



COLLECTED THINGS

Collected
THINGS
VOLUME II



II

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For Shivani

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AISLE THREE

A man walked into a store with a handsaw bisecting the top of his head. He was covered in blood.

The clerk pointed to aisle three. "First aid is down there." He returned his attention to the comic book he had been reading.

"Thank you," the man said. He went to the aisle, then returned to the checkout counter with a small packet of bandages.

"Sure that's all you need?" asked the clerk.

"It's nothing, really." The man showed the clerk his palm, which had a small red welt. "Just a blister on my sawing hand."

ALL THE HOLES

His fingers fell off first. Then the hair on his head and body shed. His nose and ears dried up and cracked off during a strong wind. His skin became pitted and brittle. His privates rattled in his underwear.

His jaw hung slack, his mouth an ever-open hole. A bird made a nest inside his throat and laid its eggs. Hatchlings were born. They cried for grubs and received them. Eventually, the birds left.

His eyes fell out. Squirrels chased each other through all the holes he had to offer.

AND DIES

A person pissing in the street is hit by a car and dies. The person driving the car runs off the road, hits a pole, and dies. The person fixing the wires atop the pole is electrocuted and dies. The person cleaning the storefront window is hit on the head by the lineman's tools and dies. The person skateboarding down the sidewalk falls over the cleaner and dies.

The person watching all this unfold from the window of their apartment leaves the last bit of cheese from their sandwich on the floor for their cat, wipes clean their hands, and goes to bed. They dream of an open field where rocks rise and fall from the earth like pistons. It makes them laugh in their sleep, which is a welcome diversion from the tightening they feel in their chest.

THE ANT CITY

The ants work at night, tunneling into her belly button as she sleeps. In the morning, before she wakes, they surface, faces shiny with sweat. They sit down on her hips, fill their hard hats with ice, and sink their hands into the cold. Beers are passed around and guzzled.

“It’s hard work building a city inside a person,” one of them says.

“No fancy excavators and erectors for us!” one of the old-timers says. “Just these.” The old ant holds up its gnarly ant hands. “And these.” The ant bares its jagged ant teeth.

“Oh, go on,” someone says. “We’re ants, it’s what we do.”

“Yeah,” someone says. “And besides, you ain’t had an erector in years!”

All the ants erupt in laughter. All but the old-timer, which finishes its beer and dumps the ice from its hard hat. “Yeah, I been around, all right!” the old-timer says, rising, fed up. “I been around!” it repeats before slowly crawling toward home.

THE ARMCHAIR

The armchair pulls you into its lap. It wraps you in a bear hug and won't let you leave. Try to make a move and it only squeezes tighter.

All the weightlifting the armchair does has resulted in some very strong arms indeed.

But its aims aren't nefarious. It wants nothing from you but your shoulder to cry on and your ear to tell you how it never felt loved by its mom and dad, how the other chairs were cruel to it because of its strange build.

You may want to settle in.

THE ASH

He exhaled and ash flew from his mouth like insects. The ash floated and flitted and fell all around him.

He went to the doctor, who said he was likely dying inside. She prescribed him an ashtray to wear under his chin.

The man left the doctor's office and tore up the prescription slip he'd been given. I am not dying inside, he thought. I am on fire with life! Ashes trailed in his wake as he ran down the street, laughing and hooting at this realization. People closed their windows to keep out his soot. He made plans for a great evening: a feast of wine and meat, music, and masturbation.

But of course the doctor was right: he was only dying inside, as would soon be made apparent.

THE AUTONOMOUS MAN

See him walk on his own, just like a real man. Watch him groom and smile and pat his child's head with a lifelike hand. Witness him kiss his wife goodbye with soft lips.

See, we've made him blush, just like a real man.

At the office, he docks himself and downloads and uploads all day, no pee breaks, et cetera, et cetera. Let's skip this part.

Post-work, watch him laugh over scotches with his fellow autonomous men at the club. Hear him shout—in a friendly, real-manly manner—about sports or women or both at the same time. Ride with him as he drives slowly home.

Sit beside him at the dinner table. Ignore his comments about supper being cold. Ignore his wife's comments about him being late. Ignore his child's tears as the argument unfolds.

In fact, let's skip this part, too.

See him go to bed, exhausted, unhappy, just like a real man.

BALONEY DREAMS

Pink circles mound like breasts, like buttocks, sweating salaciously in the pan. Dancing pork polka dots with smiling slits of mouths. Give us a kiss, piggy. Greasy and getting crispy and smelling up the house, just like us, just like us.

Here's a dairy-white blanket. Let's go to bed.

THE BEAR SUIT

He went on a hunting trip to get away from the office. He killed a bear and admired the creature's appearance so much he decided he would wear the bear's body to work.

When he returned to the office, wearing his bear suit, he saw that all his coworkers had been mauled and partially eaten. Their bloody corpses lay scattered about the floor.

He smelled smoke coming from the break room. Probably the guy who always burned popcorn, he thought. But when he turned the corner, he saw four bears laughing, drinking beer, and sharing a bottle of whiskey around a campfire. One of them played an acoustic guitar. A human leg roasted over the flames. They saw him in his bear suit and waved him over. He took the bottle of whiskey when it was offered.

One of the bears stood up and presented him with the eviscerated body of the popcorn guy. It seemed they wanted him to try it on.

THE BEAST

Big red four-legged beast stands sentinel on the tower. Sees all, knows nothing. Not happy, not unhappy: is.

Soft creature in the hamlet below draws the beast's eye with its elaborate ablutions, tongue-bathing in the bright sun. The creature sneezes and out flies a bubble. The bubble rises to meet the beast. The beast corrals the bubble in the net it keeps to catch its food.

The beast inspects the bubble and it bursts: the tiny bird heart that had been trapped inside falls at its feet. It looks delicious, succulent. The beast eats it. It is delicious, succulent.

"I love you, too," the beast calls down to the soft creature.
"I love you, too."

THE BENEFIT

They held a benefit. It was wriggly and white like a maggot, heavy as a fat child in a sack. When it became too much for one to hold, it was passed on to the next person.

Nobody could recall ever holding such a benefit before. It was, they all agreed, gross.

“Really,” someone said finally, “what is this benefit for?”

Nobody could say. They decided it was a benefit for its own benefit. They continued holding the benefit, though no one found it enjoyable in the least.

THE BIRD

A dying bird came one day. It was broken-winged and confused. Blood trickled from its beak. “A window got me,” it said. It asked to come in, so we opened the door and gave it respite.

We enjoyed seeing the bird in our guest room. Mostly it slept. Gradually, it began to drink more water and eat more seed. It took to sitting up and looking out the window—longingly, if not a little fearfully, it seemed. It began hopping about the floor and trying out its wings.

“I am better,” said the bird. “You’ve been too kind, but I think I should be on my way.”

“The window is there,” we said. “You’re free to leave at any time.”

“If you could just open it for me—”

“It’s already open, is it not?”

“Is it?” the bird asked.

“If you’re not sure, perhaps you’re not as well as you think,” we said. “Perhaps it’s better if you stay a little longer.”

“Is it really open?” asked the bird.

“Here, now,” we said. “Back into bed with you.”

The bird did as it was told.

We crossed the room and closed the window. “So you don’t catch a cold,” we said.

THE BLOOD BOAT

There is a dying man in a boat filled with blood adrift on an ocean of boiling oil spilling over a bowl-shaped planet spinning on the end of a staff held aloft by a giant incomplete creature with no discernible features beyond a man-like hand holding the staff that supports the bowl-shaped planet that holds the ocean of boiling oil in which the boat filled with blood cradles the dying man, who says, “Okay, okay, okay.”

THE BLUR

There's a blur where he used to be. Just a distortion, like petroleum jelly on glass. He's where he always was: standing in front of the window. But only this blur remains, obscuring the window and preventing us from seeing out.

We didn't want him around, it's true. But this blur, whatever it is, is worse. We ask it to move and it does not. We ask it to leave and it does not. So now we get the saw and chalk and make preparations for a new window.

BOTTOMLESS

A man went into a diner that advertised in flashing neon a bottomless cup of coffee. He sat at the counter and told the waitress he'd have coffee, black.

“Bottomless cup or regular?” she asked.

“What’s the difference?” he replied.

“One cup is bottomless, the other is regular.”

He had hours to kill until the goat would be done seeing the dentist. “Bottomless, please.”

She placed a cup in front of him and filled it with coffee, which began to leak from beneath the cup. The puddle of coffee spread over the counter. “I see,” he said, hoisting the cup and looking at the waitress through the open bottom. “A bottomless cup. That’s funny. I’ll take a regular cup, if you don’t mind.”

“Sorry, all out.” She pointed at a booth. “That goat got the last one.”

There was the goat, drinking coffee and eating a newspaper. It was his fault for not escorting the goat, which was terrified of the dentist, into the waiting room.

THE BOX YOU WORE ON YOUR HEAD

The box you wore on your head—the one that blended your beautiful face and hair and skin and skull and brain to a liquid that we dispensed from the bunghole on the front of the box, a pale pink liquid which we filled our cups with and drank, on the rocks or neat, and afterward wept over while picking pieces of you from our teeth—that box: why did you ever deign to put it on?

THE BRAIN DEALERS

Your rotten brain is up for sale to the highest bidder. It's incredible what people will buy. Scientists, your children, rich baroque figures, zombies: they all want that black banana floating in your skull.

Why? Who knows. You'd have to ask them. But you'll forget, like always, because that's what you do now. Don't look at us—we're just here for the commission.

THE BROKEN ARM

His arm broke. It shattered into hundreds of small pieces that he patiently glued back together. Despite his care, his arm never properly held blood again. He ruined many white shirts before opting for red ones exclusively.

One day, his boss called him into his office. “These red shirts are no good,” his boss said. “They look . . . satanic.”

“I assure you, I’m no satanist.”

“That’s nice to hear,” his boss said.

“It would be more accurate to call me a Luciferian.”

His boss reached for the phone. “I’m thinking we should call Human Resources.”

“I could have used them when I broke my arm!” he said.

THE BUILDINGS SMOKE

Here the buildings smoke. A constant sooty exhaust streams from the chimneys and vents, pulled this way and that by the air.

The buildings refused to quit smoking, so all of the inhabitants moved out, claiming it was like living in an ashtray. Now they live outside, under the clouds—the clouds high above where the planes used to fly, and the ones breathed by their former homes, which seem to smoke even more now that there's no one to tell them not to.

It's cold, the people think, but it will be warm again. Meanwhile, the buildings smoke.

THE BUSINESSMAN

Thick man in a too-small suit, face laced with blood, takes lumps from a baseball bat for five dollars a whack in the alley behind the pizzeria.

It's business, he thinks.

Onlookers wait their turn at the bat, wait for the moment when the businessman loses his temper and lashes out—or loses consciousness and the purse he's earned.

Meanwhile, father is at home being primped by teenage girls bound for cosmetology school and abortion clinics. Makes them paint pimples on his face so he can feel young. He wants his hair teased as high as theirs.

It's pleasure, yes, but where is the goddamn pizza? they wonder.

THE BUTCHER

The butcher discovered that the cow was made of chicken, and now he had a dilemma: should he sell the cow as chicken or the chicken as cow?

For it was clearly both, was it not?

Or perhaps it was neither.

He didn't know what to do. He didn't want to harm his good reputation.

In the end, he put the cow made of chicken back together and returned it to the field. There it stood motionless, drawing flies, like a cow made of cow.

He never told anyone what he knew.

BUT THEN

There is no language. There is no voice. There is no art.

There is no window. There is no sky. There is no sun.

There is no chair. There is no table. There is no room.

There is no you. There is no they. There is no we.

But then.

But then there are you and there are they and there are we
in are chairs at are tables in are rooms by are windows beneath are
skies beneath are suns are languages, are voices, are arts.

But then.

CAPTAIN BARF

Captain Barf stabbed his mother in the eye upon exiting her body. Captain Barf's first meal was a baby bird, his second was a vulture eating a carcass, his third was the carcass. Captain Barf drank from the salty ocean exclusively. Captain Barf amputated his own legs because he couldn't stand the sight of them anymore. Captain Barf loved kittens, especially on pizza.

Captain Barf hated life, but liked birthday parties. He liked any party, in fact, most of all the ones without partygoers.

On a whim, Captain Barf died, but not before making fun of himself for dying.

Rest in beef, Captain Barf.

THE CAT EXPLODED

The cat exploded. Bits of cat clung to everything.

They tried to reassemble the cat but it looked all wrong. There were pieces missing. They threw away what was left of it.

The cat's meow remained, however. They heard it that night while trying to sleep. It cried to be let out, cried to eat, cried for no reason, as cats do.

But there was no cat to let out, no cat to feed, no cat to swat away, just a cat voice howling through the night.

They opened the window. All the unexploded neighborhood cats came calling.

THE CAVE OF FUR

Each morning, he left his house before first light, traveled into the forest, and explored a cave crowded with fur.

Each evening, he returned home before dark and attempted to hug his wife, who kept him at arm's length.

"Who do you love that is harboring animals?" she asked, plucking tufts of fur from his shirt.

He reminded her of the cave of fur, which he had been exploring for years.

"Did you fall asleep in there again?" she asked.

"I can't help it," he said. "The fur is so soft, so abundant—it is like no bed on earth! Won't you come experience it with me?" He reached once more to embrace her.

She sneezed. "Why do you live to torment me? You know I'm allergic to fur! Go outside and turn the hose on yourself."

"Like no bed on earth!" the man repeated.

THE CEILING FAN

The ceiling fan above the bed turns in the dark. At midnight, the fan propels the roof of the house into the air and out of sight, revealing innumerable white stars moving in the black sky. The stars form a spiral, which rotates in mesmerizing fashion. Hypnosis follows, then levitation. The house is left behind. You continue to rise. The spiral looms larger and spins faster.

Sparks fall like rain, pricking your flesh. Your meat tears away and feeds the prowling animals back on earth. All over, houses that once had ceiling fans are without fans, houses that once had roofs are without roofs.

THE CLEAVER

In the cake is a cleaver. We need it to cut the cake. We destroy the cake to get the cleaver. Frosting and cake rubble are everywhere, but we get the cleaver.

Putting a cake back together isn't pretty. Our cake resembles an animal that has been run over and remolded from memory. And we forgot to wash our hands before putting our cake back together, which is problematic because after we accidentally left the cleaver in the cake and put the cake in the oven to bake, we went outside and dug holes in the dirt with our hands. Now we don't want to eat the cake at all.

We frost the cleaver instead and put it in the oven. We turn the oven up past one thousand degrees and watch the frosting melt away. The big flat blade of the cleaver begins to glow orange. We look at each other and smile even as the smoke burns our eyes.

CONSTRUCTION

A giant drill bit spiraled up out of the earth. It rose, turning, turning, raining dirt and rocks down, until the tip of it disappeared behind the clouds.

People gathered. They contemplated walking up the spiral to take in the view at the top.

But then the drill bit began to slowly retract into the earth. The next day a giant bolt twisted up from the hole in the ground that the drill had made.

People gathered. A great shadow blanketed them. They looked up to see a giant hex nut falling from the sky.

CORPSE COSTUMES

Corpses must wear their living costumes and perform. How they hate their fleshy, smelly, hairy suits of skin and sinew! Every day, they make a great show of grooming and eating and working and playing and fornicating. They get wages they don't need, children they don't want, problems they can't foresee. They desire only what all self-respecting corpses desire: to be buried or burned or eaten by birds.

THE COW CALLED LAST NIGHT

The cow called last night. “Come over,” the cow said. “I have a fresh pie for us to eat.”

We arrived. The cow served us cocktails—actual rooster tails in glasses. We made small talk.

“Isn’t the moon beautiful tonight?” the cow said.

It was.

“Are you in the mood for some of that pie?” the cow said.

We were.

“Let’s move to the dining room,” the cow said.

We did.

The cow placed a covered tray on the table, then lifted the lid, revealing a pie crust heaping with cow caca. Not what we had in mind but it shined beautifully in the light of the chandelier.

“Who wants the first slice?” the cow asked.

Not wanting to be rude, we feigned excitement. “Me, me, me!”

CRABS

On the beach, crabs fly tiny kites to attract gulls. When the gulls dive, the crabs reveal harpoon guns, which they use to shoot and capture the birds. They sever the gulls' heads with their pincers; the blood provides a fresh coat of red for their shells and warm drink for their bellies. They pluck the birds and make effigies with the feathers. They pull the flesh from the gull carcasses and mix it with mayonnaise and celery to create a delicious bird salad. They eat it quickly before it can spoil in the sun.

THE CRADLE

A cradle filled with dog excrement appeared on their doorstep.

“We must find the dog that lost its baby,” he said.

“That’s not a puppy,” she said.

“No shit?” he said.

“Yes, shit, clearly,” she said.

“I can’t do that on command. I’m not even sure I can do that at all.”

“Do what?”

“Shit clearly.”

She sighed, went back inside the house, and shut the door.

The man leaned over the cradle. “Coochie, coochie, coo!”

THE CREEK OF SNAKES

The creek runs thick with snakes. The snakes run thick with all the children they eat. The children scare themselves by drawing as near as they can to the snakes. They spit and throw rocks at the reptiles. One child pushes another, the pushed child loses its balance and falls in, the snakes fight to feast on the body.

The child who did the pushing rushes home, bawling, says the other child got too close to the creek and fell in. "The snakes!" the child cries. "The snakes, the snakes, the snakes!"

THE CUBE

In the bath, a small honey-colored cube escaped from his anus and floated to the surface. He picked it up and examined it. It looked delicious, like a hard candy that demanded sucking. But it was soft to the touch, fleshy, and quite dense. He squeezed it, and from a hole he hadn't noticed came—slowly, slowly—a tiny white bathtub, filled with steaming water, in which bathed a man examining a small honey-colored cube.

THE DECEASED'S BIRTHDAY CAKE

The deceased's birthday cake took up smoking to give the candle something to do. The candle felt appreciated lighting the cake's cigarettes. It looked at the cake with a new affection.

The candle proposed to the cake. The cake accepted. Together they eloped, not wanting the fuss of a big wedding.

They were happy for a while. But the candle was wasting away the whole time they were married. And then the candle died.

The cake was depressed. It couldn't even smoke anymore. It found solace in eating itself, becoming fat and diminished at the same time. Dying, the cake regretted not having had proper nuptials.

THE DILAPIDATED MAN

There is a crack in his tooth from which grass sprouts. Weeds take hold and spread across the tooth and its neighbors, crawling down into his innards, stretching out all over his body and limbs. Vandals shatter the windows of his eyes. A chain-link fence is erected around him, to remain in place indefinitely. His person is completely overgrown. Chunks of his flesh fall away, powerless against the inexorable creep and tug of untamed vegetation.

A *FOR SALE* sign is placed at his feet. The asking price drops week after week. One day, a black limousine idles in front of him. Down comes the window, and a hand holding a thick cigar points at the *FOR SALE* sign. The limousine driver gets out, uproots the sign, and stows it in the trunk of the vehicle. A gray plume of cigar smoke floats from the window before it closes once more.

The next day, a *SOLD* sign is placed at the foot of the dilapidated man.

The next week, a large crane with a wrecking ball arrives. The fence is removed first.

DISTASTEFUL

He thought of a baby born without limbs, and spit into a jar by his bed. And there in the jar was a limbless baby suspended in sputum.

He thought of slugs spilling from an open mouth, and spit into the jar. And there in the jar was a mouth with slimy striped slugs slipping out.

He thought of a bipedal mode of transport powered by putrefaction, and spit. And there in the jar was a saddle on two legs farting out plumes of viscera mist.

He thought of everything distasteful in the world and spit them out, one by one, filling as many jars as have ever existed.

Then he thought of water so clear that it was invisible. He opened his mouth and out it gushed. It filled his room, his house; it washed over the town, the world. He drowned peacefully and so did everyone else.

DO THE CREMATION

Our bodies, rotting and dropping dirt, gather in the moonlight to dance around a raging bonfire. The shindig sounds like a bag of shinbones being shaken. No hoots and hollers, just sighs and the occasional squelch escape our cavities.

Somebody falls into the bonfire, gets up, and continues cavorting, ablaze. And just like that, the night witnesses the birth of a new dance craze. Soon everybody is doing The Cremation.

EGG PARTY

The brown eggs drink white wine, the white eggs drink brown liquor. Loud music vibrates the jelly inside their shells. This inner rhythmic wiggle leads to amorous feelings. Some roll close together and kiss as eggs do: skinny top pressed against fat bottom. Some roll down the stairs and meet their end, leaving a mess that will need to be cleaned up in the morning.

THE ELEPHANT QUILT

The quilt has a square of elephant hide still bristly with hair. When watered, the hairs on the elephant square produce tiny elephants that sprout trunk first. Once the elephants are large enough to work, they are sold. The purchaser of the elephant drapes a quilt over its back and rides it to the train station, where they board the line that will take them to the office where they are employed.

They do this for the next fifty or so years.

The owner of the elephant typically dies first. When this happens, the elephant takes a piece of the human's hide, still downy with hair, and stitches it into a quilt. When watered, the hairs on the human square produce tiny humans that sprout nose first.

THE ELEVATOR

Babies pile high atop the elevator car; grown men cling for their lives to the bottom. The elevator rises to the top of the shaft and a man plummets to his death; it descends and a baby rolls off and lands softly on the body of a man. The baby crawls away into the darkness.

The elevator climbs, a man dies.

The elevator goes down, a baby falls.

It goes up, a man dies.

It goes down, a baby falls.

Eventually, the story ends.

THE END OF BOOKS

Every book released a swarm of stinging bees when opened. Some people were dying to read. Others said it was proof that nothing good ever came from books.

The situation was deemed untenable.

All books were placed in boxes with glass screens. A mechanism was devised to turn the pages, though nothing could be seen for all the bees buzzing about inside the boxes.

The bees died and filled the boxes. Then there was really nothing more to see.

EXCELLENT CHOICES

Unscrewing a bottle of gasoline for the table, the cat-costumed waiter asked them if they had any questions.

“Actually, I do,” the man said. He folded his hands over the menu. “Why are you dressed in a cat costume, complete with wriggling tail?”

The waiter poured an inch of gasoline into the man’s glass for him to swirl and try. “This is simply the attire required by my employer, sir. And how is the gasoline? Is it to your liking?”

“Indeed it is,” the man said. He motioned for the waiter to fill his wife’s glass.

“I have a question, too,” the woman asked, “but it’s for you”—she pointed to her husband. “What made you think I would enjoy being served gasoline by a waiter dressed as a cat?”

“It’s a potato restaurant,” the man said. “And you love potatoes.”

“The best potato restaurant, in fact,” the waiter interjected.

“Competent sex and a hamburger afterward would have sufficed.” She sniffed her glass. “But maybe gasoline poisoning would be better.”

The waiter changed the subject. “Did anything on the menu tickle your fancy?”

“The lady will have the potatoes,” the man said. “And I will have the potatoes.”

“Excellent choices.” The waiter collected their menus and turned. The cat tail knocked the gasoline onto the candles on the table, which exploded into flames, setting the man and woman on fire. The rest of the diners ooh’d and ah’d and considered changing their meal orders.

FENCES

The fence tried to get away in the night so they put a fence around it.

The fence that had been erected to secure the fence that had tried to run away felt guilty for imprisoning one of its own. The on-duty fence shared a flask of whiskey with its ward. Later that night, they tried to get away together.

Being fences, which are painfully slow, tottering as they do on posts, they were caught trying to escape. And then a new fence was built to pen them.

THE FIRST DEATH

The first death was a lovely affair. It took place on a bright summer day, in the woods, beneath the shade of trees. The dying one lay on a cool carpet of moss. Consciousness gave way to a lucid dream of flight, in which mountains were seen from above.

All the while, the dying one felt the sun slanting upon them. First, it warmed their toes.

And then their shins.

And then their thighs.

And then their genitalia.

And then their belly.

And then their chest.

And then their neck.

And then their mouth, which they opened to the warmth. The warmth, which they ate with a smile.

THE FLOWER KILLER

He was hired to clobber flowers by the rich man who lived on the hill. Waiting for him every morning at the bottom of the hill were a new baseball bat and one hundred orderly rows of potted geraniums, gerberas, lilies, and more. A bird would fly down bearing a time card that he punched with his fist. Then he would grip the bat with both hands and start swinging. When he had reduced every flower and pot to pulp and rubble, he set down the bat and went home.

Each night, he allowed himself an overcooked steak, two beers, and one hour of television before going to sleep. He dreamed of tending to flowers, of sniffing them, of watering them, of watching them grow, of walking up the hill with baseball bat in hand, kicking down the rich man's door, and bashing in his skull.

FROM THE GRIP OF A GREAT EAGLE'S CLAW

A man in the grip of a great eagle's claw drops the book he has been reading, only pages from the end.

"I need to know the rest of the story! Down!" he says to the eagle. The bird ignores him and continues to drift about the sky.

He bites the hard yellow flesh of the eagle's foot. The eagle squeezes the man tighter until his nose begins to bleed. The man tries to protest but cannot speak.

On the ground, a child searches among the roots of a tree for caterpillars to pinch. The book the man dropped crashes through the leaves and lands at the child's feet. The child takes up the book and soon forgets about the caterpillars. *Once upon a time*, the book begins, *a great eagle roamed the skies.*

A GARBAGE CAN

He went to the store to purchase a garbage can.

“All your garbage cans are empty,” he told the clerk. He held up one of the cans he’d found on the shelves. “Do I have to purchase the garbage separately?”

“You make the garbage at home and then put it in the can,” the clerk answered.

“Oh, I’m afraid I’m not that handy,” he said. “Can you tell me where I can find one that’s already assembled, complete with garbage?”

The clerk reached under the counter and handed the man a garbage can brimming with refuse. He took the empty can from the man and put it under the counter.

“How much?” the man asked. A fly landed on his nose.

“On the house,” the clerk said. “You’re our one billionth customer!” The clerk made a flatulent noise with his lips and applauded.

The man whooped as he left the store carrying his new garbage can.

A GIFT

Two friends were talking.

“He gave me a headache,” she said. “What was I supposed to do?”

“You could have tried to sell it,” her friend replied.

“Sell it?” she said. “You can’t give a headache away.”

“It seems that’s exactly what he did,” the friend said.

“So you’re saying it’s my fault for accepting a gift?”

“I’m saying a headache might be a bad gift, but it’s no reason to kill a man.”

“All right, ladies,” the prison guard said. “Lights out.”

THE GOOD FACE

Put your face on. Not that one—the good one, the one that makes you look three years old.

Looking good, baby face! Now go to the office.

“Is it bring-your-child-to-work day?” says someone.

All the moms in the office come by to pinch your cheeks. All the dads come by to muss your hair. The childless workers just ignore you.

Make paper-clip chains and drawings of dinosaurs and smiley-faced suns. Drink milk and eat peanut butter.

Mess your pants accidentally on purpose. Don't tell anyone. When accused, begin to blubber.

Sob uncontrollably and allow yourself to be picked up and carried away.

Be forgiven.

GRAY

A gray man met a gray woman under a gray sky in the grayest of seasons. They fell in love and moved into a gray house together. They had a gray child, took in a gray cat, and all of them lived together happily for many years.

Eventually the cat died and the child moved out.

It was just the gray man and the gray woman again. They were excited to fornicate without the complications of a child or cat in the house. But their libidos had waned over the years.

They looked at one another longingly. She did not tell him that his temples had begun to go blonde. He did not call attention to the brunette hair that had begun to pepper her salt.

THE GUMBALL MACHINE

Pull a coin from your nose. Drop it into the coin slot on the gumball machine. Turn the handle. Hear the gumballs shift and tumble.

Clink goes something against the metal flap. Lift it like a garage door that hides a father pretending to work on a car, a mother smoking cigarettes, a sibling pushing their head through the wall, a cat big enough to ride, a skating rink of blood, a bountiful vegetable garden, and a pile of rotting wood.

Lift the flap. Open the plastic egg that falls into your hand. Take the coin you find inside and put it up your nose.

THE HAIRY HOUSE

It was just a few blonde hairs along the gutters at first. Then the shingles sprouted hairs. Soon the entire roof was shaggy. By week's end the hair had shrouded the whole house. The hair was brown now, making it hard to see out the windows.

They took turns cutting the hair, but each morning it had regained a foot of length, and by Friday they were in darkness once more. The hair was black now, making it even harder to see out the windows.

They cut; it grew. They cut; it grew. They gave up and resigned themselves to darkness. They started fighting more. More sex, too, but mainly fighting. There were punches and kicks. They cried, hugged each other, had sex. The hair was gray now, but in their tumult, they hadn't even noticed.

Then the hair turned white. The sun filtered in. It felt good, so they went outside and cut the hair. This time, the hair did not grow back. They cried, hugged each other, had sex. They observed a few blonde hairs sprouting from the floor but didn't say anything about them. For now, they enjoyed the tickle of them as they walked about the house, tumescent and dripping.

THE HARD AND SOFT STUFFS

A skull made of meat and a brain made of bone. Stones made of flesh and flesh made of stone. Protect the hard stuff with the soft stuff. Gather the hard stuff with the soft stuff.

A skull made of bone and a brain made of meat. Stones made of stone and flesh made of flesh. Imprison the soft stuff with the hard stuff. Pulp the soft stuff with the hard stuff.

THE HEAD

A hairy head emerged from his ear. It grew big in the open air.

“Am I going to have to feed this thing?” he asked his wife.
The head chewed its tongue.

“You mean am *I* going to have to feed this thing?” she replied.

HEADACHES IN THE END

A bowl of buttered cannonballs and a never-ending cigarette. A salad bar eighty-sixing and a gazebo hideout. Hidden monster magazines and a ball that doesn't stop bouncing.

Everything spins like a merry-go-round. Laughter, nausea, headaches in the end.

A cracked skull and a suckerfish kiss in the almost deepest lake in New England. An almost lake of scotch and vodka threatening to drown the shore. An early morning mouse chase and another broken toe.

Everything spins like a merry-go-round. Laughter, nausea, headaches in the end.

HEAVY

His head became heavy. It dipped toward his chest. Then it pulled his torso to the floor. Then the floor couldn't support the weight of it, and he crashed into the basement.

His wife peered into the hole in the floor. "Are you down there again?"

But he couldn't hear her; his head had cratered the basement floor and dirt had poured into his ears.

He opened his mouth to cry for help, and the dirt poured into his mouth. He tried to breathe, and the dirt entered his lungs.

His wife spoke into the phone on the floor above. "Oh, he's down in that basement again!"

HE WAS MADE OF DUST

He was made of dust. Of dander and crystallized exhalations and crumbs of meals long forgotten.

He was hard to notice, sitting in his easy chair, but he rose up any time someone fluffed the cushion beneath him. How he could fill a room.

He hung about in all the well-lit and cozy nooks, where one might seek a moment of solitude, only to be perturbed by his agitated yet silent presence.

You couldn't get rid of him if you tried—not completely. A part of him was always present, his closet-smell like a tinge of bad cologne that clung to afghan blankets, to warm skin, to the cat's head.

If he could speak, one could imagine him saying, This is my goddamn house! If he had a mouth that produced saliva, one could imagine the light flickering through his spit as it flew.

HEY, KILLER

He had eagle wings for eyebrows and a gray wolf for hair, alligator tails for arms and snapping turtles for feet. He put on his finest suit and headed out. When he got to the bar, he lit his clothes on fire and walked through the brick facade to enter.

As the dust and rubble settled, he saw only a few old men sitting at the bar, heads in hands, flies buzzing about their greasy pants.

“Hey, Killer,” the bartender said to him. “What brings you here so late? Or early, as it were.”

“The ladies,” he said.

“Might wanna check that watch, Killer,” the bartender said. “Ladies’ Night ended hours ago. It’s now Depressing Alcoholic Old Man Early Morning.”

He checked his watch. It was a shark’s eye with random numbers scraped into it. “I think I need to get this fixed,” he said. He patted out the fire consuming his suit and exited the bar through the hole in the wall he’d created.

“Looking sharp as ever, Killer!” the bartender called after him.

THE HOLE IN THE TREE

There is an inviting hole in the tree. Your friend crawls in first and is quickly whisked away somewhere. You crawl in after them.

Inside the tree is a moving walkway that pulls you into its woody depths. It is completely dark.

Your friend calls for help somewhere up ahead. Then your friend screams. Then your friend barks like a dog. Then your friend roars like a lion. Then your friend screeches like a monkey.

You try to turn back but the walkway is moving too swiftly. You fall and are unable to get back up. You yell for help. Then what sounds like a dog is on you, gnashing; then what sounds like a lion is on you, tearing; then what sounds like a monkey is on you, thrashing.

It was such a beautiful tree, you think.

THE HOLLOW MOUNTAIN

The mountain was upside down: narrow peak touching earth, broad base touching the clouds. Over centuries, we hollowed it out. It was an ideal way to capture rain. Our crops were plentiful.

Then the rain stopped, never to return. Somebody screamed into the mountain when their family died from starvation. We had never heard anguish projected so loudly. The vibrations parted the clouds surrounding the mountaintop—or rather bottom.

Somebody had the idea to call for help using the mountain as an amplifier for our voices. Each day, one of us hollered into the hollow mountain until our throats bled.

No help came.

Then one day we heard a rumbling. Great boulders fell from the sky. We ran and ran. From a safe distance, we watched the mountain crumble. It was no longer an upside-down mountain. It was no longer a hollow mountain. It was no longer a mountain at all or anything that could save us.

HORSE AND WIRE

High above the buildings hangs a horse from a wire. No one knows how it got there. The other end of the wire is obscured by clouds.

“Maybe it’s a giant outer space child playing with its horse puppet,” someone says.

“There’s no such thing as giant outer space children,” someone counters.

“Maybe it’s a flying horse that got caught in sky snare,” someone says.

“There’s no such thing as flying horses or sky snares,” someone counters.

“There was no such thing as a horse hanging from a wire high above the buildings either,” someone says and points at the suspended beast. “And yet, here we are discussing just such a thing.”

“Maybe the moon is fishing for us using a horse as bait,” someone says.

THE HOUSE BLEW AWAY

The house blew away and got caught in a tree. It flapped like a trapped flag. They slept drunkenly through the whole thing. When they woke up in a house in a tree, they thought they were still drunk so they went back to sleep.

The house blew away again and landed in the lake. It floated like a dead body. They slept drunkenly through the whole thing. When they woke up in a house on a lake, they thought they were still drunk so they went back to sleep.

The house blew away again and landed where it had always been before it began blowing away. It stood like an ordinary house. They slept drunkenly through the whole thing. When they woke up in a house like any other, they were hungover so they started drinking again.

HOW THE CAT COMES TO HISS

A saucer of crow feathers soaking in oil. A lit match ignites it. The smoke is inhaled by a cat suspended above. The cat's eyes roll back as it spills urine on the flames. The fire hisses and the cat breathes it in.

The fire is extinguished, and the feline's eyes return, wider than they've ever been.

The cat hisses. It wants to be released. It is released.

HOW TO DANCE

Step one: put on your dancing shoes—work boots, high heels, snowshoes: whichever shoes you consider your dancing shoes. Go to a public place. If you're wearing pants, pull them up to expose your calves. Even better, remove your pants. Now, start tapping one shoe on the floor. Close your eyes and shake your head arrhythmically to keep would-be dance thieves on their toes. Now, the other shoe—tap in direct counterpoint to the already tapping shoe. Okay, arms up: clap your hands over your head until they turn purple.

Ask for a volunteer from the crowd that has gathered to watch you. Tell the first volunteer that comes forward to punch you in the stomach. Absorb the punch, double over, and fall to your knees, gasping for air.

Now it's time for step two.

THE HURT BURNED

His ear leaked. The leak arced. The arc pooled. The pool
scummed. The scum browned. The brown hurt. The hurt burned.

The burn hurt.

The hurt burned.

The burn hurt.

The hurt burned.

JUST

The wind is really just the ghosts of birds flying past. The sun is just the head of a giant match that is billions of miles away. The ocean is just the earth's eye welling over with tears. The stars are just bullet holes in the night sky. Lava is just cooking bubbling over in the planet's core. Snow is just the falling shavings of an ice sculpture we will never see.

Of course, all of the above is just to make the days bearable.

LEAVES

Green leaves are queasy from the knowledge of what it means to be a leaf. Yellow leaves are jaundiced from drinking too much in order to forget. Orange leaves are different just to be different. Red leaves are flush from the exertion it takes to remain a leaf. Brown leaves are all leaves and nothing more. All leaves are brown leaves and nothing more.

THE LID OF HIS BELLY

He carved a circle in his belly and removed it. Smoke billowed out of the hole he'd created. The snake crawled in and coiled up. He replaced the lid of his belly.

He drank a cup of kerosene. Just a cup; any more would kill him.

His belly rumbled like a furnace waking up. The lid of his belly wobbled. He steadied it with his hand, making sure to leave it slightly askew to let the steam and aroma escape.

His family appeared one by one. Each sniffed the air and commented on how good he smelled.

“Almost ready,” he said.

THE LIGHT

He looked in the mirror and saw a string dangling from inside his ear. He pulled it and a light went on inside his head. A warm orange glow shone from his eyes, nose, ears, and mouth.

He preferred to be kept in the dark about all things if he could, most especially himself. So he pulled the string again and the light inside his head went out.

LIKE A JAR

He unscrewed the child's head like a jar. He suspected there might be cookies inside. There were no cookies. He screwed the child's head back on. The child never learned to speak after that. It made a noise that went *doo-doo-doo*.

He unscrewed the cat's head like a jar. He suspected there might be cookies inside. There were no cookies. He screwed the cat's head back on. The cat never played after that. It turned in circles on the floor until it got sick.

He unscrewed his own head like a jar. He suspected there might be cookies inside. There were no cookies. He screwed his head back on. He never craved cookies after that. He stared at the sun until his vision vanished.

THE LOOPING

A black tongue rises from the sink drain. It needs water.

The faucet is turned on. A pink tongue descends from the faucet.

The two tongues meet. They flick at each other. They twine.

The black tongue from the drain enters the faucet; the pink tongue from the faucet enters the drain.

A looping occurs in the plumbing.

Soon the black tongue rises once more from the drain, and the pink tongue descends once more from the faucet. The two tongues meet and flick and taste each other as if meeting for the first time.

Then the black tongue from the drain enters the faucet, and the pink tongue from the faucet enters the drain.

A LOVE TRIANGLE

She turned on the stove and the dancing flame man appeared. She bent to kiss him and her hair caught fire.

“Why would you do that?” she asked. “I wanted to greet you warmly.”

“*I* wanted to greet *you* warmly,” he replied. He danced seductively.

“I’m on fire!” she said.

“*I’m* on fire!” he said.

Her head was really burning. She turned on the faucet, and the running water man appeared. She bent to embrace him. Her head hissed and steamed.

“Slow down,” she said. “Let us be together. It’s you I really want.”

But he just babbled and burbled in reply and never stopped running.

A LUMPY MAN COMES

A lumpy man comes. He seeks a lumpy lady. But here all the men and women are lumpless. They are all smooth lines.

He tries to express himself but the lumps in his throat allow only gurgles.

The people stand clueless. They can't stop staring at his lumps, which appear to have lumps of their own.

The lumpy man takes a stick and draws a lumpy woman in the dirt. He gives her heavy breasts and points at them to underscore what he means. But the bystanders just see two more lumps on a very lumpy figure.

He gurgles some more. The people begin to back away from the lumpy man. The lumps around his eyes shine with tears.

"I've heard of his kind," someone says.

"He will make us sick," someone says.

The first rock sails past his head. The second one hits it square.

THE MAN WHO LIVES IN THE BUSHES

There's a man who lives in the bushes. He screams like a blue jay and holds out his hand to passersby. He receives an apple, coins, a firm shake, and spit, among other things.

“Why don't you come out of there?” he's asked. “Get a move on.”

He screams. “I need to stay here where it's safe. I haven't yet learned to fly.”

He's told that people don't fly, they walk.

“No,” he says, “I won't settle for that.” He screams.

THE MARIONETTIST

They peeled him open, starting at the part of his hair. Inside was a skyscraper: an office building, lit up, with people milling about in every window—but one.

They pressed close to the glass of this dark window and inside saw an unmoving man, sitting in a chair that had tipped backwards onto the floor. His legs stuck straight up into the air; his feet were shoeless. His toes began wiggling and his legs started dancing. Then they saw the strings tied to his toes, and the crossbar controlling the strings, and the hands controlling the bar. But they couldn't see the face of the marionettist in the dark. And they thought this only fitting, because to see the marionettist's face would ruin the illusion.

So they focused on the man's wiggling toes and dancing legs. And they didn't notice the other windows of the skyscraper going dark, one by one.

A MIDNIGHT SNACK

He woke up at midnight craving a chicken sandwich. He put on his boots and coat and drove to a nearby farm where they kept chickens.

He arrived at the farm and entered the chicken coop, armed with the remains of a loaf of bread he'd baked the night before when he'd woken up wanting something warm and doughy. He called out in the dark to the chickens, grabbed the first one that came to him, wrapped it in bread, and began eating it.

It didn't taste good at all. There was something gamy about the meat. And it was furry and seemed to have four feet. And it smelled awful.

"Well, you old idiot," he told himself, "you ended up at the skunk farm again."

He finished the sandwich before returning home.

THE MIND

The mind was found deep within the earth. It looked and behaved like snot, forming webs between our fingers.

One of our colleagues brought it home for their child to play with. The child, perhaps unsurprisingly, tasted it when no one was looking. We know this because the child said so. When asked what it was like, the child, staring blankly now, answered, “Empty.”

“You are empty or the mind is empty or something else?”

“Both,” the child answered.

“I don’t understand; I asked three things.”

“We are all one,” the child answered, “And both. That makes three.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And nothing, too.”

The ambulance came quickly, but not fast enough to save the life of the child. Our colleague took a leave of absence. The mind, we all decided, was poison and should be left alone.

A MISERABLE CHILD

The child was born without a mouth. Its parents drew one on its face with makeup. They changed the mouth depending on the child's mood: a smiling mouth in bright red lipstick was the default, a black circle meant surprise, a squiggle meant a fit was forthcoming, a violent scribble meant extreme distress.

The child's parents were only guessing at its true emotions; noises leaked sporadically from its nose, ears, eyes, and anus but were merely flatulent in nature.

When the child was older, it drew a frown on its face. The parents tried to change the child's mouth with makeup as they had always done, but the child refused to let them.

"We always knew you were a miserable child," they said.

THE MOPE

The mope mumbles something about meaning. Or meeting.
Or meating.

 We ask the mope to clarify.

 The mope mutters something about mothers. Or muckers.
Or murders.

 We ask the mope to clarify.

 The mope murmurs something about manners. Or
managers. Or mangers.

 We ask the mope to leave us alone. The mope begins to
speak but we say, "No, no, that's quite enough."

MR. PIE

Mr. Pie cries, "Please let me do my work!" He opens the door that has been closed before him and enters.

He climbs to his desk, which is stacked on chairs, which are stacked on cabinets, which are stacked on a table, which is stacked on a desk. His head sweats from the ceiling light bulb pressed against it. He can feel the heat of the roof, too. Mr. Pie grows tired and falls asleep.

When he wakes, the lights have been turned off. Outside the windows, it is also dark. Mr. Pie climbs down from his desk and cries, "I'll be back!"

And he is, the next day. "Please," he cries, "let me do my work!" He opens the door that has been closed before him and enters.

He climbs to his desk and promptly falls asleep from the heat. Mr. Pie's work continues to suffer. All he wants is a pay raise so that he can finally take a vacation. But there will be no raise for Mr. Pie, not while his work suffers so.

A NEW CROP OF PIES

A new crop of pies rises from the dirt. We poke our fingers in each one and lick them clean. We like cherry, we like peach, we like rhubarb, we like apple.

The pies have an effect on us.

We poke our fingers in each other and lick them clean. We like him, we like her, we like them, we like us.

But we find it's better if we poke our fingers in the pies then poke our fruited fingers in each other then lick them clean.

THE NIGHT CLEANER

A clock boils over onto the man watching it. It burns him severely, leaving him blistered and bleeding. His face sloughs off onto the ground. He crawls away from his desk, makes it as far as the elevator bank, and dies.

The night cleaner encounters the face on the ground and mistakes it for pizza. He is hungry. If the face resembled any other type of food, he would eat it, but he hates pizza and throws it into the trash.

NIGHT OF THE KNIVES

All the world's knives escape from their drawers and cutting blocks and sheaths and take to the sky while their owners sleep.

When everyone wakes up in the morning, they cannot cut grapefruit or spread butter on toast for breakfast; they can't chop things that need chopping, slice things that need slicing, or carve things that need carving. Old men on porches fall into deep depressions for want of whittling; they can't even slit their wrists.

They lament the loss of their knives but take consolation in all the new stars glinting in the night sky. No one realizes that they are not stars at all but rather the knives that have flown away, many of them falling back toward earth at blinding speed, deadly sharp, admired for being something they are not.

THE NODULE

There was a nodule on his forearm. He spent the day watching it tremor. He was rewarded when it ruptured and a small slimy homunculus, yellow-beaked and black-haired, poked through. It had skin-covered eyes.

The thing opened its beak and he drooled into it. Its little tongue curled and turned. He drooled some milk onto it.

He petted the eyes of the homunculus to encourage them to open. He felt movement beneath. He pushed on them and they pushed back. He realized they weren't eyes at all but nodules. He took his hand away and waited for whatever was within to burst forth.

THE NOISE COLLECTOR

He collected noises in glass jars and kept them neatly labeled and shelved in the basement: *Automobile, Backfire; Cough, Hacking; Infant, Screaming; Window, Breaking; Zebra, Dying.*

One day, he felt vibrations underfoot. An earthquake. He quickly made a label—*Earthquake, Rumbling*—and went outside. He placed the jar on the ground and captured the sound. The earth shifted. He ran to the shelter of his house, which was shaking violently. He would hide in the basement. Was that the sound of glass shattering? He grabbed another jar, prepared another label to collect this new noise, and descended.

AN OFFICIAL REPORT

THE HOSE WOULDN'T CONNECT PROPERLY TO THE BACK OF THE SUBJECT'S HEAD, RESULTING IN A CONTAMINATING SPRAY OF GREEN SLURRY ON THE OPERATOR'S BODY.

GIVEN THAT THE OPERATOR HAD BEEN EATING CORN CHIPS WHILE ESTABLISHING THE SUBJECT'S FUEL TRANSFER, HIS FACE MASK WAS NOT IN PLACE AS REQUIRED, AND HE INGESTED AN UNKNOWN AMOUNT OF GREEN SLURRY.

THE ERROR WAS DISCOVERED NEARLY IMMEDIATELY VIA THE CLOSED-CIRCUIT MONITOR. WHEN THE OPERATOR WAS CONFRONTED, HE PLACED THE STILL-PUMPING FUEL-TRANSFER HOSE IN HIS MOUTH, PRESUMABLY IN AN ATTEMPT TO EXTERMINATE HIMSELF. EXTERMINATION ENSUED.

SUBJECT ALSO DIED AS A RESULT OF OPERATOR ERROR.

THE OLD MAN

The old man weeps mustard. He weeps gasoline. He weeps whiskey.

“Stop it!” they say. “Your tears are making us sick.” They vomit on their shoes.

The old man weeps blood. “My wife . . .,” he says.

“Oh, stop it!” they say. Their throats burn with stomach acid.

The old man weeps black tar. It gums his eyes. “You never met my wife . . .,” he says.

“That’s right, crybaby!” They puke again. “Stop it!”

“I can’t cry anymore,” the old man says. His eyes are black and stuck. He vomits lung water.

“Stop it!” they say. “Your sick is making us cry.” They weep into their mouths.

The old man vomits mud. “My wife . . .”

PERSPECTIVE

On the forest floor is a tiny house, inside of which is a tiny forest, on the floor of which is a tinier house, inside of which is a tinier forest, on the floor of which is a huge house, inside of which is a huge forest, on the floor of which is a huger house, inside of which is a huger forest.

THE PIE

A pie with four legs made of graham crackers walked into the room. The pie ejaculated liquid cherry from the slit in the top of its crust. It began writing with the red stuff, arranging the goo into letters.

The pie wrote, *Am I a pie? Am I dead? Please tell me.*

The pie pulled its legs beneath it and settled onto the floor. It was sunken now, sapped. The slit on its crust closed, like an eye shutting for sleep.

We put it in the oven, which was still warm from the pie we'd baked earlier and eaten. "Good night," we said and closed the oven door.

PLANTING RABBIT EGGS

Plant the rabbit egg in the ground. Put your ear to the dirt and listen for the sounds of hatching; as soon as you hear the crack, dig out the fresh rabbit before it suffocates. Lick clean the rabbit until it is a healthy shade of pink. Suckle the rabbit until it grows soft fur. Kiss the rabbit and hide it in the grass. Count to one million. Search for the rabbit. If you can find it, you planted a bad rabbit egg and should return to step one.

A PROPOSAL

She plucked a hair from his nose and a daisy came out. She smelled the yellow flower and twirled its hairy stem in her fingers. “Will you marry me?” she asked him.

“You don’t even know me,” he said. “We just happen to be waiting for the same elevator.”

“I know enough to marry a man who gives me flowers without my asking,” she said.

“Let’s do this properly,” he said. He stuck his finger in her ear and pulled out a diamond ring. He got down on one knee.

THE PURR MACHINE

He petted a hole in the cat's head. He couldn't remember if the hole had always been there and he liked to pet it, or if he liked to pet the cat so much he'd worn a hole in its head.

He looked in the hole and saw the cat's purr machine. It was stuck in the *ON* position. That explained why the cat never stopped purring, which is why he never stopped petting the cat, even though it had a hole in its head, even though he couldn't remember if the hole had always been there and he liked to pet it, or if he liked to pet the cat so much he'd worn a hole in its head.

THE RAINING ROOM

It was raining in the room.

“How are we supposed to sleep with all this rain?” he asked.

“Let’s pitch the tent,” she said.

They raised the tent and crawled inside.

“I love the sound of the rain,” he said.

“It’s so calming,” she said.

The room filled with rain. The tent began to float.

“I love the feel of a waterbed,” he said.

“It’s so soothing,” she said.

The tent filled with water. They began to float.

“I love just drifting,” he said.

“It’s so relaxing,” she said.

Their lungs filled with water. They began to die.

He coughed. “I love drowning.”

She coughed. “It’s so peaceful.”

THE RECOVERY ROOM

A woman had a bad organ inside her that made her yellow. They removed the bad organ and she turned blue. They installed a new organ and she turned pink. Little pink fly wings sprouted on every inch of flesh she had left.

There was nothing more they could do for her.

When it was time for the woman to leave the hospital, the nurses opened the window of her recovery room. Her wings buzzed. Up she rose and out the window she floated.

THE ROOF

The roof said it wanted to come inside. “I’m tired of being buffeted by rain and snow, tired of squirrels skittering over me and of birds shitting on me,” it explained.

They agreed to let the roof come inside the house. But once the roof had climbed down and settled in, the house had ceased to be a house; it was more like a holding pen, with four walls and nothing on top.

“This house isn’t very homey,” said the roof. “I don’t think I will be happy here for very long.”

They asked the roof if it could go back to being a roof again.

But the roof didn’t seem to hear them. “I really don’t know how you’ve managed to live happily here for so many years. It’s cold and not cozy at all.”

THE ROUND HEAD ROLLS

The round head rolls. Out the window it falls. Through the air it screams. On the shoulders of a headless man it lands.

He lost his old head in a dream of war. And though he had been headless and happy, now people smile at him and he smiles back. That's better.

He waits under windows for new limbs to fall, for new pectorals, for new genitals, for new clothes to wrap himself in, for chewing gum to keep his new head from rolling away.

THE SEEDS BECOME A TREE INSIDE

Eats the apple, seeds and all. No anus, born without one, so the seeds remain inside.

Falls asleep under the tree eaten from. Falls asleep for years.

The seeds become a tree inside. Roots descend through the legs and feet; branches ascend through the trunk and arms. Toenails and fingernails make way for the tips of roots and branches. Not painful, still asleep.

Now a tree, fruiting. Something to sit under and dream of an anused life while eating an apple or two or three or a dozen. Something to fall asleep beneath, full and happy, anus be damned.

A SELF-IMPROVEMENT SOMETHING OR OTHER

He was given a candid photograph of himself. He did not like the crookedness of his teeth. With a pen, he straightened them. His ears were like jug handles, so he fixed those as well. And his hair: there wasn't nearly enough of it, so he fixed that, too.

In the morning, in the mirror, he now looked just like his doctored photograph. He was excited to show off his new appearance. He visited the friend who had taken the picture.

She opened the door when he knocked. "Yes?" she said.

"It's me!" he said.

"It certainly is," she said. "Can I help you?"

"Do you notice anything different about me?" He cocked his head, jutted his chin, and showed his profile.

"Different from what?" she asked.

"From how I looked before!" He handed her the picture she'd taken.

She looked at the photograph before handing it back. "I'm sorry, I've never seen this person in my life. Are you selling something? A self-improvement something or other?"

"I'm not selling anything—"

She closed the door.

He studied the photograph. He wasn't sure he could erase the changes he'd made. He should have used pencil. One should always use pencil.

THE SHAKER

She shook.

“Why do you shake?” they asked.

“I can’t help it,” she said.

“Have you tried covering yourself with blankets?”
they asked.

“Of course,” she said.

“And?”

“I still shook, but I couldn’t see anything.”

“Wasn’t that better?”

She thought for a moment. “Yes,” she said. “It was.”

She got into bed. They gathered blankets. They covered her. Each day, new visitors arrived with more blankets to lay over her. One could feel a faint trembling beneath the blankets until finally one could not.

THE SHAKING SWORD

After breaking into the house, he took the sword off the wood-paneled wall and it began shaking so violently in his hand that he was afraid he might cut her or himself. He dropped the sword and it clanged on the floor.

She picked it up. It shook violently when she held it, too, whipping about like a hose surging with water. She cut his arm and dropped the sword.

They pushed it outside, gently, with the boots on their feet. They dug a hole and buried it.

They went through the house, pocketed anything that glittered, and made sandwiches. She was the one who noticed the shotgun propped up beside the refrigerator, at the ready in case anyone unsavory came to the door.

He wiped his fingers on his pants. His hands shook as he picked up the gun.

THE SHAMPOO DRINKERS

The shampoo drinkers are here, crowding the kitchen and guzzling the green stuff. It pours out their noses, bubbles up from their burps. They laugh and barf soap suds on which they slip and fall. They swing on the chandelier. They chug and wretch and drip.

Somebody show these bastards what shampoo is for! Introduce them to whiskey and wine! Get them out of the kitchen and into the bath!

SHE WORE A SLIP OF LIGHT

She wore a slip of light and slippers of hair, her lips cordial, cherries on her nipples. She danced with closed eyes in a room without mirrors or windows, ate everything that presented itself, including herself, and died happy.

He wore a hat of papier-mâché animal paws and underwear of rainbow suede, posed with a machete that had only cut sugarcane until he cut the rug with it. He dug a tunnel to her, never made it, and died happy hearing the muffled thud of her dancing feet above his head.

THE SHOE HOLE

Shoes issued from the hole in the wall. Clown shoes that squeaked, horseshoes that clanked, work boots that clunked, high heels that clicked, slides that scuffed. They piled on the floor, spilled down the hall, and filled the other rooms of the house.

They hung a sign outside their door: *Shoe Store—Bargains Galore!*

Customers began to arrive. They left with arms full of shoes they purchased. The house was brimming with shoes and people wanting to buy them.

“Hey,” someone yelled. “These are my shoes! My name is written on the tongue.”

“And these are mine,” someone else yelled, holding up a sandal. “I’d recognize this spot of blood anywhere—it’s my husband’s!”

“Wait a goddamn minute!” someone cried.

They hid in the room with the shoe hole, holding bags filled with money. The stream of shoes ceased. The first bloody severed foot dropped, quickly followed by another and another.

SHOVELS

Killed by a shovel to the head. Buried with the same shovel.

Eons.

Dug up with a different shovel.

THE SICKBED

The illness spread across the bed slowly, like heavy oil. A week passed, by which time the entire bed was consumed in black. Heat waved from its surface.

The room was sealed, the inhabitants quarantined. They crawled beneath the sickbed, lay on their backs, and embraced. They listened to the sickbed cough and spit and moan.

They tried to rest but sleep was missing.

SILK MITTENS

He insisted on silk mittens to swing the axe. As a result, the axe flew into the crowd when he attempted his chop. It stuck in an old man's head, causing him to dance as if on hot coals while his wound spurted blood all over the tightly packed crowd.

Children splashed about in his spew as if it were a sunshower.

Meanwhile, the axeman just stood there, staring at his silk-mittened hands, opening and closing them. Fists, not fists, fists, not fists.

THE SKY WHALE

One day a whale descended slowly from the sky. It hung over the town common, darkening the ground where we had gathered to greet the sky elephant, which had not arrived. The goalposts had been set up on both ends of the field.

We got out the megaphone and asked the sky whale if it knew where the sky elephant was. It didn't answer us but writhed and flipped in seeming discomfort. We thought we perhaps were about to be shit upon. That's often what happens when the sky elephant comes.

We repeated our question through the megaphone, but there was still no answer. The whale shook and opened its mouth. Were we about to be vomited on? We had never been vomited on by the sky elephant.

And then from the great mouth of the sky whale emerged the searching tip of an elephant's trunk and then the white tip of a tusk. It was happening.

We tore off our clothes in preparation, curled into balls on the ground, and waited. Who would be kicked first? Who would roll past the posts and score the first point?

THE SKYWRITER

He looked at the sky, where a plane was writing in contrails. He watched the words form one after the other: *What... are... you... looking... for?*

He answered aloud, "Love."

More words began to form: *What... are... you... looking... at?*

He answered aloud, "You."

More words: *That... was... a... rhetorical... question.*

"I... I...," he said.

Seriously... who... could... love... you?

THE SLANT

We live on the slant. Find a crevice to cling to and stay there. Fingers and toes raw and bloody. Exhausting.

The sun bakes us. We're all blonde or red-haired, red-bodied or black. Always thirsty, always hungry. When we expire or just give up, we slide down the slant like it's a carnival ride.

The clouds look nice below us. And it's a fine sight watching one of the strong among us descend through the white wisps, with empty water skins and food sacks waiting to be filled.

To be filled, or not. More often not.

But what a vision it is when one of us, bedraggled, three-quarters dead, climbs back up through the clouds, laden with water, berries, rodent meat. Blazing white teeth gritting in exertion, grinning in happiness.

SNAKE WITH ARMS

Snake with arms gets a gig playing bongos in a nightclub. Lights a lady's menthols and tips back scotch and sodas post-show. Makes her laugh by saying nothing at all. Rides with her to her home. Impresses her with a few push-ups then makes slithery love to her. Snake with arms thinks she sounds pleased, doesn't really care either way. Lights her a menthol.

Snake with arms, having grown a little bored with this nightly routine, leaves and finds a house to intrude. Climbs up the clapboards and drops down the chimney. Dark inside—perfect. Finds a bedroom: two sleeping bodies on a big mattress and a baby snoring in a crib. Can't believe the luck. Snake with arms wraps its knuckles with tape. Gonna rattle some toys, gonna punch some people. Gonna end the night on a high note.

A STATE OF MACARONI

A dozing cat full of macaroni stretched across the belly of a person full of macaroni asleep on a bed of macaroni in a room of macaroni inside a house of macaroni in a neighborhood of macaroni in a town of macaroni in a state of macaroni.

Turn on any faucet: from the left tap comes boiling water, from the right, marinara.

When not eating, all are yawning. When not yawning, all are sleeping, dreaming yellow dreams. This is one of those times.

THE STUFF

They warned the child it would turn into peanut butter if it continued to eat so much of the stuff.

The child stared at its parents—at the hairs poking from their noses, at their shiny eyes like marbles that had been sucked on and stuck in their heads, at their dry and bleeding lips—and then the child stuck its hand back into the jar of peanut butter for more.

TENTACLE FACE

A tile fell from the ceiling. A tentacle-faced man appeared in the open space left behind. A droplet of briny water fell from the man into her open mouth.

“Brr, brr, brr,” the tentacle-faced man said.

“I was just about to cook dinner for myself. Please join me.” She waved him down.

He slid through the hole in the ceiling slowly, gelatinously, and landed with a squishy thud on the floor. His body was limbless and wormy. He didn’t move.

She cut the tentacles from his face with a knife, and he purred. The surgery seemed as welcome as a friendly back-scratch. She sliced the tentacles into rings, put them in a pan with garlic and oil, and fried them.

She turned her attention back to the man. His face tentacles had already begun to grow back. Finally he moved, stretching up toward the hole in the ceiling.

She helped him back up into the hole. He retreated into the darkness, and she replaced the tile with slimy hands.

The tentacles were nearly done cooking. She called her

friend over for dinner.

“It’s funny,” she said to her friend, who had brought over a nice bottle of wine that complemented the tentacles perfectly. “I keep thinking of it as a man, but really, it isn’t a man at all.”

“What is it then?” the friend asked.

“Something better,” she said. “Something delicious.”

THERE ARE RIVETS EVERYWHERE

Shorn of locks and keyed up before flying, we fail to inquire about our destination or why hair is no longer required.

On landing somewhere lush, we find indications—corpses, faded signs—that the water isn't potable or perhaps not even present. Empty buckets of green paint abound. Grass crumbles and flakes when touched.

There are rivets everywhere.

The plane takes off as we survey our surroundings. We watch it rise against the unfinished sky, where blue fades to primer white, through which seeps flat black.

THERE IS THE MOUNTAIN AND
THERE IS NOTHING ELSE

There is the mountain and there is nothing else. The land all around is flat and barren. The sun is big and then small; it is here and then there. It moves not in invisible increments or on a course. It flits like a magical drunk. They do not trust the sun.

They lead themselves out of the mountain and cannot find their way back in. They will make a home here, outside.

Red oil runs down the mountain. It is not hot. The meat that fell from the sky is still frozen. It is left in the sun to thaw but the sun disappears. It sometimes does this. They wait for the sun to return but it does not. Twilight.

The oil pools and catches fire by some unknown means. It flames green and smells like opened bowels. The smoke tightens throats.

But they have no choice. The meat fell from the sky so many days ago and yet it refuses to thaw. They have never encountered anything so cold. But when they place the meat in the fire, the flames recede. They place more meat onto the fire until all the flames are gone and the fire is extinguished. They touch the meat and it is cold.

They look at each other. They look behind them and there is the mountain and there is nothing else.

THERE WAS ANOTHER DOOR

He opened the door and there was another door. He opened that door and there was another door. So he opened that door and there was yet another door.

He opened doors for days, weeks, months, years. He became an old man.

Then he opened the next door and there was a red brick wall. He took the bricks out one by one and found there was another wall. So he took the bricks out one by one and revealed yet another wall.

He took down walls for days, weeks, months, but not years, for he had no more years to give nor did he want to give them. He lay down on the ground. Sometimes, he thought, a wall is meant to be a wall. Sometimes a door is meant to remain unopened. And then he fell asleep.

TIGER

He painted himself striped orange and black so that the tiger he had fallen in love with would love him back.

The man was consumed with passion.

But the tiger was color-blind. It mistook him for a zebra and ate him.

The man was consumed with passion.

A TINY GUITAR

She made a tiny guitar and swallowed it for the little man in her stomach to play. She wanted to be serenaded.

The little man strummed hesitantly. "Just warming up a bit," he called up to her. He strummed more vigorously. A string broke. And then another.

"Miss," the little man said, "What am I to do?"

"Just beat it like a drum and sing along to that," she said.

The little man hammered the guitar without any sense of rhythm or dynamics. He wailed horribly.

"Stop, stop, stop!" she said. "What's the matter with you? Are you drunk?"

"Miss," he said, "You had a glass of wine . . . naturally, it made its way down here . . . I couldn't help but have some, too."

"But it was only half a glass!"

"But, miss, I am so little."

"Can you whistle?"

"Miss, I will try," he said. "My whistle is properly wet!"

THE TREES

The trees bend from the weight of the water within them. Their bark is furred and slimy, their branches lank, their leaves dark and dripping.

“What is happening to us?” they whisper.

“We are sick,” they whisper.

“We are overfull of life,” they whisper.

“We are dying,” they whisper.

One of the trees lies down. And then another does the same. Then another and another until all the trees are on the ground.

“What is happening to us?” they whisper.

But even that is too loud; it hurts to hear anything. “Shh,” they say, “Shh.”

TURKEYS DROP

Spring. Turkeys drop. Turkey puddles for splashing.
Summer. Turkeys drop. Turkey rain for dancing.
Fall. Turkeys drop. Turkey piles for jumping.
Winter. Turkeys drop. Turkey drifts for diving.

UNCLE CACA

Uncle Caca is nobody's favorite uncle. He visits his nieces and nephews in their parents' homes and insists on smoking cheroots and drinking dark whiskey, stinking up everything. Rusty pennies are all he doles out, never dollar bills. Fingers orange, fingernails black, lumpen face like the anus of a pit bull. Brown suit be-sheened with random greases.

No, he is nobody's favorite. But his siblings take pity on him. He was the firstborn and thus awarded the family name Caca, while they were dubbed Rose, Jasmine, Philippe. They press the smalls of their children's backs to urge them forward. "Go on," they say, "go give Uncle Caca a hug."

UNNATURAL

A fish married a cat. No one could believe it. Even the fish and cat said, "Can you believe it?" But they loved and supported each other and were happy.

They had a baby. The baby, being both cat and fish, couldn't resist eating itself.

The fish and the cat mourned the loss of their child. Secretly they blamed each other for the loss. Then they blamed themselves. The cat thought, Why did I fall in love with a fish? It's unnatural. The fish thought, Why did I fall in love with a cat? It's unnatural.

THE VISITOR

A visitor appeared at the door. He clutched his long coat tightly around his neck and waist. We asked him his business.

“I am a visitor,” he said. “I visit. May I come in?”

“We prefer to know our visitors,” we said.

“Did I not just introduce myself?” the visitor said. A snake wriggled up from his collar. Another dangled from the bottom of his coat.

“Ah!” we said. “So it’s you!”

“It is,” the visitor said.

“And you’ve brought the serpents!”

“I have,” the visitor said.

We opened the door wide and welcomed him in.

THE WAVING HAND

While returning from the grocery store, you see somebody waving behind a window. You wave back.

They continue waving.

You draw nearer, still waving.

They remain in the window, still waving.

You leave the sidewalk for their front yard, still waving.

They remain in the window, still waving.

You part the bushes beneath the window and press your face against the pane, still waving.

The person stops waving and gently peels each finger of their hand, revealing pale, banana-like flesh. They open the window, devour one finger, and offer you your choice of the remaining four appendages.

“I have ice cream,” you say, before choosing the big middle finger.

A WAX MAN

A wax man molds a woman from the flesh he finds in his ears. He never speaks because he is made of wax and lacks the bits that make speech possible. She talks and receives only silence in return.

As the years pass, the woman grows taller, stronger, voluptuous. Eventually she towers over the man. She resents him for bringing her to life.

One dark evening—they always sit in the dark—she stuffs a wick in his bottom and pulls it out of his mouth at the other end. She makes him stand at attention on her nightstand, lights the wick, and begins to read the first of many books. When the man gets too small and threatens to burn out, she enlarges him with the wax she finds in her ears.

WHERE THE RAIN LIVES

Where the rain lives, people fall from the sky. Each raindrop carries an umbrella to protect itself when it needs to go out during a people-fall. Worst is when the rain wakes up on a Monday morning, ahead of a long day of falling to earth, and sees people pouring down. Better is when the rain has a day with nothing planned, when it can stay home and read or doze with the calming, steady tattoo of people landing all around.

A WITCH STORY

Silver wires hang from the chin of the witch, throwing sparks. The witch collects the electricity in a glass jar, which glows like a lantern and guides her passage through the dark tunnel.

The tunnel ends in a wall. Sitting on the ground in front of the wall is another witch, also with sparking silver wires hanging from his chin. The witches sit knee to knee and braid their wires together. Blue current flows between them, pulsing like blood through veins. They part their lips to smile at each other and their teeth glow blue. They laugh and their mouths glow blue, revealing the caves of their throats glowing blue.

A YELLOW CAR

A yellow car drives past. Intestines trail from its tailpipe. Your dog breaks away from you and gives chase. It catches up to the car and grabs the intestines with its teeth. The car continues on, vanishing from sight, while the intestines continue to release.

The dog eats and eats and eats the guts, more than a mile of them, until it reaches the end of the intestines: a brain with a mouth speaking gibberish. The car is nowhere to be found. You tell the dog to sit.

You give the mouth a cigarette and light it. The mouth puffs away, silent now. The dog looks up at you, waiting for your command.

“Come,” you say finally. “No more treats.”

YOUR HEAD IS ON FIRE

Your head is on fire. It smells like bacon. Makes us hungry.

Your head is on fire. It looks like it hurts. Makes us queasy.

Your head is on fire. It lights up this cage. Makes us angry.

Your head is on fire.

It reminds us of life before.

Makes it easy.

Let the fire take the rest of you, so we can eat the residue.

