



Collected  
Things  
VOLUME III

Collected Things

III

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THINGS

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*For Shivani*



# Collected THINGS

VOLUME III





## AN ADVENTUROUS DINNER

He was clinging to the ceiling when she came home. He put a finger to his lips when she saw him, then pointed at the alligator sleeping in the middle of the kitchen. She placed a pair of earmuffs on the reptile's head.

“What's going on?” she asked.

“I had an adventurous dinner planned,” he said.

“And?”

“The rabbit ate the salad, the pig ate the rabbit, and the alligator ate the pig.”

“Let's just get a pizza,” she said.

“I already ordered one,” he said. “But the gator ate that, too.”

“Great.”

“Hungry creatures, alligators,” he said.



## THE ANGRY ROOSTER

The angry rooster will not calm down. It crows and stamps and scratches the ground with its feet.

The source of its anger: an egg lodged in its anus.

We try to help the rooster by removing the egg, but it won't let us.

“Don't touch!” cries the rooster. “It hurts!”

We ask the rooster what happened, how did an egg get lodged in its backside?

“I was trying to help out around the house!” cries the rooster.

## THE ARM CYCLE

A hand rises up from the earth. They pull on the hand, and the arm to which it is attached follows. The arm is seemingly without end. They keep pulling and the arm keeps coming.

Coils of arm pile up. A new landscape is created: mountains and hills of arm. They continue to pull the arm from the earth.

There is too much arm. They don't know what to do with it. Someone says they should bury the arm. Deep trenches are dug and the arm is rolled into it.

They free the arm from the earth, they bury the arm in the earth. It is a cycle without end.

## THE ARTIST

The artist carved a man carving a man. The carving of the man carving a man was also carving a man. The carving of the man carving a man carving a man was also carving a man. On and on went the carving, ever smaller men carving ever smaller men.

Finally, the last man carving a man carved not a man but the true prize: a single, slender toothpick, which the artist plucked and placed into his mouth.

“Why didn’t you just whittle a toothpick in the first place?” he was asked.

He chewed the toothpick. “I am an artist,” he said, “Not a maker of trifles.” He chewed the toothpick and then flicked it away.

## A BARRIER

A barrier goes up around the town.

We are being kept in, the people inside the town think.

We are being kept out, the people outside the town think.

The people beneath the town think what they always think: how wonderful it is to live underground.

## BATHING WITH THE BIRDS

He put a bathtub in the yard. He wanted to bathe as the birds did. He removed his clothes, got into the tub, and waited for rain.

The police arrived. They told him his neighbors would like him to put his clothes back on.

“I can’t bathe in my clothes,” he said.

“Why don’t you bathe inside like everyone else?” the police said.

He told them about the birds.

“Birds don’t have dangling genitalia, hair all over their bodies—”

“Not all over my body,” he interrupted. “I’m bald, like an eagle.”

The police stepped forward, gripping their batons. “Endangered like one, too.”

He exited the bathtub. “I’m returning to my nest now,” he said. “To hatch a new plan.”

## THE BATHTUB

The bathtub closes like an oyster. When it finally opens again several weeks later, there is a human skull inside. He has the idea to make an earring out of it for his wife, but he needs another skull to complete the pair. He commands the bathtub to close again. He grows impatient after a few weeks and pries the tub open. Inside is a human head, partly decomposed. It moans in pain. He tells the bathtub to close again, but it does not listen. The head moans. It will be some time before the earrings are ready.

## A BEAR SEEKS A PILLOW

A bear seeks a pillow. “The rock in my cave is giving me a stiff neck,” the bear says.

“The only spare pillow we have is an old feather-filled thing,” they say.

“Oh, that won’t do,” the bear says. “I’m allergic.”

“We have a sack of potatoes that might work,” they say.

“That would be a very lumpy pillow,” the bear says.

“We could mash the potatoes,” they say.

“Oh, but then I would just eat the pillow, mashed potatoes being my favorite food,” the bear says.

“Isn’t that funny,” they say. “We’re having mashed potatoes for dinner.”

“You don’t say?” The bear turns bashful. “I don’t suppose you have enough to share.”

“Oh, we can manage an extra spot at the table.”

After dinner, the bear is sleepy. “Do you think I could lie down in front of your fireplace? Just for a little while.”

“Please do,” they say. The bear sprawls out on its belly before the crackling fire and is soon asleep.

They open a bottle of wine and cozy up on the bear's back.  
They clink glasses and kiss.



## THE BIRD IN THE SKULL

The bird in the skull wants worms but settles for brain. The brain in the skull wants a bat but settles for the bird. The brain forgets itself as it is eaten; the bird forgets itself as it eats. It grows full and tired. It gathers hair from the head that houses the skull and builds a nest. It falls asleep. Beneath its warm bottom, the hairs begin to grow heads and, within them, skulls.

## BORN IN A TIN CAN

He was born in a tin can. His brothers were beans and his sisters sardines.

“Where are our parents?” he asked.

He was told they were out there, waiting to eat them.

“Why would they eat us?” he asked.

“What are children for but to be eaten?” they said.

## BOTTLED

They bottled him for a special occasion. He sat on the shelf for many years, collecting dust. He read and reread the one book he'd been bottled with more times than he could recall. Eventually, he died.

“He’s dead!” they said. “Let’s open the bottle and celebrate his life!”

They drank him. He was more bitter than he had been alive. Age had done nothing to sweeten him. They ended up pouring him down the drain.

## THE BRAIN DONOR

He wanted to donate his brain to science.

“You should really wait until after you’ve died,” the scientist said.

“But then all the big ideas I have would go to waste!” he replied.

## THE BRANCH

There was a tree branch in the kitchen. It sat at the table waiting for breakfast. It impatiently tapped an empty plate with its tips.

“Didn’t I tell you to stay outside?” he said.

“I wanted eggs,” said the branch.

“Are there no eggs outside?” he said.

“The only eggs outside are inside chickens.”

“Then maybe you should eat chicken—you’d get both the meat and the egg.”

“I only want the egg,” said the branch.

“This is why I can’t bear to be around you!” he said and cracked an egg into the frying pan.

## BRING A LEMON TO A GARDEN

Bring a lemon to a garden. Turn over the first stone you find. Ask the first worm you meet how it got there. When it doesn't answer, ask it how you got there. After it explains the birds and the bees to you, seek out a bird and a bee and encourage them to do what birds and bees do. After the bee stings you and the bird pecks you, eat the worm angrily. Take your lemon and throw it into the air and say, "Look at the sun rise!" At the lemon's apex, yell, "Look at the sun!" As the lemon falls, say, "Look at the sun set!"

Bury the stinger-less bee beneath the stone you overturned. Hold the bird in your hand and regurgitate the worm into its mouth. Open the lemon and squeeze its seeds into the soil.

Return to the site many years later to die beneath the fragrant shade of the lemon tree you planted.

## THE BURIAL

He breaks a glass and buries it.

A week later, the glass surfaces, whole again.

He thinks of the broken watch that has been in his nightstand for many years. He buries it.

A week later, his watch surfaces, ticking again.

He thinks of her. He buries himself to try and heal his broken heart.

But the earth just keeps him like any other body that has been buried. This is fine, for now his heart no longer aches.

## THE CAGE

His plan was to waste away so that he would fit between the bars of his cage. He refused the meager meals he was given once a day.

“This one has given up,” his captors said. “He doesn’t even want to eat anymore.”

His plan was working perfectly.

He grew skinnier with each passing day, until finally he was able to slip between the bars. He waited for the guard to fall asleep before attempting his escape. But he was so diminished that he collapsed from exhaustion only halfway out of his cage. The guard woke up and pushed him back inside.

A stonemason was called to brick the prisoner in. “He’s stopped eating anyway,” the guard said. “And I can’t bear to see him suffer so.”



## THE CAR

The car refuses to leave the garage. It's tired of running, it says, tired of always coming and going.

You've never seen the car so depressed. You walk to work and make plans to give it a warm bath that night. You will cook its favorite meal of motor oil soup.

When you return home that evening and enter the garage, you nearly faint from the carbon monoxide. The car, which had been running, sputters through the last vapors of gasoline in its tank. There is a note on the dashboard: *I wanted my suicide to be painless for me and clean for you. For your safety, keep the bay open to let in the fresh air.*

You get into the car and sit behind the steering wheel, which is cold beneath your hands. You caress the horn and then press it, but there is no sound. The car is dead.

## THE CARDINAL

The cardinal dripped its red onto the snow below. A fox sat beneath the tree with its mouth open and caught every drop that fell.

The cardinal's red pooled inside the belly of the fox. It grew into a baby cardinal that splashed about in the red of its own parent.

The fox drank too much of the cardinal's red and vomited. Out came the baby cardinal. It shivered in the snow. Its cardinal parent screeched from above, too scared to get near the fox. The fox licked the baby cardinal clean.

The baby cardinal hid in the fur beneath the fox's chin, where it was warm. They went into the fox's den, where it was even warmer.

The cardinal in the tree had lost all its red. It was now indistinguishable from the dead tree on which it perched. It decided it was now a mourning dove. Appropriately, it mourned.

## THE CASTLE

There is a castle. It is an empty castle. It is an empty castle in a forest. It is an empty castle in a forest on an island. It is an empty castle in a forest on an island hidden in mist. It is an empty castle in a forest on an island hidden in mist on a planet undiscovered.

Then the planet is discovered.

Then the island is colonized.

Then the forest is cut down.

Then the castle is razed.

Then a new castle is built.

There is a castle.

## THE CAT DRAWS A SELF-PORTRAIT

The cat draws a self-portrait. Beneath the image of itself it writes, *MISSING*. The cat hangs the picture by the hole in the wall where the mice live. When the mice step hesitantly out of the hole to check their surroundings before going to work for the day, they notice the sign. A squeaky cheer goes up among them. They draw a mustache and dark eyebrows on the cat's portrait. They tear the picture to shreds, set it on fire, and urinate on it.

The cat had no idea the mice hated it so fervently. It cannot even bring itself to pounce on the unsuspecting rodents. Tears fall from its eyes; they hiss when they hit the flames engulfing its self-portrait.

## THE CAT'S REQUEST

The cat brings a bird home and requests that it be roasted.

“Don’t cats eat raw meat?” you ask.

“Not me,” the cat says. “I’m evolved.”

“Not evolved enough to cook, it seems,” you say.

“Give me time,” the cat says. “Now, please get going—  
I’m hungry.”

“Not hungry enough to just eat the bird you caught!”

“I purchased this bird from my butcher!” the cat shouts.  
“Do you take me for an animal?”

## THE CAULDRON

A baby swims in a large cauldron. It does the breaststroke, the back float, the butterfly, the doggy paddle. The townspeople all cheer at its preternatural ability in the water.

“What a swimmer!” someone says.

“Look at that baby go!” someone says.

“A shame I need to cook it in that very cauldron!” says the witch.

## THE CEILING

They are lying in bed when the ceiling begins to descend.

“Maybe if we close our eyes, it will stop,” he says.

They close their eyes.

“Did it stop?” she asks.

“I can’t see if it stopped,” he says. “I’ll open my eyes to check.” He opens his eyes: the ceiling is nearly touching his nose. “It didn’t stop,” he said. “But maybe it stops as long as we keep our eyes closed,” he says.

“It’s definitely stopped for me,” she says, drowsily, her eyes still closed. She begins to snore softly. He closes his eyes and falls asleep, too.

## THE CHIMNEY WORE A RIBBON IN ITS HAIR

The chimney wore a ribbon in its hair. The hair we had given the chimney to keep its head warm. The head we had given the chimney to give it sentience. The sentience the chimney had developed to combat loneliness. The loneliness the chimney had accepted as part of life. The life the chimney had never asked for.

But one cannot have a ribbon in one's hair without life, not even a chimney.



## A CLOUD GETS A HAIRCUT

A cloud gets a haircut. “Just trim away that swirly tail I’m dragging across the sky,” it tells the barber.

The barber snips.

“If you would, just even out that bump up top that makes me look fat.”

The barber snips.

“How about you accentuate my natural waves by chopping here and there?”

The barber snips.

“Now,” the cloud says, “what can we do about all this white?”

## THE COLLECTOR

The floor cracks open. A tower of bric-a-brac rises and bursts through the roof. An old man forces his way out of the rubble and announces himself as the collector. He asks for objects to add to his monument, which still grows toward the sky.

“What have you done to our house?” they ask him.

“Trinkets? Tchotchkes?”

“Our floor is gone!” they say.

“Gewgaws? Baubles?”

“Our roof!”

“Trifles? Doodads?”

They pull a random object from the tower and hand it to the collector.

“Egads!” the collector says. “I’ve looked all over the world for one of these!” He climbs back inside the tower of trash, which descends into the earth.

They look at the hole in their floor. They look at the sky, which they now have an unobstructed view of. And then the rain begins to fall.

## CUT DOWN

They determined he was dying. Rather than risk him dropping a limb or falling onto somebody's house, they decided to cut him down. He would be brought down to a stump, and then the stump of him would be ground up. It was spring.

He protested. "Look, I'm still budding!" He pointed to the green tufts on his knuckles and in his ears and nose.

They said that would just make him more prone to falling or breaking, which was another reason to cut him down.

He protested. "Look at all the shelter I offer!" He pointed to the hole in his belly, in which a squirrel could be seen cooking dinner.

"Rotten, too," they whispered and shook their heads. They took up their chainsaws.

"Can I at least be made into paper? Something that can be written or drawn upon?"

He was the wrong type of man for that, they said before starting the saws.

## DIM

She cracked his skull with a cast-iron skillet. Light beamed out.

“And all these years you called me dim!” he said.

She placed a lampshade on his head.

“Are we having a party?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “You must be very drunk not to remember.”

“Is that why I have a headache?”

“Yes,” she said. “You drank everything in the house.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t whack me with that frying pan in your hand!” he said.

“Oh, believe me, it took all my strength!” she said.

## THE DIRT DRINKER

The dirt drinker is drunk on dirt again, facedown in the mud and gulping. People walk right across the back of the dirt drinker, leaving dirty footprints. Dogs lift their legs over the dirt drinker. Birds harvest worms from the hair of the dirt drinker.

The dirt drinker says some gluggy gibberish in between quaffs.

“Pathetic,” people say. They shake their heads at the dirt drinker.

But the dirt drinker is only exclaiming happiness. There are no hangovers for the dirt drinker, only drunkenness. The dirt drinker’s bowels release freely and richly into the dirt, where it will be drunk again, an endless free supply of happiness.

## DIRTY

He beat the ground with his fists.

They asked what he was doing.

He told them he was trying to teach this particular patch of earth a lesson.

Why didn't he just stomp all over it?

He told them he didn't fight dirty.

They cited the dirt on his fists as proof that the ground *did* fight dirty.

“So you can see why I decided to teach it a lesson!” he said.

## THE DISAPPEARER

He began to disappear in increments: a fingernail vanished, then a finger; a hand, then an arm.

“I am leaving,” he said, but he was alone, so his words disappeared, too.

When he was just a nose and eyes attached to the primitive portion of his brain, long after he had made his peace with his fate, he began to grow back in a different form. Tentacles sprouted like hair from his nostrils. He watched them lengthen and taste the air like elephant trunks. They grew in number and strength, affixed themselves to the bars in the ceiling grate—the only source of light in his room—and yanked it free. The tentacles writhed in the warmth of the sun. They gripped edges of the opening in the ceiling and pulled what remained of the old him toward the light.

## THE DISH

The dish opened its mouth and vomited a fountain of peas. The mice poured in from the walls to catch the falling green orbs in their tiny yellow teeth. The rodents gorged themselves then crushed one another trying to squeeze back into their holes.

A week had passed since he had set the table and laid down to dream his dinner into being. His pillow was yellow with sweat; his breath browned the air. He smacked his lips: he had dreamed of rabbit stew.

He rushed to the table and saw the remains of shrunken, stale peas, smelled the rot of bloated mice. His dinner dream had been spoiled. He felt the back of his head and found that he'd forgotten to close the door of his skull before he'd gone to sleep.

He looked once more at the peas and the mice. It would be a different kind of stew, then.



## THE DISSECTION

He dissects himself to understand how he lives. He examines his musculature, vasculature, organs, skeleton. He sees how everything is interconnected, but he cannot find the battery that drives him. He thinks it may be embedded in his brain, but before he can finish dissecting that, everything goes white and he loses consciousness. In his unconscious state, he sees himself sitting in his easy chair, with the tray of surgical tools on the table beside him. He watches himself make the first incision in his chest, allowing him to neatly open his skin. He hears the low-battery warning: an insistent beeping, seemingly without origin. He watches himself examine his musculature, vasculature, organs, skeleton. From somewhere, the battery beeps and beeps and beeps. He watches himself lose consciousness as he attempts to harvest his brain for study.

## DONUT TOWN

Dogs dive through donuts into rivers of gooey cream. Birds drop rainbow sprinkles from their butts. Honey glazes everything; sex leads to dessert, which leads to sex. All is sweetness in Donut Town.

Until the donut machine starts spitting out straight cakes. Where are the circular donuts? people say. These straight donuts aren't enticing at all, people say. They look like eliminations, diseased penises.

Someone has the bright idea to arrange all the straight donuts into one huge circular donut.

The mayor declares it Donut Day. "Dig in!" he says, and everyone does. Soon the giant donut is devoured.

Someone from the donut factory comes running. "The donut machine is back to normal! Look!" The factory worker holds up a circular donut.

All gathered erupt in cheers.

"Wait a minute," someone says. They step forward, holding the last piece of straight donut. They take the circular donut from the factory worker's hand and place it lovingly onto

the straight donut, as if fitting a ring onto a finger.

The crowd falls silent at the sight of the wedded donuts. But it is only a moment's hush before everyone erupts in ecstasy, for truly it is a new day in Donut Town.

## THE DRUNKEN TOILET

The toilet was missing.

“This won’t do,” they said.

For the rest of the day, they paced around the house, holding their fronts and bottoms, pausing only to sit fitfully with crossed legs.

“This won’t do at all!” they said.

Finally the toilet returned, drunk. It hiccupped all the way back to its spot in the bathroom.

He was about to relieve himself but she stopped him. “Let it sleep,” she said.

For the rest of the night, they paced around the house, holding their fronts and bottoms, pausing only to sit fitfully with crossed legs, waiting for the toilet to sober up.

## THE EARTH AND THE DYING TREE

The dying tree says to the earth, "If I fall, will you take me into your bosom?"

The earth says, "If you'll accept me as I am: dirty."

The dying tree says, "If you'll accept me as I am: impotent and frail."

The earth says, "All I've ever wanted is for you to lie down with me, stilly."

The dying tree says, "I am not stoic; I am just tired from standing my whole life—you understand, don't you?"

The earth says, "You don't need to explain yourself. I haven't moved my whole life."

The dying tree says, "I am falling for you, for you alone."

The earth says, "I am waiting, ever waiting."

## AN EGG FELL FROM HIM

An egg fell from him. He put it back inside. It fell again. "Please stay inside me until it is time for breakfast," he told the egg. He put it back inside, where it remained. He finished his work and went to bed.

In the morning, he waited for the egg to fall, but it did not. He jumped up and down until it dropped. He prepared the frying pan with butter and cracked the egg into it. Rank blood oozed out of the rotten egg.

"Not again!" he cried.

## EGGS

They are in need of eggs, but there are none. They decide to crack their skulls open and cook what comes out. She whacks his head with a hammer. There is a puff of smoke. He tips his head into the frying pan, but once the smoke dissipates, nothing more comes out. He cracks her skull with the hammer. A bird is released; it flies out the window. She tips her head into the frying pan, but nothing more comes out.

They stare at one another, trying to remember what it was they were doing before staring at one another.

“Honey,” he says, “you hurt your head!”

“Honey,” she says, “*you* hurt *your* head!”

“But I’m so hungry!” he says.

“But *I’m* so hungry!” she says.

“I’ll see if we have any eggs,” he says.

## THE FALLEN MAN

In spring, they clean the leaves from the previous fall. Beneath the leaves, they find a man asleep.

They rouse him and ask if he's okay.

"I fell from the tree and was in the process of dying." He pinches his brown and brittle skin, which cracks between his fingers. "But apparently, there's a little life left in me yet." He sits up, then rises to his feet, supporting himself with the trunk of the tree from which he fell. He coughs dust. He takes a step and crumbles into a pile on the ground.

"Collect me," he says, with a smile on his papery lips. "Put me in a bag. Incinerate me. Make me smell warm and inviting. Make me burn your eyes with smoke."



## THE FLOOR THAT LEFT

The floor began leaving on a Sunday. They watched it proceed slowly, one wooden plank at a time, out the front door and onto the sidewalk. It continued its slow march toward the center of town.

They tried to coax it back into the house with promises of fresh wax and no shoes, but it didn't work. By Monday, the floor was gone.

Without a floor, the house was just a box, and they were just contents in that box, along with assorted chairs and tables and clothing and televisions and toilets.

They agreed that they were now in storage. Fittingly, they no longer came and went but just stayed where they were, as things in boxes do.

And the house, being a box near the side of the road, was removed on trash day.

## THE FLOWER

He is awakened by a pink flower sniffing his neck. He gently pushes it away, but it resists.

The flower sniffs the hair on his head. It sniffs under his arms. It angles toward his groin but he will not let it sniff there. He takes hold of it and follows its stem, which goes out the window and originates in the garden, directly over the spot where he buried his dog the previous summer.

He coils the long stem and buries it in the dirt. He turns to leave and there is the flower, at his ankles, following. He returns the flower to the garden. "Stay," he says, "stay."

## THE FLUTE

Her flute blows blue smoke that forms shapes in the air. She makes a smoke pony that prances, a demon that scowls, a raven that rolls in flight, a diamond that hangs in the air.

Children gather around the tree where she sits and plays. They demand a dinosaur, they want a whale, they plead for planets.

She explains to them that she has no control of what escapes from her flute; she plays and what comes out is what comes out. She takes up her flute again and out slithers a snake.

“But it’s your air that makes them,” the children say.

“The air is yours as well as mine as well as this tree’s, which is to say, it is none of ours.” She takes up her flute again and out lumbers a locomotive. She plays a choo-choo tune and the train grows longer and longer. The children chase it, paying no mind to where it might be heading.

## THE FOG

A fog rises from the sink drain. It floats before him then goes out the door. He quits shaving and follows, wearing only a towel around his waist. The fog leads him through the center of town, where other men and women are following their own fogs, some of them completely nude. The fogs lead them toward the outskirts, to the reservoir, which is shrouded in its own dense fog. One by one, they are led into the lake and disappear.

Back in their homes, loved ones take their turns in the bathrooms to ready themselves for the day. Fog rises from the sink drains; it smells like their husbands, like their wives, like their children, like a memory of someone they can't describe. It floats before them then goes out the door. They follow.

## A GOOD HEAD

His head had gone soft. He pushed the top of it in and made a wine bowl for his wife. His eyes moved down to his mouth.

“I’m seeing things differently,” he said, his eyes bouncing like marbles on the back of his tongue.

“Me, too,” said his wife, halfway through her second bottle of Chianti. “Can this hold spaghetti?” she asked before licking his concave head clean.

“Oh, yes,” he said. “Bread and salad, too.”

“What a good head you turned out to have,” she said.

“Yes, it wasn’t hard at all,” he said. “I’ll start the water boiling for the pasta.”

## GRASS AND STONE

Grass fell in love with stone.

Grass told stone, “You are so old and hard I can’t believe I love you.”

Stone told grass, “You are so green and soft I cannot believe my luck.”

Grass became brittle with age and died. Stone remained, eventually swallowed by earth, dead without dying. Never again, thought stone, but then the roots of new grass came a-tickling.

## THE HAIRCUT

Lacking scissors, he cuts his hair with a saw. Lacking coordination, he accidentally cuts his head off.

The cat sits him in a chair at the kitchen table, crawls inside his body, and pulls his head back on. They wait for her to come home.

“Why so quiet?” she asks him after he ignores her questions about how his day was, about what he had for lunch, about whether he still finds her attractive. “Cat got your tongue?” she asks.

Yes, yes, yes! the cat wants to shout. But it just comes out as meow, meow, meow.

She laughs and tousles his hair. “You need a haircut,” she says.

## THE HAIRY MAN

The hairy man fills his house with shed. He cannot move without dropping hair. He stays in the hall to keep his hair confined there. He tries to sit still, but halls make him want to pace, so pace he does, up and down the hall. At the end of the day, he's up to his knees in fuzz, which he dutifully cleans before collapsing into bed, exhausted.

One day while pacing, he falls through the floor. He's worn the boards away to nothing. Hair floats down like curly snow. He watches it pile up, throws it into the air and laughs. He makes hair angels in it. He makes a hairy man out of it, with button testicles and a carrot penis. He makes a hairy woman with button breasts and a carrot dildo. They all have a party until the wee hours.



## HALLOWEEN

Bugs crawl from the ink-black pools on the tips of her fingers. Birds flap violently in the back of her throat when she tries to speak. Cloudy icicles form on the ends of her hair. Her skin ripples as if in a wind chamber. Blood spurts from the pinholes in her eyes.

Someone compliments her dedication to Halloween.

“Halloween?” she says, as sparrows fly from her mouth. “I just woke up like this.”

## THE HAMMOCK

A man hung a hammock between two branches high up in a tall tree. They asked why he had chosen to relax in such a precarious place. He told them he couldn't doze on the ground, not with all the snakes slithering about. They looked around and told him there were no snakes that they could see.

“There are if you drink like I do,” he said and closed his eyes.

## THE HAT HOOK

He drives a nail into the back of his head to have a place to hang his hat when he's not wearing it. It works like a charm. He is growing old and forgetful, however, and one day he cannot remember where he hung his hat. He wastes hours looking for it before he scratches his head and finds it.

He drives another nail into the front of his head with a note attached reminding him to check the back of his head for his hat.

## THE HEAD

While sleeping, his head went out on the town. Everyone wanted to buy the head a drink. They picked it up off the street and brought it under their arms into a tavern.

They set the head up on the bar and fed it shots of whiskey and pickled eggs, which immediately spilled out the bottom, where the neck should have been, having no other place to go. It drank and ate all night and never got full.

“Tell us a joke!” they shouted.

The head told the filthiest jokes it could recall. It went through all the jokes it knew and started at the beginning again. The audience was by now fully drunk and didn’t notice or care. Even the bartender was in his cups.

A woman approached and began to kiss the head on the mouth. The head kissed back.

One of the patrons collapsed. He wasn’t breathing. The head had to give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation because everyone else was too drunk to do so. But the head’s lungs were at home sleeping, so it had no air to give the dying man.

“I’m sorry,” the head said. “I tried.”

Everyone in the bar was inconsolable. They sobbed together. A round of drinks was ordered. They all toasted to their dead friend, the name of whom no one could recall at the moment, but, they all agreed, he was a swell guy, a great guy, the best guy that ever was.

The head took its final drink and left the bar, leaving the gathered to their lamentations.

## HER HEAD CAVE

She is sleeping with her back to him when he notices the cave in her head, the mouth of which is at her nape. He peers inside it with a flashlight, but it is too dark to make out any details. He sends in an ant to explore. On the first night, the ant returns with a bucket of coal. Unsatisfied, he sends the ant back in, and this time it returns with a collection of bones. He tells the ant to go back into the cave.

The ant resists. "What is it you're looking for?" the ant asks.

"I was hoping for something precious," he says.

"But don't you know she's already given you everything precious already?"

## HER REAL EYES

She stared out the window, at what, no one knew. People passed by and waved, but she didn't wave back. They pulled faces, but she never cracked a smile or showed her teeth. They angrily threatened to break the thin pane of glass that separated them, but she never blinked.

She sits there now, staring out the window.

If anyone were to go inside to check on her, they would see the eyes in the back of her head—her real eyes, not the show eyes in the front of her head—are watching the third extra inning of a Sunday afternoon baseball game. They flick with every pitch thrown to the plate.

## HIS HEAD IS A SANDWICH

His head is a sandwich with a bite taken from it. He asks the doctor what he should do. The doctor tells him he would be better if toasted. He returns home and toasts his head as instructed. But he is no better: his head is still a sandwich with a bite taken from it, only now he is dry and crumbly, too. Perhaps I am just getting old, he thinks, and that is why no one will finish eating my head.



## THE HOUSE THAT ATE ITSELF

The roof slurped the chimney like a strand of spaghetti. The attic ate the shingles of the roof like potato chips. The upstairs ate the cobwebbed attic only grudgingly. The downstairs ate the upstairs with delight, savoring the steps like an ear of sweet corn. The basement burbled with bile and devoured everything that remained: the plaque-clogged plumbing, the wilting wires, the moldering meat of the home's former occupants—a cat and its fur, two humans and their hair. Nothing was left but the bone-white toilet, which not even the hungriest house would eat.

## THE HURT BACK

Her back hurt. She asked it, "Why do you ache so?"

"I pine for my one true love," her back said.

"Who is that?" she asked.

"The front of you," her back said. "It is so close and yet ever out of reach."

"What if there were more distance between you?" she asked. "Would that help?"

"It might," her back said.

"I will make myself fat, then," she said, "and soon my front will be far away from you."

"On second thought, I think that would make me sad."

"Perhaps," she said. "But I will be happy." And then she began to eat.

## THE ILL-FITTING SUIT

A crow wears a too-small white suit.

“Look at that cow in the tree,” someone says.

“That’s not a cow,” someone says. “That’s a zebra.”

“That’s not a zebra,” someone says. “That’s a skunk.”

“That’s not a skunk,” someone says. “That’s a panda.”

The crow shifts in its perch. It tugs the collar of the ill-fitting suit.

“That’s not a panda,” someone says. “That’s a—”

“I’m a fucking crow!” says the crow. “And I am going to kill my dry cleaner.”

## INSIDE THE WALL

A finger pokes out from the fieldstone wall. She pulls on it, and it hooks around her finger and tugs back. It is a very strong finger. It pulls her between the stones and into the wall. Inside the wall, it is too dark to see. Something tickles her ear, pokes her nose, pinches her lips—and then she is left alone. Silence. She yells out; her voice echoes as if in a cave. The air and the ground below her are cool and slightly damp. She crawls blindly in the dark for what seems like days until finally in the distance she sees a chink of light. She moves toward it, raises her hand, and pokes it with her finger. The sun warms her finger from the other side.

## THE INTESTINE DOOR

Behind the door was a wall of soft, slick, pulsing, pink intestine. It squeaked like a balloon being twisted. He closed the door.

“Something’s wrong with the closet,” he said to his wife. He gestured toward the door.

“That’s not the closet, honey,” she said. “That’s the intestine door.”

He scratched his head. “I need to start eating more fish. For my memory.”

She sipped her coffee. “Carrots, too.”

## THE KEY

A child stuck a key into the family parakeet and turned it. The bird died. The child stuck the key into the family rabbit and turned it. The rabbit died. The child stuck the key into the family hamster and turned it. The hamster died.

The parents saw the dead bird, rabbit, and hamster. The child explained what had happened.

You must turn the key to the left, they explained. They unlocked the bird and out came a slightly smaller version of the bird. They unlocked the rabbit and out came a slightly smaller version of the rabbit. They unlocked the hamster and out came a slightly smaller version of the hamster.

The child took the key and stuck it into its father, then began turning the key to the right.

## THE KITE EMPIRE

There is a kite in a tree. He cuts down the kite.

It is perfect. He will sell the kite.

He guards the tree, waiting for more kites to bud. His kite empire has only just begun.

## THE LADDER

He passes a man on the street covering his eye with his hand. Blood trickles down the man's face. "Whatever you do," the man says, "don't climb that ladder." He continues on and encounters the ladder leaning against a building. He can't resist climbing it. When he reaches the top, he sees a baby perched precariously on the building ledge. He moves to rescue the baby before it falls, but then a crow swoops down and pecks his eye, blinding him. He screams in pain. The baby laughs joyously and claps its meaty little hands. He climbs back down the ladder and passes a man on the street. "Whatever you do," he tells the man, "don't climb that ladder. Unless you wanna see the world's meanest baby and crow."

The man can't resist climbing the ladder.



## THE LAND OF BREAD

The land of bread, where loaves of wheat eat loaves of man. The men are cut down in the fields while they walk with their lovers; they are milled, out of sight, in a factory. The factory floor drains clog daily.

The milled men are packaged in saggy sacks, fifty pounds in each parcel, and sent to the bread bakers—that is, bakers that are bread—and they are turned into luscious loaves for all the bread to eat. They are ripped and dipped in honey, in mustard, in chocolate, in oil.

The loaves of bread get fat on man. They take their exercise outside, in the sun, where they are hunted by hungry men who savage and devour them. It is a terrible and necessary thing.

## THE LAUNDRY

He put the laundry in the machine and turned it on. When the wash was done, the clothes were gone. He climbed inside the machine. There was a tunnel in the back. He crawled into the dark tunnel and proceeded for some time. At the end of the tunnel, he smelled cigar smoke. Below him was a poker table. There were his outfits—shirts and pants and socks together—playing cards. His favorite outfit, denim, won a hand and pulled the pot in the center of the table toward it. The winnings were piles of colorful, fluffy lint. Denim pocketed the lint and got up to leave.

His least favorite outfit, corduroy, produced a gun from its pocket and placed it on the table.

Denim sat back down and shuffled the cards in preparation for the next round.

## THE LAWN

In the morning, the lawn is rumpled like a blanket that has been thrown aside by someone freshly awoken.

They go outside and make the front yard like a bed, tucking and smoothing the green lawn just so.

But in the morning, the lawn is once more unkempt. Again, they tuck and smooth the lawn.

At night, they look out the window and the lawn is undulating. The undulations reach a crescendo and then cease. Then they smell cigarette smoke. The moon is huge.

They search for a bucket to fill with cold water to throw on the lawn.

## A LEAF GOES MISSING

A leaf goes missing. The tree is despondent. It wails and shakes. More leaves go missing and the tree wails and shakes even more until it is bare. A season of mourning ensues. The tree feels that it is passing on. It welcomes the chill of death. But then its tips begin to itch and stretch. A pregnant feeling fills its limbs. A burst of green follows a burst of green follows a burst of green. The tree shivers.

## THE LEAF PILE

They rake the leaves into a pile. As it grows, the leaf pile becomes sentient.

“Waaaah!” says the leaf pile.

They ignore it and continue to make the pile bigger.

“Mama!” says the leaf pile. “Dada!”

Then they set it on fire.

## THE LEG

His leg hurt. He stabbed the spot where it hurt. Now his leg hurt worse.

“Why did you do that?” she asked.

“It was hurting me,” he said. “Naturally, I wanted to hurt it back.”

“What are you doing now?” she asked.

He started the chainsaw. “Finishing what my leg started.”

## THE LOUVERED MAN

Inside the louvered man is the woman who hides from him. She peeks between the slats in his chest to make sure he is not at home. When she sees that he is gone, she exits through the secret hatch in his back.

Upon exiting, she sees the man. Before he notices, she sneaks back into her hiding place inside him.

She peeks between the slats and waits for him to leave. He leaves every day. He leaves never.

## THE LUNG

A lung slips out of the child's Christmas stocking, onto its lap. The lung laps at the child's face. The child giggles delightedly.

"Can I take it outside?" the child asks.

The parents nod.

The child brings the lung outside. The lung leaps from the child's arms and bounds away through the falling snow. Suddenly, the child can't breathe sufficiently. It goes back inside and collapses, gasping for air. "It got away from me," says the child.

"This is why I wanted to spend the money to get him a lung from the store!" says mother to father.

"This is why we gave him one of his own lungs rather than throw our money away!" says father to mother.



## THE MAN IN THE CEILING VENT

The man in the ceiling vent died. His rot stunk up the entire house. Soon his smell spread throughout the neighborhood.

“Aren’t you going to do something about it?” one neighbor asked, holding his nose.

“Not while his wife is still grieving,” we said. And then, as if on cue, one of her tears fell from the vent onto the shiny shoe top of our neighbor.

## THE MAN WHO BECAME A TABLE

He said to his wife and child, "I am no longer your husband or father."

"What are you then?" they asked.

He got down on all fours. "I am a table. Unfortunately, I can do nothing for you now. I can only stand here as a table. And not even the functioning sort of table—I am antique and merely to be looked at."

She whispered to the child, who then left and came back with an axe.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"It's been so cold since the man who was our husband and father has gone," she said. "The fireplace needs fuel, and we have no use for an antique table. Such old wood should burn nicely."

The child took the first chop.

## THE MELTING BRAIN

His brain had begun to melt. Gray liquid trickled from his eyes, ears, and nose.

“It’s not a cold,” he told anyone who would listen. “My brain is melting.”

“That’s nice,” people said, if they said anything at all.

“You might converse with me now,” he said. “I will probably soon lose the ability to speak.” His shirt was dark with brain.

“That’s nice,” some people said, though most just grunted.

He said, “Grrr.” He said, “Mmmm.”

“Hrrr,” people said. “Nnnn,” people said.

That’s nice, he thought, which ended up being his last thought. It rolled down his cheek like a gray tear. Then he lay down. He lies there still.

## MONKEY BANANAS

They peeled a banana. Inside was meat. They returned to the store where they'd bought the banana and demanded an explanation. The clerk took them to the aisle where the bins of bananas were: one was clearly labeled *Banana Bananas*, the other, *Monkey Bananas*. "You want the banana bananas," the clerk said.

"And who would actually want a banana made of monkey?" they asked.

"Bananas eat the monkey bananas, monkeys eat the banana bananas."

"Are you calling us monkeys?" they asked, growing angry.

"I would say you're more monkey than banana."

"And what does that make you?"

"I'm just a clerk in a store," the clerk said. "But I know enough to stay away from the monkey bananas."

## THE MONKEY WITH THE METAL TAIL

The monkey drags its metal tail on the pavement. The tail sparks and splits open, revealing the meat inside. The meat catches fire and makes people think there's a barbecue. A crowd chases the monkey through the streets with tongs and forks and sauces. The monkey heads toward the only tree still standing in town, on the common, and climbs it.

“Get a ladder!” someone cries.

The monkey begins to gnaw at its metal tail, its pride and joy. The monkey's gums bleed as its teeth chew through the metal, then through the meat, and then the bone. The monkey's mouth drips blood as it drops its severed, smoldering tail to the hungry mob below.

The monkey recalls the words of its mother on the day it decided to leave home: “Why decamp for a town with no trees? Where others will covet your metal tail? Stay, stay, and never leave.”

## Moss

Moss began to grow on her back.

“You need to come into the sunlight,” they said.

“I like my moss,” she said. “And I don’t want to move.”

“But soon you’ll be covered in moss,” they said.

“Yes, that is my aim,” she said.

“But everyone who loves you will miss you,” they said.

“I’ll be here in this grove. They will know where to find me.”

“But you’ll be camouflaged in your moss and hard to spot,” they said.

“Yes,” she said, “I like my moss.”

## THE MOTOR

The motor requires baby oil, which we currently lack. The baby press is stuck. A particularly tangled and tough batch of babies went into the press, and the press wheel could not be turned as normal. Only a trickle of baby oil was collected in the basin. The motor, which cannot be stopped, is growing dangerously hot for lack of lubrication. The babies gumming up the press are growing angry, spitting blood and screaming at us. No one dares enter the press to clear it. The motor is going to seize, and our town, our world as we know it, will cease to exist.

The rattles! Bring the rattles to distract the babies and then we'll go in. We'll press the bastards by hand if we must.

## THE MOUSEMOBILE

The mice build a car on wheels of cheese. They never get to drive it because they eat the wheels every day. In the evening while waiting for new wheels to arrive, the mice put the car up on blocks. But the blocks are made of cheddar, and they cannot resist eating these, either. The mousemobile ends up on the ground until morning, when the new wheels are delivered and mounted. Then one of the mice suggests a nibble—just a nibble—and soon the cheddar blocks are brought out once more, and once more they are eaten. The mousemobile remains idle another day.



## THE NEW HOLE

A hole occurs in the roof. They have no shingles to repair it, so he goes up to cover the hole with his body. He's pelted with rain, buffeted by wind. When his wife returns home, she throws rocks at him, thinking he's a burglar.

"It's me," he says. "There's a hole in the roof that I'm covering up."

"Why don't you just move the chimney over the hole?" she says. "Every chimney needs a good hole."

He moves the chimney, brick by brick, and places it over the hole.

She applauds his work but points to where the chimney had been. "There's another hole in the roof," she says.

He scooches over to the new hole and covers it with his body. He's pelted with rain, buffeted by wind.

## THE NEWLYWEDS

A postcard arrived in the mail. The return address was their own, and he recognized the handwriting as his:

*Dear Us,*

*We are having fun, eating, drinking, and fornicating like newlyweds. The bed here is sumptuous and we might never leave. Wish you were here (but not really).*

*Yours,*

*Us*

There was a smear of what appeared to be jam in the bottom corner.

They went to the bedroom half expecting to find trays of room service and empty champagne magnums strewn about, but it was immaculate as usual. He pressed his hand into the mattress then decided to drive to the liquor store, the market, the pharmacy before it got dark.

## THE NEW MOON

A new moon appears in the sky. The old moon's services are no longer needed. The old moon begins to gather its belongings into a cardboard box: a man's footprint, an American flag, some cigarette butts and empty champagne bottles, used condoms and a pair of frilly underwear, rocks.

As the old moon finishes packing, two guards appear and tell it—courteously but firmly—that it is time to leave. Together, they escort the old moon from the night sky.

## THE OBITUARY

The obituary read, *He died.*

Did he live? they wondered.

That was debatable. But he definitely died.

## ON DEATH ROW

A pig is about to be executed. It is asked what it would like its last meal to be.

“A man sandwich,” the pig says.

A man on death row with the pig is told he will be made into a sandwich for the pig after his execution. The man is then asked what he would like to eat for his last meal.

“I wanna eat that sonofabitching pig,” the man says. “I thought we were friends.”

## ONE DUMMY

One dummy pulls out its rag guts. Birds make a home in its belly.

One dummy dances like a wet baguette. People point and laugh.

One dummy inserts its head into its anus and rolls away. Frothing dogs chase it.

One dummy sets itself alight. Firemen drag hoses and douse it.

One dummy speaks with a cotton tongue. A swishy language that lulls everyone to sleep.

One dummy rifles through pockets. One dummy spits lint on the helpless. One dummy, the worst dummy, the meanest dummy, finds a gun among the unconscious and intends to use it.

## ONION BACK

He arches his naked back toward the sun and waits for rain. He welcomes the company of insects on his flesh. They crawl and cha-cha-cha along his spine. Weeks and months pass. The sun grows ever warmer.

Days of long dull ache. Then his back erupts: onions being born. He wants only to see the beautiful bulbs ready to be plucked, but he has no view of his back, no mirror to hold above his shoulder. And soon they come, the harvesters, and they take away his onions. They weep and sniff as they pluck but offer no words of thanks to him. But he appreciates their touch, the feel of their rough warm fingers on his back as they free the onions. The breeze kisses the fresh openings on his back. For now, he sleeps.

## THE OVEN

There is a man who lives in the oven. They try to coax him out.

“I am not ready yet,” he says.

They ask him how much more time he needs.

“Decades,” he says.

He will be dead, they explain, and will go from one oven to another.

“Oh, that would be ideal,” he says and closes the oven door.



## THE PARTY

They came calling for him. They were smiling and dressed brightly for the party. From behind the door, he told them he couldn't go out; it was going to rain.

They told him the sky was blue, the sun was high, the party awaited.

Again he declined. "At some point, it is going to rain."

## THE PAW PRINTS

There were greasy paw prints on the ceiling. They had never noticed them before. They looked to be from a raccoon.

“How did those get there?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” he said. “It may have been that time our house tipped over and all the garbage on our floor ended up on the ceiling.”

“Ah,” she said, “you’re probably right. One of these days, we’ll take care of that.”

“The paw prints or the garbage?”

“Both, I suppose.”

“One of these days,” he agreed.

They pulled the covers over their heads and held each other’s hands and fell asleep once more.

## THE PEBBLE

He ate a pebble. It grew into a stone inside him. Stone Stomach, they called him.

The stone grew into a boulder. Moss gathered in his navel. Boulder Belly, they called him.

The boulder became a mountain. Snow capped his ample abdomen. Mountain Middle, they called him.

He could no longer move. He just lay on his back while people climbed up him and skied down him. Not all pebbles are fit for eating, he told himself, even as his fingers felt the ground for another rocky morsel to suck.

## THE PIPES

Blood pours from the faucet. He turns it off and blood bubbles over the toilet bowl. He closes the lid and blood spills out of the shower drain.

He calls the plumber. The plumber tells him the pipes have a bleeding ulcer. He asks what can be done.

“The pipes need to stop drinking,” the plumber says.

“But isn’t that all they do?” he says

“Therein lies the problem,” says the plumber.

## THE PIT

A great pit appeared in their backyard. It was pure black and perfectly rectangular in shape. He threw a pebble into it, and the pebble made no sound. He loosed a large rock from the earth and dropped it in; again, there was no sound.

“Let’s just walk around it,” she said.

“I need to find that rock,” he said.

“Why?” she asked.

“It was the hollow rock with the house key hidden in it.”

“The one we came out here to look for?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Why would you throw that away?”

“Because I saw this pit and it’s always been my understanding that pits eat rocks.”

“I’m afraid for you to go into the pit,” she said. “Let’s forget the key. Let’s build another house with its own key.”

“Don’t be afraid, love. I’m not a rock, just a man, and pits don’t eat men.” He kissed her and stepped forward.

## THE PLANTS CLIMB THE WALLS

The plants climb the walls for lack of things to do. The walls, tired of being walls, see this as an opportunity to escape. Under cover of the plants, the walls leave.

The plants are strong, but not strong enough to be walls.  
The roof caves in.

The roof, on the ground and no longer a roof, files for unemployment. It sits about the house with nothing to do but smoke cigarettes and drink coffee.

The walls remain AWOL.

The plants go underground and begin to plot.

## THE PLUNGER

He resorted to the plunger. After a few pushes and pulls on it, a child's head emerged from the toilet's drain.

He held the child in the air before him, its head stuck fast to the plunger. "So you're the one that's been causing all the plumbing trouble."

The child gasped for air. "Are you my father?"

"I most certainly am not."

"How did I end up down the drain?" the child asked.

"The previous homeowners must have hired you as a baby to keep their pipes clean," he said. "And you've done a terrible job."

"Does that mean I'm fired?"

"Technically, you should have been let go when they died," he said. "Technically, you're trespassing."

"Oh, please don't call the police on me!" the child cried. It struggled to free itself from the plunger. "If you just let me go on my way, I'll—"

"Not so fast!" the man said. "I just washed the floors! Back the way you came!" He pushed the child back into the bowl, but

the toilet only took the child halfway.

“Maybe try the plunger again?” said the child.

“I need to snake the drain,” he said. “Hold tight.” He headed for the closet where he kept the python.



## PROUD

They remove his hands so he will stop picking at his head. He begins biting the stumps where his hands used to be, so they remove his teeth. Then he begins massaging his gums with his toes, so they remove his feet. He starts to totter unsteadily on his legs, so they remove those, too. He doubles over in pain or anguish or anger, so they remove his torso. For good measure they remove everything but his head, which is now all he is.

“Please,” he says, “can you apply that lotion to my head? It is so itchy.”

“Why didn’t you tell us that’s all you needed?” they said.

“You know me,” he said. “I’m too proud to ask for help.”

## THE PUDDLE

In the puddle is a little man in a little boat. He casts a line from his fishing rod, which quickly arcs under the weight of an unseen fish. He begins to reel it in, and the ground beneath your feet trembles, then cracks. A whale bursts from the earth, atomizing the puddle containing the little man and his boat. You grab onto the whale's blowhole as it soars into the air then flops over and falls back into the open earth.

## A QUIET MOMENT

A quiet moment ends with a window shattering. Snow drifts into the room. Outside goes the room occupant. It is dark. There are footprints in the snow that stop just short of the broken window. The footprints are followed; they terminate at the roots of a large tree. A shout up the tree; there is no answer. Up the tree goes the former occupant of the room. There is a large owl nesting. From the owl's beak hangs a bloody human finger, small, that of a child.

“Who broke the window?” asks the former occupant of the room.

Hoo, goes the owl, and the finger falls to the ground below.

“Yes, I'm asking.”

Hoo, goes the owl.

Back down the tree. The bloody finger wriggles in the snow. The former occupant of the room puts it in their mouth and goes back inside. There is an owl in the chair, with a finger in its beak. A grown finger. It is then that the former occupant of the room, now a current occupant once more, notices that their index finger is missing. They sink the bleeding stump of it into

the snow that has collected on the floor, which turns red with blood. They spit the child's finger at the owl, which catches it in flight and wings out the window.

The snow piles.

## THE RABBITS' DEMANDS

The rabbits arrived with a set of demands. More clover to eat, fewer dogs chasing them, better accommodations underground. They were told to get lost. They returned the following week, holding baby rabbits, with another demand: they wanted help caring for their offspring. Again, they were told to get lost. The baby rabbits, now grown, returned the following week, pushing their now old parents in wheelchairs. Another demand: eldercare assistance. They were told to get lost. They promised to be back. Their demands would be heard, they were legion, multiplying, infinite.

## THE RAG MAN

A rag man douses himself with gasoline, goes outside, lights a cigarette, and waits to explode. But the cigarette burns down to nothing before this happens. He checks the can of gasoline: the word *WATER* is written on it in large letters.

He lies down in the sun to dry out. He falls asleep and is picked up by a passerby, who brings the rag man to her home. She begins to cut him into pieces, to make rag children of him. He wakes up screaming.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I thought you were dead. I decided to make children of you.”

“Oh no,” he says. “Please don’t do that. I’d much rather be dead!”

“Don’t be silly,” she says. “You’re a father now.” She hands him a small, mewling rag child made from one of his feet.

He jumps to his remaining foot and hobbles toward the door.

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“For cigarettes,” he says. “And gasoline.”

## THE RAIN RAINED

The rain rained. The wind winded. The house housed. The windows windowed. The room roomed. The bed bedded. The people peopled. The end ended.

## A RAT FLIES BY THEM

A rat flies by them.

“Did you see that flying rat?” she asks.

“See it? I hired it!” he says.

“Why would you hire a flying rat?” she asks.

“To impress you,” he says.

“Why would I be impressed by a flying rat?” she asks.

“Because the rats we have just crawl all over our feet,” he says and points to the rodents scurrying over their shoes.

“It would have been more impressive if you had exterminated all the rats we have!” she says.

“But then our feet would be cold,” he says.



## THE ROBIN

A robin dyes its breast blue.

Its fellow robins ask why.

“Because I am sad,” replies the robin. “This color fits my mood.”

“Why are you sad?” they ask.

“Because I was born with a red breast, which doesn’t suit me at all.”

“But now you’re blue—doesn’t that make you happy?”

“It did, but then I remembered that I dyed my breast blue to remind me of my sadness.”

“Why not choose a different color?”

“Blue is my favorite color,” says the robin.

“But it reminds you of your sadness!” they shout.

“I am willing to be sad if it means I can be happy.”

## ROCK MAN, ROCK WOMAN

They stack rocks in the shape of a man and it becomes a man made of rocks. It asks to eat, so they give it rocks to eat. It asks for a bed, so they give it a bed of rocks. It lies down on the bed of rocks and asks for a wife, so they make it a wife out of rocks.

The rock man and his new wife have relations. They fall to rubble in the process.

They stack the rocks in the shape of a man and woman. The rock man and rock woman ask for a meal and a bed and to be left alone.

## Rocks

They were boiling rocks on the stove.

“These rocks are as hard as rocks!” he said.

“Let’s roast them instead,” she said.

They roasted the rocks in the oven.

“They’re still hard as rocks! And hotter than hell!” he said.

“Did you tenderize them first?” she asked.

They smashed the rocks with a hammer. The rocks broke into smaller rocks.

“They’re still hard as rocks and hotter than hell and now there’s more of the goddamn things!”

“Were these leftover rocks? Did you get them from the freezer?” she asked.

“Of course! We can’t just splurge on fresh rocks every time we need them!”

“Rocks, rocks, rocks!” she said. “I’m sick of them!”

“Bah!” he said and dismissed her with a wave. They went to bed hungry again.

## THE RUNNING NOSE

His nose was running. It wanted to get in shape. Specifically, the shape of a leg. He told his nose that he did not want a leg on his face.

“Don’t you, though?” his nose said before sprinting away.

## THE SALESPIG

There was a pig at the door selling footballs.

“How could you sell out your own kind like that?” he asked the pig.

“Everybody’s gotta make a living,” said the pig. “Besides, it’s no skin off my back.”

## SAME OLD

He defecated a duck. The duck quacked, then perched on his shoulder. The duck defecated a snake down the man's back. The snake climbed onto the man's shoulder, ate the duck, then slithered into the man's navel. His belly griped. He grabbed his middle and groaned. "It's always the same old shit," he said.

## THE SECOND FLOOR

The second floor is gone. They stand at the top of the stairs and stare into the black where the second floor once was. Scraps of paper and dead leaves whip past in the air. A high-pitched ringing noise issues from the void. A giggling baby spins into view, followed by a human skeleton, before both disappear back into the darkness.

They go back downstairs and call the police. “We’ve been burgled,” they say. “Somebody stole our second floor.”

## THE SINGING DOG

There is a man with a dog that sings beautifully.

“O sole mio,” sings the dog.

“How did you train your dog to sing like that?” they ask.

“You just need to find the right incentive and you can teach a dog to do anything,” the man says.

“What’s its incentive?” they ask.

“Human flesh,” replies the man.

“La donna è mobile,” sings the dog.



## SKELETON YOU

The mirror spills its silver down the wall, and in the black hole that is left appears a skeleton you. You wave and it waves a bony hand back. You open your mouth wide and so does the skull. You make a fartypit noise and skeleton you makes a clicky-clacky bone noise.

You smile and skeleton you does nothing.

You frown and skeleton you does nothing.

You close your eyes and skeleton you disappears.

## THE SLOP DEALER

Along comes the slop dealer pulling his cart, spilling gray gruel all over the cobbles. Children and adults alike fight to be the first at his ladle.

“Orderly, orderly!” the slop dealer shouts.

They fall in line and hold out their hats. A nickel gets one a scoop of slop. They all know his slop is only old newspaper, water, and salt, but it’s heavenly. Try as they might, they cannot replicate his cooking.

He scoops until every hat is filled and his slop is gone. His pants droop under the weight of nickels in his pockets.

At home, he prepares a sloppy dinner: the day’s newspapers, water, and salt. But he reserves for his customers the happy stories in the papers—stories about pandas being born at the zoo, about a wretch winning the lottery, about the discovery of a new planet. He throws into his dinner pot the stories about murder and war and disease and the impending end of humanity. Consequently, his dinner tastes awful and goes down like bile. It leaves him unsatisfied and flatulent. But tomorrow he will be welcomed like a hero when he comes a-tugging his cart.

## THE SMELL OF A GHOST

They detected the ghost by its smell, which was akin to rainwater on asphalt.

“Might it be that the smell is just the asphalt driveway after a rain shower?” someone countered.

“No,” they said from their chairs in the driveway. “We know and enjoy that smell, which is why we choose to sit out here in the rain. This smell—the ghost smell—is similar, but different enough that we identified it as belonging to a ghost.”

“How is it different?”

“It is less wet, more dry, as befits a ghost,” they said. “And we wish it would leave, because it is detracting from the lovely smell of our wet driveway.”

## THE SNOW MAN

They make a man out of snow. He is a robust man.

But the next day, he begins to shrink. A week passes and he has wasted away.

They call in the doctor. He does a thorough examination and gives them bad news: it is cancer.

“What kind?” they ask.

“Cancer of the snow,” the doctor says. “I’m sorry, there’s nothing to be done but make him as comfortable as possible.”

The snow man eats nothing but ice cream for the remainder of his days.

## SPIDER HEAD

He drills a hole in his head to let in some air. A spider crawls inside and makes its home. Soon, his head is overrun with spider babies.

“Your head is full of spiders!” his family shrieks.

“Yes,” he says. “But they eat all the bad bugs that are in there.”

## SQUARE SURGERY

A square wants to become a circle. It goes to a surgeon to have its corners smoothed. When the surgery is done, the square is shocked to see that it is not a circle but a triangle.

“What have you done?” the square cries. “You’ve made me a triangle!”

“Yes,” the surgeon says, scrubbing his hands. “I wanted to make a point.”

## A STORY OUT OF ORDER

A spider exterminated by a shoe. A shoe untied by two hands.  
Two hands down a pair of pants. A pair of pants pulled from  
the edge of a bed. The edge of a bed soaked in blood. In blood  
a payment made. A maid who finds ten dollars and a thank-you  
note on hotel stationery. A station on a television tuned to static.  
A static charge between two pairs of lips.

## THE STRANGER

A stranger came to the door. “I remember this door,” he told us when we opened it. We explained to him that this door was not here prior to our installing it. “I remember this room,” he said, peering over our shoulders. We explained to him that this room did not exist prior to our building it. “I remember that smell,” he said, sniffing the air wafting out of the still-open door. We explained to him that we brought that smell with us when we created this home. “May I have a tour to see if all is as I remember?” he asked. We explained that nothing is as he remembered, that memory is the most fallible thing of all. He wept and wept and wept. “On the front lawn,” we said, “so you can water the grass, where your tears won’t be wasted.”



## STUFFED ANIMALS

Animals stuffed with humans stagger out of the restaurant, belching and picking their teeth with finger bones. In their overfed stupor, they let the nets fall as softly as blankets upon them. Tranquilizer darts sink into their flesh and they all fall down.

The stuffed animals are rounded up and brought to the toy store, where their teeth and claws are removed and their brains lobotomized. They are placed on shelves and wait to be pointed at and brought home by children.

## THE SUICIDE

A squirrel hanged itself from a tree. They found a small note on the ground.

“The poor thing,” she said. “What does the note say?”

He carefully unfolded it. “Goodbye, cruel world.”

“Anything else?” she asked.

He strained his eyes to read. “Milk, bread, butter, acorns.”

“The poor thing,” she repeated.

## TEETH DREAMS

One night while he slept, his teeth retreated into their gums and took up residence in his skull. They moved into the folds of his brain and fell asleep. He dreamed that his teeth took a vacation inside his head. His teeth dreamed of wonderful sex in the warm dunes of an untrod island in the middle of nowhere.

## THE TINKLING

There was a tinkling sound, a sound like weak urination. He went into the bathroom and found the toilet unoccupied. He checked the faucet; the tap was dry. He went back to bed.

There was a tinkling sound, a sound like shattered glass falling to the ground. He went to the window; the panes were unbroken. He checked the mirror; his tired face stared back. He went to the kitchen to fix something to eat.

There he found a mouse wearing sunglasses playing a tiny xylophone. A cigarette dangled from its lips. The mouse had a bottle of whiskey by its side. The little rodent tinkled away on its instrument.

He grabbed the broom and waited for a break in the music to applaud.

## THE TURKEY

A turkey is at the door. It offers itself.

“We don’t eat turkey,” they say.

“I can cook and clean,” says the turkey.

“You’re hired,” they say.

They return from work after the turkey’s first day on the job: the kitchen and bathrooms gleam, the laundry is washed and folded, and a heavenly smell wafts from the oven.

“I hope you’re hungry!” says the turkey.

“Famished!” they say. “What’s for dinner?”

“Turkey—and before you protest, you haven’t had turkey like this. It’s an old family recipe.”

“Oh, yeah?” they say. “What’s the recipe call for?”

“One old family member.” The turkey opens the oven.  
“How’s it going in there, ma?”

“Getting a little warm, but I’ll be all right,” the turkey’s mother responds. “I always am. Not like anyone cares any—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” says the turkey and slams the oven shut before turning to its employers once more. “It’ll be a little while—care for a cocktail while you wait?”

## THE UNDERTAKER

They called in the undertaker. He arrived, gave his condolences, and asked where the deceased was.

They pointed to the old man snoring softly in the chair by the window.

“But he’s not dead,” said the undertaker.

“But soon, maybe?” they said.

“I don’t know,” said the undertaker. “I’m not a doctor.”

“No, we’d never call a doctor for him!” they said. “But since you’re here, with that big black hearse—”

“I’m not an executioner!” protested the undertaker.

“We know—the executioner wouldn’t return our calls!”

## UNDER THE CEMETERY

Under the cemetery, a trial is being held. One of the dead stands accused of celebrating life, for drinking a still-full can of beer it had found.

“Why do you shirk the eternal black of death?” they ask.

“I was haunted by the memory of life,” it says.

“So you celebrate it?” they say.

“I was not celebrating,” the accused says. “I recalled that it was a custom among some to wash memories away with drink, so that is what I attempted to do.”

“And?”

“Just as in life, it did not work.”

## A VERY LARGE MAN

A very large man sat in an open field. He removed his breasts and placed them on the ground before him. He covered his open chest with a blanket, which he wore around his neck like a bib.

Children came to visit him. They wanted to touch his breasts. They paid him in food: chicken legs, Danish pastries, ears of corn, macaroni in sauce.

They jostled and angled to paw the breasts on the ground. “Soft,” they exclaimed. “Hard,” they exclaimed. “Gross,” they exclaimed.

The large man’s blanket bib grew heavy with food and grease and juices that had escaped his mouth. It slipped off his neck, revealing the dark holes in his chest.

The children screamed and ran away.

He wiped his face clean and replaced his breasts. He was full now and went to sleep.



## WASHING UP

He washed his face off. It swirled down the drain without his noticing. When he raised his head from the sink and looked in the mirror, there was nothing there—not a mirror and not a reflection of his face. It was black. He thought he had forgotten to open his eyes, but of course his eyes had been washed away, along with the rest of his features.

He bumbled his way out of the house and into the street, where one of the neighbors called an ambulance, but not before a bird took up residence in the place where his face had been.

Sometime later, in the sea, a fish could be found wearing his nose as a hat for its fin, a turtle was practicing its pout with his lips, and an oyster had claimed his eyes for pearls.

## A WICKED HILL

A wicked hill appears at the edge of town. Wicked because it sets loose boulders that roll into our streets and destroy homes and bodies like wrecking balls. Always it births these deadly boulders from within its lush green hump.

Wicked because its lush green hump draws us on hands and knees toward it like a healthy buttock. Wicked because it opens up and swallows us whole.

Wicked because it demands daily cuts of its verdant fuzz. We sneeze and wheeze as the green clippings drift in the breeze all over town. Wicked because we realize too late that these clippings, which have infiltrated every hidden inch of our burb, are growing into their own wicked hills underneath our feet. The asphalt buckles, the sidewalks rise, the trees show their roots, our homes shift. All the while, the wicked hill rolls its boulders down its alluring hump, demanding another trim.

## THE WIG

A wig buys a head to fill the emptiness it feels. But the head comes with a body, which comes with various ailments, one of which is baldness brought on by illness. So the body buys a wig to cover its head. The store takes the old wig back, returns it to the shelf, where it feels empty once more.

## A WOODEN MAN

A wooden man is born to a family in need of heat.

“He’s made of wood,” the father says. “And our fire is dying out.”

“But it’s our child,” the mother says.

“He’s a man,” the father says. “You can tell by the brown clothes he wears, by the smell of tobacco and whiskey on his breath.”

“But such an awful death it will be,” the mother says.

“Like any man, he was born to die,” says the father. “And I can’t think of a more noble death for a wooden man.”

“So be it,” the mother says.

Into the fire goes the wooden man. The home is filled with warmth.

A man of flesh is born into the same family.

“He’s made of meat,” the father says. “And our larder is nearly empty.”

## WORDFALL

A square of sky opens and words fall like hail. People collect the nouns, verbs, and adjectives and hold them in their palms: *horse, stab, cromulent; suede, devour, lugubrious; pus, groan, lurid*. The words feel heavy in the hand, meaningful, powerful.

Until they begin to melt and run in black rivulets through everyone's fingers.

"I had an *elephant*," someone says, "and now it's gone."

"The mighty *sea* was mine!" someone else says.

People begin to eat the words before they can fully melt, as if they can keep them forever this way. But this only turns their tongues black, makes them drool inkily, and fouls their taste.

## THE YARD SALE

A man stands in front of his house moving his arm like a well pump. Water pours from his mouth. A fish flops out and lands on the grass, followed by a cross made of chicken bones, followed by an overdue library book, followed by sodden toilet paper.

Comes a bowling ball, a bicycle, a beekeeper's mask, a bread maker. A fish tank for the fish, which he fills with the water still leaving his body.

Finally, there is only blood exiting the man. He arranges all the vomitus on a table in his driveway and hangs a yard-sale sign on the light pole at the end of his street. People offer him money for his wares, but he finds he is too attached to the objects. "I'm afraid I can't sell that," he says when someone makes an offer on the bowling ball. "It has sentimental value." He swallows the bowling ball. Then he swallows the bicycle, the beekeeper's mask—all of it except the fish, which a crafty crow steals when he isn't looking. This leaves him so distraught that he cancels the yard sale. "Come back next weekend," he tells the assembled. "Right now, I need to mourn my fish, and my stomach is upset."

