarettes is gone, and her search for the store takes her further and further away from home.

Postcards arrive weekly.

I feel I am gaining on the cigarette store. I just know I will find it, if not in the next town, then the one after that. Please don't forget me!

The postcards continue to arrive. Fall, winter, spring, and another summer come and go. The child enters a new class at school. Father just sits at the kitchen table, waiting for mother to return with his cigarettes.

Family, she writes, please don't forget me!

COLD

It must be cold outside. Puffs of breath from every person, dog, bird, and squirrel cloud the air. You almost can't see through the steam.

Except it's not cold outside at all. The people and animals are just letting out the cigar smoke from the casinos in their bellies. The neon-lit signs mounted on their heads flash: *Roulette, Poker, Craps, All You Can Eat.*

COOKIES

There is a noticeable lack of cookies. There is a distinct surplus of dust, some of which may be the crumbs of former cookies. While there is no potable coffee to speak of, the dark brown rings on this surface seem to indicate there had been at some point. Currently the windows let in only a small amount of ambient light; the plant, however, is flourishing, which indicates a healthy level of photosynthesis.

There is no human presence, but traces of one are evident. The seat of the chair, when depressed, releases a roast-meat smell. Specks of blood and mucus dot the walls. There are fingernails—torn or bitten, rather than cut—on the floor. It is unclear whether the human is temporarily absent or permanently gone. Regardless, it is our recommendation that a plate of cookies be left here. One, it may encourage the human, if extant, to return. And two, it may serve as an enticement for the remaining humans to stay/not destroy themselves.

THE DARK SPOT

There was a dark spot on the floor. It could not be rubbed out. It began to spread, several inches a day. No one knew what to do about it. They ate sandwiches and watched it grow. Soon the entire floor was black. Slowly the darkness climbed the walls and obscured the windows. Then the ceiling was black, too. No light could get in. And so heavy was the darkness inside that matches wouldn't even spark. No one knew what to do about it, and there were no sandwiches left.

DARLING HAROLD

He wore dead babies for shoes. Drove a car made of curses you could hear for miles. Shaved the heads of random passersby. Swung every cat that crossed his path. Fed poison to all the mutts. Handed out feces on Halloween. Made a priest eat his own member. Shot an airplane out of the sky. Put razor blades in bowling ball holes.

He defecated on a rainbow.

He was the meanest man in town. But to his mother, who was delighted to receive his freshly cut flowers each Sunday, he remained Darling Harold.

THE DAWN OF MAN AND CHRISTMAS TREES

A pine tree erupts from the middle of the ocean, rising like a rocket into space. It spears the moon, which pops like a balloon and releases a confetti of spermatozoa and ova. Some of these mate in freefall and land silently, programmed for birth. Others collect like snow on the gigantic pine that freed them, glinting like metal by the light of the stars. Another moon rises like a soap bubble from the deeper sea and takes its place in the night sky.

DEAREST HEART

A suitor wrote a letter to the woman he was wooing. *Dearest heart,* it began, *how do I love thee?*

The letter was returned, edited, several days later. *Dearest heart,* it now read, *how do I love the?*

He wrote back, *Dearest heart, how do I love the what?*

Again, the letter was edited and returned: *Dearest heart, how do I love the what is not the question.*

He wrote back, *Dearest heart, how do I love the what is not the question I am asking.*

The letter came back: *Dearest heart, how do I love the what is not the question, I am asking why?*

He wrote his beloved, *Dearest heart, how do I love the what is not the question I am asking, why are we quarreling?*

At last, his beloved wrote back, *Dearest heart, how do I love thee?*

THE DINNER PARTY

After dinner, we moved to the host's patio. Someone suggested we play our favorite game.

"I'll start," Charlemagne said, smoking his ever-present pipe. He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Ah!" he exclaimed, then tucked his forelock into the bowl of his pipe and burned his head off. A fine start.

"I've got one!" said Suzette, neck laden with jewelry. She twisted her lovely gold chains tighter and tighter until her purple head popped. Wonderful.

Sven, the lothario of our group, winked at us and lasciviously flapped his pink tongue. He took that glistening organ in his fist and ripped it out, removing his lungs right along with it. Breathtaking.

Finally, our host took the patio, his huge mastiff beside him. "Really," he said. "This again?" He bent down and placed his shiny bald head in the dog's panting mouth. A sound like crunching ice.

It was then that I noticed my drink had melted. I had planned to sink my member into its cold and die of embarrassment. Alas, the party was now truly over.

THE DIPPING SKULL

The dipping skull is filled with savory sauces. The dipping skull is lowered into the well for water. The dipping skull is paired off with a dance partner. The dipping skull is thrown into the lake. The dipping skull is allowed the indulgence of snuff. The dipping skull disappears, finally, into the grave.

THE DONKEY, THE CHILD, AND THE SEAGULL

The braying donkey walked into the ocean. It didn't know if it could swim or not. It couldn't and drowned.

Next came the child. It waded into the ocean. It could swim, but not well enough to survive the swells and currents. It drowned, too.

Then came the seagull. It plopped into the water and bobbed like a boat on the ocean. It was as seaworthy as any Viking ship of old. It drifted aimlessly and caught a little shut-eye in the warm sun.

A raving, starving man in rags floated on a tattered raft with nothing but a splintered oar. He hadn't eaten or drunk anything in days. He saw the seagull and cracked its skull with the oar. He twisted the bird's head off, drank its blood, and ate its flesh. He was reinvigorated.

He began to paddle. He was determined to find land, to reunite with his donkey and child.

THE DOOR

A man came upon a door without a handle. There was no way to open it. He knocked.

From the other side a voice said, "Hello! I seem to have come upon a door that cannot be opened."

"Hello," said the man who had knocked. "I, too, seem to have come upon a door that cannot be opened."

"Can you help me?" said the voice from the other side of the door.

"Can you help *me*?" the man said.

"I'm stuck behind a door," the voice said.

"*I'm* stuck behind a door," the man said.

"But you're free," the voice said, "not being trapped behind this door with me."

"But *you're* free," the man said, "not being trapped behind this door with *me*."

THE EDIBLE WIFE

First he ate her toes, then her ankles, calves, knees, and thighs.

“Don’t stop there,” she said.

He ate her hips, her belly, her breasts, and her neck.

“Don’t stop there,” she said.

He ate her chin, cheeks, nose, ears, head, and hair.

She was gone.

“I miss you,” he said.

“I miss you, too,” she said from within him. “Come inside.”

So he ate his toes, his ankles, his calves, his knees, and his thighs. He paused to take a breath. “I’m coming, love!” he said.
“I’m coming!”

ETERNAL REST

A man decided to stay in bed and sleep forever. But eventually he woke up at his funeral in a casket.

He tried to move but couldn't. Nothing worked anymore. "I'm not dead!" he cried. "I just wanted to rest, in peace!"

His family looked down on him. "That's what we said."

"I'm sorry I ignored you all," he said. "But I'm in a better place now!"

"That's what we said," they said.

THE EXTINCTION

It wasn't an ice age caused by an asteroid. It wasn't a plague bubbled up from the muck. It wasn't volcanoes or earthquakes or flooding or fire. It wasn't a lack of water or a burned-out sun. It wasn't a chain reaction or natural disaster of any kind.

It was a baby that did it. And not even a cute one.

THE FAMILY HAMMER

In our family, the hammer is passed from one generation to the next, like red hair. When my father bowed his head and handed the hammer to me, I felt the weight of it—both real and ritual—and stove in the back of his skull. He crumpled at my feet, kissing them in gratitude.

In due time, I passed the hammer to my own child, now fully grown. “I’m sorry,” my child said, which was the first mistake. The second was to not be true to their own strength: the blow knocked me down and out for quite a while, but it did not eliminate me.

So here I stand, a kind of god among my line. The family hammer hangs above the cradle of my child’s firstborn, a redhead like its parents and all the other parents before it. But my hair grows gray and I plan to live forever—or at least long enough to watch my grandchild take up the hammer, heft it in their hands, and fell the one who couldn’t fell me.

THE FERRIS WHEEL

A man cleaning his attic knocks his head on a rafter. The ferris wheel inside his skull comes to a stop. The seat at the top of the wheel swings back and forth. The lovers fondling and kissing in the seat don't seem to notice that the wheel no longer turns. Their fumbings intensify; their shoes drop. The man sneezes, and the wheel is jarred back into motion. He decides the attic is too dusty and leaves it as he found it: cluttered.

THE FLY

A fly landed in his drink, took a sip, and asked him if he had anything better than swill.

He opened a bottle of wine he'd been saving. The fly sampled it, hiccupped, and told him the wine had turned to vinegar—hadn't he anything worth drinking?

He poured two fingers of the best scotch he owned.

"I like it on the rocks," the fly said, woozily.

He took a cube from the freezer and plopped it in.

"Your ice," the fly said, "there's a fly in it."

FRESHLY DEAD

A corpse was delivered to her front door. It appeared freshly dead: a former man, dressed in a rumpled business suit, cheeks blue with stubble, and hair that had been neatly parted now slightly in disarray. He would no doubt be ashamed of his appearance were he still alive.

She dragged him inside, sat him in a chair, and stripped off his clothes. She pressed his suit, shaved his face, and combed his hair. When she had properly neatened him, she went to bed.

In the morning, she came downstairs to find him in the kitchen reading the newspaper and drinking coffee. He looked up at her. "There are eggs on the stove," he said.

She made herself a plate and sat down. The eggs were good. She sprinkled a little salt and pepper on them.

"Listen," he said, "I should have called you, I know. The boys at the office decided to get together for a few drinks after work, and you know how they are. Lost track of time. I must have gotten in late and slept down here so as not to wake you."

"I thought you were dead," she said.

“I’m sorry, honey,” he said, folding the newspaper. He rose and kissed her head. “Busy day today. I’ll see you tonight!”

She took another bite of eggs. They really were good. “Tonight,” she said.

THE FROG'S DREAM

A frog in a glass box knocked itself unconscious while leaping. It dreamed that it was a frog of great wealth and noble bearing, living in a cool, damp castle of stone. Beautiful servants brought endless flies for it to eat. The frog was an adept equestrian and dressed in a plush velvet mantle and hand-stitched boots. The frog was also a renowned vintner and gifted its wine to all who came to visit the castle. Enemies were captured and confined to the dungeon, where the frog was not above urinating on them or cracking a bullwhip beside their ears. The frog slept peacefully and soundly on an endless bed of the softest moss.

The frog woke up. Its head throbbed. Then it looked up, saw a cloudless blue sky, and leaped.

GETTING MILK FROM MR. JIM

I hated visiting the basement to get milk from Mr. Jim. The silverfish were everywhere down there. But I dutifully took the bottle to the boiler room, where Mr. Jim sat in a dark corner. With one hand he unbuttoned his navy work shirt. He parted the shiny black thicket of hair on his chest, revealing his nipple, and nodded. That was my cue to raise the bottle, into which he expressed his milk.

But the silverfish! They terrified me. I could almost hear them scurrying over my shoes as Mr. Jim slowly emptied.

THE GINGERBREAD MAN

The gingerbread man's foot is gray with mold. It needs to be amputated. He places his wallet in his mouth, bites down on it, and slams his foot in a door. It snaps off cleanly, both painful and a relief. Beads of white frosting drip off his forehead and from his eyes.

But the next day he notices mold on his hand. And on his belly. And on his face.

He is lost.

He fashions an artificial foot from a cashew and his own frosting and leaves the home where he was baked. Outside it is cold. A bird calls to other birds from a rooftop; they will eat him in no time—an undignified end. It begins to rain. He stands motionless. A puddle gathers around him. He feels himself dissolve. It feels good. He sinks into the puddle and smiles. The birds take flight.

THE GLADE

A flat stone slimed with blood in a glade. No evidence of struggle in the grass, no evidence of entry into or exit from the clearing. A turkey vulture wobbles and wheels high above but does not descend. The surrounding forest whishes in the breeze.

A white cat walks toward the stone and perches on it. The cat cleans its cheek with a paw while its bushy tail sweeps the rock. When finished, it licks its muzzle and yawns, exposing sharp teeth. It is a yawn so gaping that it seems the cat might split in two along its jaw.

And then it does: fur and flesh peel away to reveal a shiny black snake lumpy with prey—or unborn offspring. The snake passes a small pink being from beneath its hind end; it vomits another from its mouth. These slick creatures pile up on the stone, writhing and mewling: kittens.

The turkey vulture still circles overhead, confused.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Your afternoon cup of coffee is used motor oil. When you drink it at your desk, blue smoke is emitted from your mouth, nose, ears, and anus. The person standing behind you, who you didn't know was there at all, makes a beeping noise and waves you to the side.

“You'll never make it,” he says. “I can get you where you need to go.”

Your eyes water from all the smoke. You're exhausted. So you go with him, and you do not notice him replace the dirty can of motor oil in the back of his belted waist with a knife already covered in blood.

Or you notice this and go with him anyway.

GRANDMOTHER'S SNAKES

Grandmother's snakes disappeared into the forest after breakfast each morning. When I could no longer hear their hissing, I'd venture downstairs to eat cold eggs. Dinners I ate early, before the food had finished cooking, before grandmother called her snakes home. I'd tape up the crack beneath the door to my room, then nail a board over it for good measure. From my window I'd watch the snakes come in, a quick, roiling river of black licorice whips. At night, with the covers up to my chin, I'd listen to them flop onto the floor in the next room, fighting for space in the big bed they all shared.

THE GREASY BAG

What's in our greasy paper bag, dear? Gelatin bunnies and shimmering robin eggs? Honeycombed bars of hollow teeth? Sweet golden tar? Spittle and cat fur? In other words, elation?

Yes, all that and more. Let us not imagine our bag empty and crinkled. Let us pull from it a chain of foil with which to garland our bellies.

A HEADACHE DECREE

A decree was issued, whereby all citizens were required to report to the citadel to be given their respective headaches.

This one had a fanfare trumpeted into his ear, that one was given a knotted thread to untie. One was informed that all his savings had been looted, another was told it was time for her to fill her womb with a baby. All the children were lined up and had their temples pinched. Not even the beasts of the fields were spared: they were simply rapped on the head with a mallet.

Once everyone's head was properly hurting, the headache decree was rescinded. In its wake, another decree was issued, whereby all citizens were required to lie on the ground and await the arrival of the clowns, who were to cheer them up and make them forget about their headaches. Many were already smiling at the thought.

THE HEIR

No food or water, they said, so she stopped feeding and watering them. No sunlight either, they said, so she kept the house in darkness. She told them stories to pass the time, spitting loose teeth as she spoke. They gave her a dollar for each tooth that fell.

THE HOLE

A man found a hole in the ground and worried it with his finger. The hole grew. He began to dig with his hands. He stopped eating, sleeping, or doing anything else in favor of digging the hole.

People who visited him were concerned. His yard was now a crater. They beseeched him to stop.

“It has no end,” he said. “When I take dirt from that side to put on the other, the other side grows while that side shrinks. Then when I take dirt from the other side to put on that side, that side grows while the other shrinks.”

“But what if you just stop?” he was asked.

“Are you crazy?” he answered.

THE HORN

A horn was growing from his head. He wasn't certain he wanted it removed; part of him wished to see how it would grow. But he would prefer the input of an expert; an appointment needed to be scheduled. A normal doctor would simply put him through a battery of tests, tell him the horn was harmless but should probably be removed. Or that he was going to die but they should try to remove it anyway.

He needed a cow doctor probably, but the idea frightened him. Any time he'd seen a cow doctor on TV, the doctor had his arm shoulder-deep inside the cow's rectum.

Did cows even grow horns? Or was it only bulls? If so, were bull doctors different from cow doctors? That wouldn't make sense. He rubbed his horn. How little he knew about the world. No wonder he was sitting on a bench alone in the middle of the day with a horn on his head, not even really worried about it.

An appointment definitely needed to be scheduled.

THE HORSEFLY

The horsefly crashes into the windshield, shatters the glass, and thrashes about, half inside and half outside of your speeding vehicle. It shrieks and blood spouts from its thick neck onto your face; you can smell its panicked breath, see the plaque on its big yellow teeth. You are, of course, screaming and swerving the entire time. Thankfully, it's night, so the highway is quiet. You aim for the side of the road, stomp the brakes, and the car skids to a halt. The horsefly struggles mightily but it is stuck fast. It frees a hoof and punches the seat next to you.

You think of a field trip you once took, where you fed peppermints to a pony. So you unwrap one of the mints you always keep in your car and place it in your palm for the horsefly to take between its horrible teeth, which it does. It stops shrieking and savors the mint a moment before crunching it to nothing. You unwrap another mint and the horsefly hungrily takes that one, too, so you unwrap another and another. And now the car smells like mint, and you are covered in blood but unhurt, and the horsefly is covered in blood and dying, and there's nothing to do but give it a candy and kiss it on the nose, give it a candy and kiss it on the nose, give it a candy and kiss it on the nose.

THE HORSEMAN'S SORROW

The dark gray clouds slid down the sky and piled up on the horizon. Those nearest the clouds said the rain fell in sheets, like a waterfall. The rain finally reached us in the form of an ever-expanding puddle. Then the thunder clapped, and moments later we saw a tentacle of lightning shoot up Main Street. It roasted a Clydesdale that was being led to the elementary school for show-and-tell. The horse's owner, who wore rubber gloves due to a skin condition, was spared from electrocution. He was inconsolable, but we convinced him to let us eat his horse. "It will only go to waste," we said. "And it is cooked perfectly."

THE HUMPH

The floor rises in a hump, which grows a little each day. It turns red. One morning it bursts and releases a white ooze that covers the legs of the couple who had been using the hump as a table.

He dips his toast in the ooze and eats it. “Do these eggs taste funny to you?” he asks his wife.

“You know I don’t like eggs,” she says, busy smearing the ooze over her face. “Does this face cream smell funny to you?”

He finishes another piece of toast dipped in the ooze. “This milk is on its way to bad—best drink it while we can.” He drops face-first into the ooze and slurps.

She glops a dollop of the ooze onto her head and works it into her scalp. She flops onto her back in the ooze and sings a shampoo jingle: “Wash those cares right outa your hair!”

A crust begins to form on the hump, which shrinks a little each day.

HUNGRY

A man carved off a bit of his forearm, fried it in a pan with butter, and ate it. Unsatisfied by this meager meal, he slathered peanut butter on the rest of his forearm, placed it between two slices of bread, and ate that, too.

When his wife came home and saw his arm missing from the elbow down, she dropped her bag of groceries, the contents of which spilled across the floor: beautifully prepared forearms, ready for frying; a fresh jar of peanut butter; a still-warm loaf of bread.

“What have you done?” she cried.

“I thought you’d left me for good,” her husband said, “and it made me sad. And you know when I get sad, I eat.”

“But I only went to the supermarket,” she said, weeping. “Because you told me you were hungry.”

“You know when I get hungry, I become forgetful.”

His wife sobbed. “What are we going to do about this?”

“About what?” he said. “All this commotion has made me hungry—aren’t you hungry, too?”

THE INVENTION OF PEANUT BUTTER

In 1884, Marcellus Gilmore Edson invented peanut butter. Prior to that, people ate bread slathered with baby feces.

The great man told his wife, “There has to be something better.”

But there wasn't, not until he invented it.

THE INVENTOR

I invented the square wheel as an aid to digestive regularity. When riding in a car fitted with my square wheels, the bowels are jostled and stimulated, resulting in more complete evacuations.

I invented the disposable toilet to be used in conjunction with the square wheel. Drivers needn't worry about on-the-go movements when their car seat is equipped with one of my disposable toilets.

I invented the portable bidet to keep users of the disposable toilet as tidy as can be. Never again enter a business meeting with an itchy asshole! Water is not included.

Should you not have actual business to attend to, I also invented the pretend business meeting, the basic model of which we are currently participating in.

THE IRON AGE

Iron rained down from the black sky. Roofs were riddled. Skulls were broken like eggs. The only havens were caves. People crushed one another to secure shelter. The dead squelched beneath the feet of the living.

Days passed. The iron rain never ceased; it fell ever heavier. Our land was deformed, pulverized beyond recognition. The clunk and thud of iron drove us mad. One by one, we ran into the deluge. Hardly any of us were still alive when the giant magnet descended and pulled us heavenward.

KICK

The rock, when kicked, floated into the air. He watched it rise higher and higher until it disappeared from sight.

He kicked a can and it, too, floated into the sky.

He gave the dog a nudge with his toe and up it went, barking and smiling and drooling.

He gave a tree the boot and watched it take flight. Its roots sprinkled dirt on him as a dazed squirrel blinked from the branches.

He wanted to kick a bird to see what would happen but that proved impossible.

Finally, he kicked himself. He lifted gently off the ground and headed for the clouds. Away from earth, the sun was warmer and the air smelled better. He turned onto his back, crossed his arms behind his head, and closed his eyes.

THE KING OF THE WORLD

A man entered the room and announced, "I am the king of the world." He helped himself to the shrimp and champagne he found on a table.

Another man entered the room and announced himself: "I am the king of the world. Relinquish that food and drink to me."

"First," the first man said, "I am the king of the world." He belched. "And second, there are only shells and dregs left."

"Clearly, you're not the king of the world," the second man said, "for the true king of the world—that is, me—would know that shells and dregs are the sweetest of delights."

"Well," the first man said, "you're more than welcome to choke on them like the pauper you are. So says I, the actual king of the world."

"I," the second man said, "being the real king of the world, will do just that." He chomped away. "Oh, what a treat! Only a true idiot would leave the shells and the dregs. I should sentence you to death."

Another man entered the room and announced himself: "I am the king of the world." He pulled the gory head of a man out of a sack and placed it on the table.

“Who is that?” the others asked.

“The former king of the world,” the third man said. He wiped clean a large bloody knife on his pant leg. “And who might you be?”

KNIVES FLY OUT

He opens his eyes and knives fly out. He kills his wife, child, and dog in adoration. He stares at a mirror for the rest of his life as penance, with only the clink and clank of glass and metal to fill the silence.

THE LAKE MAN

The lake man rises to the surface early. He floats on his back and gently pushes himself toward the shore. His morning erection cuts through the air like a fin. He clammers onto land, urinates, and finds the nearest house, which he enters. Once inside, he helps himself to a cup of coffee. An inhabitant of the house finds him naked, pale, and fish-smelly in the kitchen and screams. The lake man encourages this by raising his arms and making a horrible face and shouting gibberish. He estimates he will have seven minutes to enjoy breakfast—dry toast exclusively—before the police arrive. He eats, then scrambles back to the lake, leaving only wet footprints as evidence.

But soon it is time for lunch, and the lake man rises once more to the surface.

THE LAMB

A lamb presents itself to you one morning as you are leaving for work.

“I’m sick of this shit,” the lamb says. “Either slaughter me or take me on vacation.”

You’ve never met this lamb before and can’t stomach the thought of killing it. “I’ll have to talk to my manager about getting time off from work,” you say.

“Oh, forget it,” the lamb says. “I’ll just kill myself. Start the car and let me suck on the tailpipe a minute. It won’t take long, I’m small.”

“Don’t do that,” you say. “Come inside a minute, okay?”

The lamb follows you inside. You call your boss and explain the situation. He tells you you’re fired. You hang up.

“Well?” the lamb says.

“I hear Florida is nice this time of year.”

“Perfect,” the lamb says. “Now help me lose this sweater.”

A LOVE STORY

He was born with buttons for eyes, a zipper for a mouth, and doors for ears.

She was born with needles for fingers, oil for spit, and a key for a tongue.

They met.

They felt and fucked and fell and fought and forgave and feasted. And it was all the same.

And then they died. And it was the same.

LUNCH

In the morning before leaving for work, a man prepared to make a sandwich to take for lunch. He got out the bread, peanut butter, jelly, a knife, and wax paper. But he couldn't remember what to do next.

“Make your lunch, you idiot!” he said to himself.

He tore the wax paper into shreds. He bent the knife. He smeared the peanut butter in his hair. He threw the jelly jar out the window. He set the bread on fire.

“You idiot!” He threw up his hands. “That’s not lunch at all!”

The man from next door appeared at the window, holding the jelly jar and rubbing his head. “Hmm,” he said. “Bread on fire . . . bent knife . . . peanut-butter hair . . . wax paper everywhere . . . jelly out the window. It’s a little early to be making dinner, wouldn’t you say, neighbor?”

THE MAGGOT DREAMS OF FLIGHT

The maggot sleeps curled beneath the bun of a rotting hamburger and dreams of flight. It dreams of higher places and better smelling things.

The maggot bursts into a fly. The maggot is no more.

The fly doesn't sleep at all. It flits here and there, in ceaseless, exhausting motion. It knows only enemies. It dreams of dreaming.

The fly is clapped between the hands of a monster. The fly is no more.

Meanwhile, the maggot sleeps curled beneath the bun of a rotting hamburger and dreams of flight. It dreams of higher places and better smelling things.

THE MAGICIAN

On stage, the magician pulled a white rabbit from a hat. "I will now make this rabbit disappear," he said.

The audience hummed.

He put the rabbit back in the hat, emptied a bottle of vodka into it, then lit a match and dropped it in. Flames shot up. The rabbit screeched. The smell of burning fur and roasting flesh filled the hall.

Fifteen minutes later, when the fire had gone out, he tipped the cinders out of the hat and revealed it to be free of rabbit.

"Ta-da," he said.

The audience applauded. "For my next trick," the magician said, taking a shotgun from beneath his cape, "I will make my face disappear."

The audience hummed.

THE MAKER

He made a wife of ripe tomatoes and a house of cinnamon. He made a baby of ham steaks and a puppy of rubber balls. He made a yard of acorn meat and a career of black wires.

He made arguments of thin air and drinks strong and frequently. He made his family hate him and believe it was their fault. He made it easy for them to pack their things and leave in the night.

He made his bed and lay in it.

THE MELTING MAN

A melting man collapsed on the doorstep. He knocked weakly.

The owner of the house answered. "My god, you're melting," she said.

"It's true," the melting man said.

"I know I should first ask how I can help you," the homeowner said, "but I have to point out that you're making a mess on my doorstep."

"It's true," the melting man said.

"Worse than a thousand ice cream cones!"

"It's true," the melting man said.

The woman thought a moment. "Why don't I just run the hose over you. It might help cool you off."

"It's true," the melting man said.

She turned on the spigot. The water ran hot. She turned the hose on the man. "It's a bit warm but it will get nice and cool soon."

"It's true," said the man, melting even faster under the hot water.

“Any minute now,” she said, waving the hose back and forth, washing the man from the steps. “Almost,” she said. “There.” The water was finally cold, but the man was now gone. She took a long drink. It was very refreshing.

THE METAL EATERS

It is their nature to wake up angry, the metal eaters, weighed down as they are by all the metal they eat, their mouths cut up from all the metal they eat, their insides hamburgered by all the metal they eat, their rectums raw from all the metal they eat.

“How did we become the ones to eat all the metal?” they ask when they are together in the feed halls, eating metal. “Why aren’t the ones who make all this metal also responsible for consuming it?”

“Come now,” someone will finally say, “less talking, more eating, or else we’ll never get out of here.”

Meanwhile, they don’t ever realize, do the metal eaters, that the metal they eat is nothing but scrap, the discarded leftovers of all the good, pure metal that exists out there in the world, which gets eaten by others, which they will never taste.

THE MOUNTAINS OF THE WOMB

The mountains of the womb were impassable. Starvation ensued. Skeletons lay scattered about, moved and disturbed by scavengers, the scavengers themselves also now long since starved, skeletonized, and scattered.

Only bones and not much else.

Fire starts from nothing and flourishes where nothing else can. It engulfs the mountains, grows mega. Hot enough to melt the mountains, the fire melts the mountains.

Nothing but fire. Not even distinct flames dancing anymore. Just vibrating fire, white-hot and thick as a mountain.

My Zoo

The wolves arrive first, wearing fur coats. They stare at me in bed and run switchblade combs between their ears. The giraffes dip their heads inside the window, lick their nostrils clean, and tell me dirty jokes about well-hung donkeys. The elephant dangles its hairy trunk through the skylight to tickle my toes. The macaw flies in and squawks and squawks, scattering cigar ashes all over my blanket. Someone spills a drink on the carpet—it's the black panther, who thinks I don't see it in this dark room. It goes on and on. My zoo grows larger and gets drunker by the hour until finally—finally!—the stinking pigs arrive and clear everyone out.

THE NATURAL ORDER

The humans bury themselves in the earth and die. The rabbits eat them and make fresh dirt above ground. The grass grows tall and the cows grow fat. They spray milk everywhere and it sours the air. Flies gather in swarms that darken the sun.

The grass dies.

The cows die.

The rabbits shit themselves dry and die.

The flies die.

There are bones.

THE NEW KING

A child found a crown while digging in the backyard. It went inside to show its mother, who was sitting at the kitchen table, sharpening a knife. The child put the crown on its head and told her it was the new king.

“If you’re the new king, who was the old?” the mother said, slowly whetting the blade of the knife.

“You’re expecting me to say the old king was Charlie, who was not my real father but who was your husband and treated me like his own, and who vanished one night, never to return.”

“Old King Charlie,” the mother said, slowly whetting the blade. “There’s a laugh!”

“Or you’re expecting me to say the old king was my real dad, who I never knew because he died before I was able to remember him.”

“Old King Dad,” the mother said, slowly whetting the blade. “There’s another laugh!”

“But I’m only playing a game, Ma—I’m just a kid who found a crown buried in the backyard. What are the chances of that?”

“Pretty good, it seems!” the mother said, slowly whetting the blade.

“All you do is sharpen that knife every day, Ma.”

“I’m not sharpening the knife,” the mother said, slowly whetting the blade. “I’m carving this stone, and it’s taking forever.”

NOTABLE CITIZENS OF OUR TOWN

Notable citizens of our town include Silas Cromwell, who has held the title Wearer of the Most Orange Mustache for twenty years and counting; Eleanor Turtle, who has checked out each volume from our library at least once; Robert Gunnerson, who tunneled the length of Main Street with a hunting knife and garden spade; Ellie Brick, whose recipe for white gravy has been printed on nationally distributed cans of meat; Wally Onion, who, for a modest fee, will bend a railroad spike for you with his bare hands; Sheila Bueno, who discovered the desiccated underwear and other mementos of our town's founder in a time capsule long assumed lost; and you, who, despite a lifelong pledge to leave our town, as voiced in innumerable letters to the editor of our esteemed daily newspaper, has remained steadfast, occupying the house you grew up in, refusing to open the shades except to occasionally peek out and yell through the window at the curious.

THE NUDISTS

One morning the sun falls from the sky. It rolls down a mountain at a great speed and burns its way across the landscape, leaving a river of fire in its wake. It crashes into the ocean with a deafening hiss and turns the sea into a hot bath. All is dark.

The nudists take this as an invitation to go swimming. They slather more tanning oil on their skin for no reason. They grope about in the dark, following the scent of coconut, sweat, and genitalia. They tumble into the scalding sea. They bob and rub together and release their fluids into the brine.

It's not as good without the sun, they think. Nothing is.

THE OCEAN'S END

A woman gave birth to a tiny child. Not wanting to deal with the child, she put it in a bottle and threw it into the ocean. The shore bristled with broken glass, and the waves lapped at her ankles.

“I’ll see you on the other side, when you are as old as I am now,” she said.

Many years later, an old woman, she made the journey across the world, to where the ocean ended. The shore bristled with broken glass and the waves lapped at her ankles. She waited. The seagulls ate the pie she had baked for the occasion.

A young woman approached and threw a bottle into the ocean.

THE OCTOPUS

A brightly colored octopus sat on a sofa, watching television and eating pretzels. Each time the octopus laughed at what was happening on the TV, a gush of black ink spilled from it onto the sofa.

The octopus heard a car pulling into the driveway: the man was home. The octopus slid off and underneath the sofa.

The man yelled when he saw the ink-drenched cushions and pulled the octopus out from its hiding place. He rubbed the octopus's beak in its mess. "Bad, bad, bad!" he said.

The octopus, silent, stared at the man. It shuddered, then burst into heaving sobs.

The man sighed. He took the octopus into his arms. "Come now," he said. "It's all right." He sat on the slick sofa, soaking his pants. "See? It's all right. I'm sorry I yelled at you." He stroked the octopus's soft head.

The octopus stopped crying. The television still played the show the octopus had been watching. The mollusk glanced at the screen: an oaf, chasing a pig around a yard, stepped on a rake, smashing his face with the handle. The octopus laughed and squirted ink onto the man's lap.

“Goddamn it!” the man said.

The octopus quivered.

The man sighed. “It’s okay,” he said. “They’re my black pants.”

THE OLD BOOK

I purchased an old book and discovered between the pages the dried and flattened remains of a tiny man. He was dressed in a suit and hat and had a tidy mustache—a style befitting the era in which the book was printed. Perhaps the book's previous owner had loved him very much and wanted to keep him forever, as if he were a flower. Or perhaps he had been annoying, like a fly, and met his end when the book was snapped shut.

OLD CORN TEETH

Old Corn Teeth charmed all the women with his bright yellow smile. He couldn't eat solids on account of his soft corn teeth, but that just meant the ladies of the town were inclined to make him delicious broths, each woman trying to outdo the other in an effort to impress Old Corn Teeth. This irritated all the other men in town, of course, and they made many attempts to pluck the kernels from his mouth while he slept. But Old Corn Teeth was smarter than them: the viper he wore as a belt stayed right beside him, ready to strike any and all intruders who dared creep into whichever bedchamber he happened to be sleeping in. That snake made many widows in town—and widows, being lonely, were only too happy to welcome Old Corn Teeth into their homes, feed him some broth, pet his viper, and admire his smile.

ON THE RANCH

A horse threw a child to the ground.

“It must have a knot under the saddle?” they said.

The horse reared and stomped the child with its hooves.

“It must have a bad nail in its shoe?” they said.

The horse urinated a heavy yellow stream on the child.

“It must have an infection in its bladder?” they said.

The horse dragged the child with its teeth to a cliff and nuzzled it over the edge. A cloud of dust rose up from the valley some moments later.

“It must serve some greater purpose,” they said.

THE ORANGES

They barged into our house carrying great sacks filled with oranges, which they swung against our heads, knocking us out cold. We woke up tied to chairs, with our mouths gagged. They sat across from us at the kitchen table, deliberately peeling then eating their oranges. Rinds piled up at their feet. The fruit turned the air sweetly fragrant. They didn't speak, only peeled and ate, peeled and ate. We watched, wondering how many oranges they could possibly consume. When they reached the last one, they huddled and whispered to each other. They removed our gags, and, before I could ask what the meaning of all this was, they fed us the orange. Then they cut our bindings and left.

Such a delicious orange it was.

We were discussing just how delicious when they barged into our house carrying great sacks filled with oranges, which they swung against our heads, knocking us out cold.

THE ORDINARY MAN

The ordinary man didn't come today. The man who came had a turtle shell on his back. The ordinary man has a spine of Stegosaurus spikes running from crown to crack. He laughs a lot.

We want the ordinary man to come back, to help the days pass. We pray he doesn't dislike us.

OUR FIRE

The fire we started in the woods behind our childhood home still burns. It had been our intention to incinerate the forest, for reasons no longer known to us, but that didn't happen: it remains the small campfire it was when we left it, however many years ago.

We had forgotten about it until we had to return. We were told by telephone that the mail had begun to spill from the mailbox, that the lawn had grown tall and yellow, that the car hadn't moved in weeks. In other words, they were dead. The police had kicked in the door and removed the bodies before we arrived, so we didn't have to see that tableau at least. And we had already said our goodbyes long ago.

But what the hell is up with our fire? Can no one else see it or smell it? Aren't the neighbors concerned? And why did they look right through us when we knocked on their doors? Why did they show no sign of hearing our voices when we spoke to them?

We decided to douse the fire, as miraculous as it was. Decades had passed since we'd started it. All it took was a pail of water, half-spilled during the walk through the woods. In other words, it took almost nothing at all.

THE PENCIL FACTORY

You wake up to the smell of freshly sharpened pencils. Hills of them spill down around your bed. You wade through them, your bare calves and thighs tickled and pricked by pencil points.

The unlit fireplace is the source of the pencils. They roll out as from a factory. The mice that normally stay hidden in the cupboards drag and pile them.

You flash a light up the flue and in between the falling pencils that arrow your eyes you make out a monkey hacking with twin machetes a log lodged at the top of the chimney.

You wander outside, where an elephant prepares to lob another log roofward.

It is a cloudy day.

PIGS

Beneath every house there is a pig that eats and drinks all the waste produced by the people inside the home. Day in and day out, the pigs gorge themselves joylessly until they earn their respite, a relaxing spell beside the lazy river of the sewer. They lie on their backs under the iron storm drains in the street and let shafts of sunlight blind their eyes. They take in nothing more than air for as long as they are not working because soon enough they are back beneath their assigned house, sucking the sewage pipe, chewing and chugging and gasping.

THE PROBLEM PRECISELY

“You’re not supposed to do that,” they said. “You should do anything but that.”

“But that is all I know how to do,” he said.

“The problem precisely,” they said.

“Would this be better?”

“This is always better.”

“Then that is what I will do.”

“But you’re not supposed to do that. Please, for the love of god, do anything but that!”

THE PROBLEM WITH RAIN

A heavy rain brought worms up through the earth, which brought birds from the sky, which brought cats from the woods, which brought dogs from the hills, which brought bears from their caves, which brought men from their homes, which brought other men into those homes, which brought bastard mouths to feed, which brought arguments and threats, which brought prayers for rain so endless as to wash the world away.

THE PRYER

The pryer comes at night to see what's in your head. He pulls back your nostrils and unpeels your face, shines a light into the open pit of your nose.

Inside is a child at the top of a flight of stairs. The child leaps but before it lands the pryer catches it with a finger. He places the child back on the top step. The child jumps again. The pryer catches it and replaces it at the top of the stairs.

The pryer smiles. He has all night to play.

The child jumps again.

THE PUPPET HAS DIED

The puppet has died. Its bowels release down the back of the ventriloquist's arm.

The ventriloquist gazes into the blinding lights. The audience whispers.

The puppet grows cold and stiff. The ventriloquist weeps.

Someone in the audience giggles uncomfortably. Laughter spreads through the crowd. Soon the entire hall is vibrating.

The ventriloquist and the puppet take a final bow.

THE RAINBOW

A child pulled the stripes from a rainbow and laid them down on the street beside each other.

The drivers were confused; they were accustomed to seeing only white or yellow stripes on the road. Traffic came to a standstill. People honked and shouted at one another.

“Stay in your lane!”

“I am in my lane!”

“That’s not your lane—*that’s* your lane!”

They drew handguns and shot each other dead. Sirens wailed but no help could get through the snarl of idle cars. The child went home and pretended as though nothing was the matter. The family dog’s nose led the animal outside, where it began to feast on the bodies of the motorists.

THE RIDER ON THE ONYX THRONE

The rider garbed in black hurtles through cold outer space on his onyx throne. A flick of the joystick on the armrest sends him zipping left, right, forward, or back in search of black holes in which to disappear.

He longs for a kingdom he cannot remember—but king he must be, or why else the throne?

The onyx throne that is at once his shuttle, his chamber, and his prison.

He presses the joystick forward and flies onward, feels the pull on his cheeks—once supple jowls they were. Royal jowls, he thinks, for he was once a king, he thinks.

THE ROBOT

The robot will make our lives easier by doing all that we do not want to—tasks such as washing the dishes, cleaning the toilet, folding the laundry, making the bed, preparing meals, showering and shaving, driving to work, working at work, procrastinating at work, avoiding work, calling out sick, getting out of bed, keeping the shades drawn, ordering takeout, purchasing beer and toilet paper, getting the mail, ignoring the mail, responding to bill collectors, ignoring bill collectors, losing all concept of time, denying the beauty in anything, seeing only the worst in everything, and ever more.

The robot will make our lives easier.

THE ROCK

A rock crashed through the window and landed at his feet. There was a note attached to it, which read, *Here is your rock.*

The man wrote a reply: *I'm afraid this is not my rock.* He attached the note and threw the rock back out the window.

The rock came through the window again. The attached note read, *This is your rock as it came from your domicile and therefore is to be regarded as your property.*

The man wrote back, *It was only in my home after you so rudely threw it through my window.* Out went the rock.

It came back again. *I do not want your rock, sir. Please keep it in your house where it belongs.*

The man dropped the rock and went outside, ready to fight. "Show yourself!" he cried into the darkness. A rock hit him on the forehead. There was a note attached. He squinted and read it by the light of his window: *Please keep your voice down. People are trying to sleep in here.*

And then the lights inside his house flicked off.

THE SAUSAGE MAKER

Father's dream was to build a better sausage maker. He started the project on his workbench in the garage, and the machine grew and grew until there was no longer room to park his car. The hopper on his sausage maker was large enough to accept a station wagon, so in ours went, and out came links of Chevrolet. But father still wasn't content, so he added more tubing and grinders and gears and teeth, and soon the machine had busted through the roof of the garage. So in went the garage and out came garage sausage.

"It's complete," my father said one day. "Find us a pig."

And so our days were filled with savory sausage, and we were happy for many years.

But eventually father grew old and hunched and could no longer work his beloved machine. He had always been a proud man. "It's time," he said, and pointed to the hopper.

I held the ladder as he climbed slowly toward the machine's great maw. It gleamed in the sun. We gave each other a final wave. The machine buzzed and burped its way through father as I held a length of casing over the spigot to catch him.

Out he came. There was his eyeglass case, there his briar pipe.
Here his blue cap, there his farmer's tan. His bald head and cute
dimples. His beautiful pot belly, which he'd patted after every
meal we'd shared. He passed through my hands like a snake made
of man.

SCARF OF BATS

He bought a scarf of bats. It flapped all about his face and neck and shrieked and shit on his chest. Worst of all, it didn't even keep him warm.

He went back to the store where he bought it and said, "This scarf is not sophisticated at all." The scarf flapped wildly. "I wish to return it."

"Absolutely not," the store manager said.

"Why?" the man asked. The scarf flapped and shrieked and shit.

"Because, sir," the manager said, "you've removed the tags."

THE SCRAPER

He scrapes many things. A little tartar from his teeth. A little ceiling from his cell. A little dander from his dog. A little skin from his scalp. A little dough from his dad. A little dirt from his dung-hole. A little taste from his tongue. A little time from his ticker. He scrapes many things.

THE SCULPTOR

The sculptor sculpts a man out of man bones and man meat. No one will have it. He keeps it in the front yard and watches the crows alight on it and feast. When the sculpture of the man is gone, he shoots the shiny black birds one by one.

The sculptor sculpts a murder of crows out of crow bones and crow meat. No one will have it. He keeps them in the front yard and watches the neighborhood cats pounce on them and feast. When the crows are gone, he shoots the preening cats one by one.

The sculptor sculpts a clowder of cats out of cat bones and cat meat. No one will have it.

No one will have it.

No one will have it.

For want of meat, the sculptor does not eat.

A SET OF INSTRUCTIONS

APPROACH WITH Pincer Fingers the dragonfly on the bush.

Avoid snapping sticks underfoot.

Watch for diving birds overhead.

Feel the warmth of sun on neck.

Hear the hum of distant lawnmower.

Wait.

Wait.

Wait.

Snatch the dragonfly by the tail.

Admire its cellophane wings but a little.

Enjoy the tickle as it wriggles.

Take pity on the captive and swallow it whole.

Now you can breathe fire.

Breathe fire.

Burn everything to the ground.

SEX WITH GUNS

He had sex with a gun. It blew him away. She had sex with a gun.
It gutted her.

In the end, the guns were left empty.

THE SHUT-IN

A man shut himself inside his house. But then he felt trapped so he opened everything: all the doors and windows and cupboards and drawers. After, he felt better and went to sleep.

In the morning when he woke up, nearly everything he had owned was gone. A family of raccoons was eating a bowl of popcorn in the spot where his sofa had been, staring at the wall where his television had been.

Then he remembered why he had wanted everything shut.

THE SIZZLING

One morning a woman woke up sizzling. She wasn't burning; her body simply hissed.

Her husband was downstairs making coffee. "What's that sound?" he asked when she entered the kitchen. "Are you hissing at me, like a snake?"

"No," she said.

"Like a cat, then."

"No," she said. "I think I'm sizzling."

"Like bacon?"

"Yes, or perhaps sausage."

"A nice pork chop, even!" The man began to sweat. "You better go cool off," he told his wife, "or I'm liable to eat you."

"Look at you blush," she said, sizzling. She drew near and petted his bald head. "You glisten like a freshly glazed ham." She licked her fingers and opened the drawer where they kept the knives, forks, and spoons.

THE SKIN

The man inside the skin did not wake up for work, so the skin left for the office alone. It dragged itself to the bus stop and onto the bus. There were no seats available. The other passengers walked all over the skin. The skin could not protest, not having the man, with his vocals cords, inside it.

At work, the manager took one look at the skin—bruised, cut, and torn—and told it to take a sick day and go home.

It was a warm, bright summer morning. The skin dragged itself along the sidewalk instead of riding the bus. It hoped for a tan.

SLEEP

They visited him in bed, with some questions.

“Where were you last night?” they asked.

“I was here, sleeping,” he said, “just as I am now.”

“You sleeptalk a good game,” they said, “but we have you on camera, sleepclimbing out this window, sleepstrolling up the road, sleepjaywalking across the street, sleepstealing a car, sleepdriving to a liquor store, sleeplooting the place, sleepdrinking, sleepdrunk-driving, sleepspeeding, sleepcrashing the stolen vehicle, sleepleaving the scene of a crime, and sleepsleeping in a ditch.”

“That’s where your case falls apart,” he said.

“How so?” they asked.

“Being an insomniac, I’ve never sleepslept in my life.”

SO IS THE FLY

Lay head on table. Fill ear with honey. Let fly taste honey. Let fly get drunk. Fly will pass out. Tap fly on shoulder. Fly will wake up. Point gun at fly. Shoot fly with gun. Yes, you are dead. So is the fly.

THE SPIDER

The spider waits until you're asleep in bed and your jaw falls open. It's positioned itself above your whitening tongue, and when your first snore rattles out, it begins its slow descent. Your breath sends it back and forth on its silken thread, and for a moment it is a child spider again, being pushed by its mother on the playground swings. It smiles. But then it remembers the smudge of its spouse on the bottom of your slipper. It times its swing . . . times its swing . . . and shits in your mouth.

The spider climbs back up to the ceiling and cries until morning. It curses god that it wasn't born venomous. It curses god that it was ever born at all.

THE SPOTLIGHT

Tonight the spotlight shines on your doorstep. You have been called. You put on your coat even though you won't need it and go outside.

You stand in the spotlight and immediately begin to sweat. You regret bothering with the coat. Everything is white. "Why . . . Why . . .," you falter. The first bullet zips past your ear, close enough to feel the heat of it.

"Why did . . . Why did the . . ."

A bullet tears your sleeve.

"Wait, wait! Knock, knock—" A bullet explodes in your thigh and you double over.

"A priest, a donkey, and a—" A bullet hits your throat and you can no longer breathe, let alone speak. You fall to your knees and, of course, now that it's too late, a good one finally comes to you.

SPRINGTIME FOR LUNCH

A mother sent her child outside to play. It was cold and the sky was gray.

A man emerged from the woods carrying a sack on his shoulder. He wore heavy boots and a hat pulled low over his eyes. A sheathed knife hung on his hip.

“Spare a meal for a weary traveler?” He held the bag before the child and shook it. “I’ve nothing but old bones in here.”

“We’ll be eating soon, I hope. You can join us. I asked mother if we could have springtime for lunch.”

“And what did she say?”

“Go outside and it will come eventually,” the child said. “Have you brought it?”

“Brought what?”

“Springtime!” The child smiled.

The man felt his pockets and looked over his person. “Aha!” He removed a bur from the cuff of his pant and presented it to the child. “Here in my hand is the very seed of spring.” He pointed to the window: mother was preparing something in the kitchen. “She need only drop it into that big pot she’s stirring.”

The child led him to the house and went inside. The man paused at the door and adjusted his knife. And then he bent to unlace his muddy boots.

Mother dumped the pot of boiling water over the hunched stranger's head. He screamed and the crows left the trees. The child knocked him out with an iron skillet and took his knife. They dragged him inside and closed the door.

A SQUIRREL CAMPFIRE

There was a flickering at the top of the tree: a squirrel campfire. If you listened closely you could hear the squirrel playing a lonely harmonica while a meal of acorns roasted over the flames. The squirrel pined for its beloved, which it had left behind with the little ones until a new homestead could be established. Things were looking up, though; the squirrel thought this tree was perfect and deserving of a letter home. The squirrel began penning the missive: *Soon we'll all be a family again.*

On the ground, the fire engine arrived. The firemen moved the onlookers aside and readied the hose.

“Damned lightning,” someone said.

A STAND

Ordered to stand, he stood. Awaiting his next order, he died on his feet. His body stiff, he was covered in bronze.

A cold statue now.

Birds covered him in shit.

STRAYS

A stray head appeared outside the window. It was on the ground, looking up at the ceiling fan spinning above her. It appeared mesmerized by the motion of the blades.

“Puss, puss,” she called. “Are you lost?”

The head met her eyes, then returned its gaze to the fan.

“You must be hungry,” she said. She filled a bowl with cubed meat in gravy and placed it on the windowsill. “Come on now.” She was trying to coax the head close enough so she could lean out the window and snatch it.

The head waddled forward on its jaw and she grabbed it. The head squirmed and squealed and tried to bite her hand. She wrapped it in a towel and held it close. The poor, shivering thing.

She took it to the spare room, which she’d turned into a kennel for strays. All the other heads began smacking their lips and trilling. Her presence meant it was time for brushing, for meat and gravy.

THE SUITCASE

There was a suitcase in the closet. It bulged and moved as if it contained something alive.

“Open it,” she said.

“I’m not going to open it,” he said. “You open it.”

The suitcase wobbled and creaked.

“Is that even our suitcase? You’ve never taken me anywhere that I can recall.”

“Don’t start that now,” he said. “What should we do about the suitcase?”

“Bury it?”

They took the suitcase into the woods. It thrashed about as he carried it. They dug a hole and dropped it in. Immediately the suitcase was still. They buried it quickly.

But when they went back inside the house, the same suitcase was in the closet. It was rotted and spilling dirt. It gave off a horrible smell as if it contained something dead.

“Open it,” she said.

SWOLLEN SUN, HEAVING OCEAN, COLD MOON

The swollen sun has sunburned itself. It doesn't look good, all red and tight. It needs soothing; give it some lotion. It needs hydrating; give it some water.

The heaving ocean is drunk on itself. It tosses and froths without relief. It needs drying out; let the sun do its work. It needs a talking-to, too; let the moon handle that.

The cold moon is aloof and distant. It hangs in the night, needing nothing at all. It turns its pocked back to us, revealing the scars left by our rocks, thrown when all our entreaties failed.

THE SYSTEM

“Somebody call somebody: the system is down. No work can be done!

What’s that? Can we go outside to discuss a plan? Well, the sun is shining, and one imagines the birds are singing.

What’s that? Yes, the birds may be problematic from a volume standpoint; it may be hard to speak over them. Let’s stay inside.

What’s that? Someone heard an ice cream truck tinkling down the road? A cool treat might do us well.

What’s that? Yes, we may get gassy if we eat too much dairy. The smell alone might make some of us sick. Better to stay inside.

What’s that? We could eat our ice cream and then find a fragrant meadow to fall asleep in? That does sound lovely.

What’s that? Yes, a meadow would surely cause hellacious hay fever. The sneezing! The itching! Not to mention all the creepy-crawlies hiding in the grass.

Fuck that!

What’s that? The system is up and running again?

Thank goodness!”

TEETH

Every tooth has tiny teeth to eat the food you eat. The strongest teeth eat spinach and lean protein, which you almost never ingest. Deprivation makes the strong teeth even stronger. They have nothing to do but exercise and march in circles while waiting for their next meal.

The weakest teeth have tiny teeth riddled with cavities. They sit in their own filth downing pizza, beer, and jujubes. They watch reruns on TV all day and guffaw like idiots. They fart endlessly in your mouth, giving you bad breath.

THE TELEVISION

A show was on television: a family sitting around a dinner table arguing about something. He put on the evening news instead. But the news was depressing, so he went back to the show with the family. The mother, father, and child were now all dead, slumped in their chairs.

Back to the news. The anchors—a man and woman, in heavy makeup—were now dead, too. The screen was still, the broadcast silent.

A nature program. A black bear loped happily down a hill. He changed the channel, then quickly went back to the bear. It was dead, paws-up on the same hill it had been roaming only moments before.

He turned off the television and tried to sleep but couldn't. He needed the low noise and blue light of the TV to lull him. He turned it on again. The bear was still there, as were the news anchors, as was the family, none of them moving. He tried all the other channels but it was the same: everyone and everything was dead.

He turned off the television and picked up a book.

THEY GROW UP SO FAST

They grow up so fast. A tiny blood clot begets a tumor begets an alien attached by its guts to your guts. They enter the world howling instinctively at the horror. Pointy little heads fill out like balloons of hot air. Hair sprouts like mold. Teeth erupt and make them cross-eyed with pain. It's always too cold or too hot; there's not enough food or there's too much; there's too much sleep or none at all.

They learn to speak our strange language: "Ma" and "Da" and "What the fuck?"

THREE MOTHERS

A woman gave birth to a pizza. Naturally, she ate it. The police came and arrested her for infanticide and not sharing.

In jail, her cellmate gave birth to a hacksaw. They used it to cut the bars on their window and break out.

On the lam, in the woods, they met a woman who had just given birth to a house. It was small, but plenty big enough for the three women.

They lived happily together in the house for the rest of their days, three mothers inside a child.

THE TONGUE

His tongue grew thick and long and spilled out of his mouth and onto his chest. It reached his belt, then his knees, then his shoes. On the ground it continued to lengthen, collecting dirt and debris. Like a tentacle it groped: up and over cars, around trees, into and out of homes, a mile long now, two miles. Neighborhood cats batted it, dogs barked at it, people took pictures of it.

A reporter came to interview the man but he couldn't speak, his tongue no longer suited for that purpose. He merely shrugged. Butchers and chefs salivated at the possibilities of the tongue, as did doctors and biologists.

Still the tongue grew.

Impulsively, the tongue got on a boat headed across the ocean, where it toured all of the countries the man had only dreamed about visiting. It tasted all the foods he had always wanted to try, though it would be weeks before the flavors made their way back to him. His tongue had a torrid affair with a local woman. She wrote to the man:

We have fallen in love, which means that we have fallen in love. We are making our way around the world, back to you. Patience, patience.

THE TUNA MAZE

Dear Mother,

Trapped in the tuna maze. Tuna fish pâté smeared on all the walls and floors. What did I do to end up here? I paid my taxes. I flossed my teeth. I yelled never.

No way out. The cat's tongue trawls, the fish disappears, but I close my eyes and more fish is there. Everywhere. Just eat me, I think, but the cat's tongue only scratches me, slicking my hair and making my skin rashy.

Goddamn this tuna maze, mother. I want to be dead. Or at home, ignored by you and asleep.

Yours,

Father

VARIETIES OF HAIR

While he slept, his wife switched his eyebrows with his mustache. She kissed his eyes and gazed into his lips.

The man dreamed of his wife's long hair whipping in the wind as they drove in their car without a roof, which had been shorn off when they drove under a tractor trailer to escape the cops after they'd robbed the bank.

When she was finished, she put her husband's eyebrows and mustache back where they belonged, then switched his pubic hair with that of his knuckles. She held his genitals and licked his fingers.

THE VEGETARIANS

Our child was born a skeleton. We swaddled it in meats so it would not grow up feeling out of place in the world—great swaths of sirloin and chuck and whatever else was on sale. My wife and I had been vegetarian (secretly I thought this may have been why our child was born without flesh), but whenever it was time to change its meat skin, we couldn't bear to let it all go to waste. So we cooked the steaks or made stews or grilled hamburgers and ate and ate and ate. Then we'd stagger around the house in a stupor.

It became our running joke the morning after one of our feasts: we'd stroke our child's chin and say, "Time to put some meat on them bones!"

Over time we got fat, sluggish, and constipated due to all the meat. For health reasons, my wife and I became vegetarians once more. And after much deliberation we decided that our child, who wasn't flourishing at all, didn't require meat skin. It could be kept in its bassinet, in the closet, without any ill effect. It's in there now, likely playing with the bottoms of our coats.

A VOID MARRIAGE

He had fallen in love with nothing and planned to marry it in the spring. "Everyone is invited," he told all his friends, "spread the word."

Spring came and nothing was ready. But the man had gotten cold feet.

"It's all or nothing with you, isn't it?" his friends asked when he told them about his doubts.

"It's all I know," he said.

"Maybe it's nothing but it sounds like it's all you really want."

"Wouldn't that be something?" he said.

"It would be everything!" his friends said.

"But, oh, I think I long once more for nothing!"

A WALK

A dog walked by dragging a leash. Gripping the leash was a hand cut off at the wrist.

A man followed soon after, gripping the bloody stump of his arm. A chicken perched on his head, flapping its wings. A stripe of white defecation ran down the man's back.

Then came a woman carrying a meat cleaver. She wore a singed apron and sweated profusely.

Then came a child wearing only swim trunks and carrying a goldfish in a bowl of water.

The goldfish jumped out of the bowl and onto the sidewalk. It flipped and flopped and gasped for air.

A fat man reading a book while walking stepped on the fish and in the sole of his shoe brought it home, where later his dog, snooping about in the middle of the night, encountered and ate it. The excited dog licked the now sleeping man's face until he woke up. It wanted to go for a walk.

WATERMELON TIME

Father crawls under the picnic table and pokes his head through the hole we've cut for him. We shave off his brilliantined hair and the warm breeze takes it. Mother, who once had artistic aspirations beyond making our beautiful home, smiles wistfully as she paints father's head green.

We've forgotten the knife! I run inside to retrieve it from the back of the drawer. I try to hand it to mother but she doesn't want to let go of the paintbrush. "You're big enough now," she tells me.

"Listen to your mother," father says.

I carve the first slice from father's head and give it to mother. I cut another for myself. I save the biggest slice for father. He bears the pinkest of fruit. It melts like sherbet in our mouths.

The birds snatch father's hair from the wind and weave it into their nests. When the next hatchlings chirp their first cheep, it will be watermelon time once more.

WHAT THE AUTOPSY REVEALED

His veins were filled with carnauba wax and Red 40 artificial color. A cloud occupied the space where his brain should have been. Inside each appendage was a different type of seasoned sausage grind: sweet, hot, fennel, and garlic. An underdeveloped pair of wings hid beneath his shoulder blades. Above the buttocks was a nub where a tail had been. His ribs had teeth marks on them; coincidentally (or not) his teeth were worn down. His sense of humor had descended into his testicles.

Everything else, inside and out, was hair.

WILLOW WALL

I was born of my father's intestine, a piece of which he'd had removed in a war. He planted this bit of his guts beneath a willow when he arrived back home. He buried it so deep that it took forty years for me to be born, by which time my father was dead. The mighty willow's innumerable branches had grown all the way to the ground and worked their way back into the earth, forming a wall as secure as stone.

So I was born into a prison of sorts, trapped within this cage of willow branches. I did not feel confined, though, but protected. And I judged my father to be a good man because he had ensured that I grew up safely in the world and without a name.

This is the story I was told by the person on the other side of the willow wall, and I am inclined to believe him.

THE WIND AND LEAVES

A man woke up on the floor in a room of swirling wind and leaves. They whipped his face, which felt chapped and raw. The last thing he remembered was a walk in the cemetery the night before. Perhaps the wind and leaves had asked him home. They swirled faster and louder. Were they married or just lovers? He couldn't recall. And now, were they fighting or fucking? He couldn't tell.

His head hurt.

And then the wind died. The leaves fell all around the man, blanketing his body. He welcomed the embrace. He was ready to change.

“Never leave,” he said, “for I will wind up dead.”

THE WORM POLICE

The child bites into a cucumber from the garden and feels something dancing on its tongue. It plucks a gyrating worm from its mouth, and pinches the worm's guts out. The child throws the cucumber to the ground and stomps on it.

Up the garden row comes a tiny car with flashing red and blue lights and a tinny siren wailing. It's the worm police. They charge the child with wormslaughter and wanton destruction of a worm domicile.

"You have the right to remain silent," they begin.

A YEAR WITHOUT FUNERALS

We are at a loss. The living need dying to become the dead. The dead need burying to become the celebrated. The celebrated need veneration to become the remembered. The remembered need the living to live. But we are at a loss. We stand in the warm sun, with our heads bowed, but without bodies it is not the same.

YOUR SOUL

Your soul is the spot of blood that sometimes appears when you blow your nose. Try not to blow your nose so hard and so often in order to preserve your soul.

Your mind is the dazzling play of light you see when you close your eyes and face the sun. Don't stare at the sun directly or else you will lose your mind.

Your spirit is different than your soul in that it doesn't actually exist. You have gases that alternately fill or escape you, but that's all they are.

Your being is the reason you are here. Don't think too hard about this one lest you waste your time on something even more meaningless than the words you have just read.