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Birth by Portland:
A Collection of Short Stories by Shay Duchaine

Shay Duchaine

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University
April 24, 2017

Prof. Bruce Machart, Thesis Director
Dr. Anne Doyle, Committee Member
Dr. Renee Somers, Committee Member

Introduction

The following thesis is a collection of four short stories. I have developed these works throughout the semester under the guidance of Professor Bruce Machart. The thesis is intended to meet the English Departmental Honors requirements. During this semester, I have specifically focused on proper utilization of craft techniques while maintaining thematic unity among my works. Through writing and undergoing a strict process of revision, I have been able to focus on improving my craft as a writer of narrative fiction.

It is my intention that the stories collected here demonstrate thematic unity, one that ties the pieces together as a collection. The theme I concentrated on in my work is that of regionalism within the United States. I wanted to examine blue collar, working class characters and how they are influenced by, as well as how they impact, their specific environments. The characters I have created work various blue collar jobs rather than professions or careers, per se. One character, for example, is a fisherman who has unwillingly followed in his father's footsteps. Another character is a retail worker who finds himself the manager of his store's pet department as an aquarium maintainer. The stories themselves take place in distinct areas of the country that hold varying values, such as a small fishing town of Maine, a family farm in Georgia, a wholesale club in Ohio and a hunter's cabin in Alaska, respectively. I feel that these dynamic differences in regional "settings" are successful in bringing the variety of characters to the forefront and highlighting the struggles within themselves and in their relationships with others.

My additional ambition here was to use this thesis to advance my skills in effectively executing and manipulating certain techniques of craft. One craft element that I utilized in this thesis is the manipulation of spatial and temporal setting. For instance, to increase the

achievement of dramatic effect of these stories, some have been told out of linear order while others are told chronologically. Likewise, I have used different points of view, tailoring the perspectives to what would be most effective in the individual narratives. The final story in this collection, for example, is told in second-person point of view to give the implicate the reader in the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the protagonist.

Overall, I believe this thesis to be a representative culmination of my work within the English Department's writing concentration, and I hope that you enjoy the following collection.

Boats

When I was a young man—fourteen at the time—my father worked down at a pier in Portland, Maine, as a fisherman on deep sea trips. He would be gone for months at a time and the work was hard. I didn't understand much, but I knew three things: he said a man should provide for his family, our town economy was going to shit, and I sure as hell didn't want to put myself in the position to have to be a fisherman. One morning we were both standing on the docks. The rotting wood of the pier creaked beneath our boots; the salty ocean and smell of fish filled our lungs. We heard screeching, the sound of two seagulls fighting over a crab on the shore. My old man lit a cigarette.

“How many months this time?” I asked.

“Four. It might be less. But probably four.”

A car door slammed. My Aunt got out and walked up to my father. She hugged him tightly and said, “You do good out there, Chuck. We'll be waiting for you to come home, have a big dinner when you get back.”

He nodded to her. He spun a key ring around and around on his finger. The man tended to fidget a lot, looking for anything to act as a distraction away from conversation. She walked back to her powder blue Camry to start it up, giving us time to talk. We never said much. He grabbed me by the shoulder and pulled me close to him. He slid his chrome coated lighter into my hand. It had been his father's, and then he gave it to me.

“Don't tell your aunt about this, you know she'll have a fuss about it,” he said.

“You know I wouldn't. She'd take it right quick.”

“Yeah, she'd give you hell and me even worse.”

“You know she’d just take it to use it herself.”

He let out a grunt and took a deep drag of his cigarette. “Sue don’t smoke.”

“Dad, come on. She hides in the bathroom and cracks open the window. She acts like I don’t know what she’s doing. The whole house smells like a smoke stack.”

“Don’t give her any shit, okay? She’s been doing us a favor, watching you. She’s the only one that’s been there for us since your Mom died, remember that.”

“I know. I won’t.”

A truck pulled up full of my dad’s friends in rugged work boots, ready to get out on the open ocean. They all filed out with their boots hitting against the pavement and with coffees in their hands.

“Guess it’s time to get going,” he said, shaking my hand.

I walked away from the pier towards the parking lot. It was the longest conversation we’d had in months. As Sue drove me away, I put my hands on the window, looking back as he shook hands with the men from the truck. Every time I hoped that he would turn around and get in the car with us. He could get an office job and stop leaving for months on end. But I knew he would never leave fishing. I watched my father out the back window and saw him staring out at the sea.

I never saw him again after that. He died two months later at an offshore stop. He had a heart attack while carrying a tool box across a fishing pier.

* * *

Twelve years later, I find myself opening the rotting wooden door to the captain’s room on a small fishing ship which I grew far too familiar with for comfort. My right hand is wrapped in an

Ace bandage, still throbbing a little, and Dennis, a large, gruff man with white hair looks up at me from beneath his thick eyebrows. He's wearing a dark Navy colored sweater and has had a few too many drinks this morning.

"I guess it's time for you to get paid," he says.

"Looks like it," I say.

He turns to his desk drawer and pulls out a check book, scrawling on it my small and insufficient bounty from the last six months. It isn't enough for all the nets I've pulled for him, for the fish guts that have been encrusted in my boots. They'll never come clean, but I'm not buying new ones.

"You'll get the rest, obviously, when we sell the remainder of the catch." He tears it out and hands me the crumpled check. It is wet and smudged.

"Thanks again, Dennis," I say.

"You're always welcome to come back here, you know. I'd be happy to have you, Stephen."

"Thanks, but I hope I don't have to take you up on that offer," I say. Something about the man makes me so I can't look him in the eye.

He laughs. "Why did you need to come back, anyway? Trying to get your girl a ring?"

"No, times are just tough out there. Hard to find a job," I say.

I once had a nice office job back in Belfast, back when Sarah and I had been dating for a few months. I was writing a column for the local newspaper. We were starting to get serious about our relationship. She was the only girl I wanted, and I knew that soon I would have to

make an official proposal to ensure she was the one I would always come home to at night. It was steady, but I wasn't making enough to support us in the long term. We were talking about having a family. She begged me not to leave, but it was the only way to establish ourselves, and she finally agreed. I signed a fishing contract and left a week later. I had ended up following in my old man's footsteps. And it *was* probably about time I got her a ring.

"Yeah. You've always got a place here, Stephen. Have a good one," he says as I walk out and climb off the side of the ship. My boots hit the planks with a dull thud, and I can feel it reverberate through my knees.

I never want to get on that fucking boat again, I think.

The sun is setting on the horizon, and gulls fight each other over some goldfish crackers thrown there by a family on vacation. I pull a pack of smokes from my jacket pocket and flick the wheel of my father's old lighter, sharply inhaling the smoke and salty air. There isn't much fluid left. I figure I can light a few more cigarettes with it. The disgusting feel of the fish scales are permanently on my hands. I see some kids kicking a ball over by the warehouses, screaming as they play keep away from each other. There are three of them who won't hand the ball over to a fatter boy in the middle. He has bright red hair and sweat runs down his face. He seems to think they're laughing with him, but *with* is not the word I would choose. They start getting awfully close to the edge of the pier, and I walk over.

"Get out of here!" I say, waving my injured hand in their direction. "Go on now, before you find your asses in the water." They all look at me with terror on their faces. They're scared shitless. I'm covered in tattoos and piercings, and they're in Catholic school uniforms.

One of them spits at the ground, picking up the ball.

“Come on guys, let’s get out of here,” he says.

“He’s a freak,” the lanky one yells in my direction. I take another puff of my cigarette and text Brian about how he’s late to come pick me up.

The fat one is staring at me, motionless.

“Tom, come *on*,” one of them yells to him, jarring him into motion. He runs, trying to catch up.

“Little bastards,” I say, looking down at the lighter. “Old man, if you could have seen them just now you’d have sent them along too.” He’s my conscious talking. I flip the lighter shut and call Brian again. The call goes directly to voicemail. Maybe there’s enough fluid for one more light.

I met Sarah a few years ago at a local bar called McHenry’s. I was sitting up at the counter with Brian and Tom. We had all just returned from a five-month haul and needed to blow off some steam.

“Three shots and another beer, Phil,” I said, waving my hand towards the bar. He nodded, filling the glasses and putting them in front of us. I downed the shot. The spice burned my throat as I threw the alcohol back and the sweetness of the warm rum lingered on my tongue long after I had drunk it. The liquor was strong and I already felt myself needing another one.

“Way to wait for cheers,” Brian said, clinking shot glasses with Tom, and they both threw them back.

“If I waited for you two to do ‘cheers’ every time, I wouldn’t get drunk until tomorrow.”

“Bastard,” Tom said, sipping what was left of his beer.

“Holy shit. Guys, look over there,” Brian said. A young woman with auburn hair walked in the door with a man wearing a gray collared shirt. She sat down and ordered a beer. He kept fidgeting with his collar.

“Stop gawking. Don’t be a fucking asshole,” I said.

“The guy she’s with is a total stiff. Look at that douchebag,” Brian said. “I’m going to go for it.”

“You sure as hell are not. Get your coat,” I said.

“Never can fucking do anything around here,” they grumbled. The guy in the gray shirt stood up, walking towards the bathroom. Brian and Tom were walking towards the door. I searched my pockets frantically looking for a pen, and noticed one on the counter that was left by another couple who had signed their receipts. I dove for it, writing my number on a napkin on the counter. I walked up to her, swallowing hard and feeling the warm, fuzzy sensation that the alcohol brought to life beneath my skin.

“I don’t need to start by telling you that I’m taken tonight,” she said, before I could get so much as a word out.

“I can see that. I just wanted to know what your name was.”

“Lauren.”

“Well, Lauren, I wanted to let you know that the guy you’re with tonight is a total asshole. If he’s asked you here on a date. I saw him in here three nights ago with a different girl.”

“Excuse me, what’s your name?”

“Stephen. But, yeah. He does this all the time, brings different girls in here numerous times a week. He never comes back with the same one. I just wanted to let you know.” I slid the napkin underneath her beer. “I guarantee you he’s going to get you the peach martini special and tell you it just came in season, but that’s not true. He’s going to start in with the small talk, asking what you do for work or have any pets.”

She looked at me with eyes narrowed as she straightened her hair.

“But if you ever want to give me a call, I promise I won’t get you the peach martini, and I won’t insult your intelligence.”

I stood up, joining Brian and Tom at the exit. She kept looking at me. Her date came back with a peach martini and put it on the napkin. Her expression registered horror.

The next night I got a text message.

Two nights later I took her to one of the fancier restaurants in town. I wore a nice suit, and she wore a gorgeous, bright red dress, her hair done up perfect. She talked the whole night into early morning. I drove her home, walked her to her door, and she kissed me.

We had sex the week after.

Her name wasn’t Lauren. It was Sarah.

Later, in Brian’s car, I’m trying to call Sarah the whole way home, but I keep getting her voicemail. She always picks up on the first try, but I keep forgetting that I can’t rely on prior established ‘always’ anymore.

A few weeks ago I was on the boat, heaving into the toilet. I couldn't stop throwing up and the smell of fish permeated my clothes and skin. The door was forced open and slammed against the wall. Dennis was standing over me with the ship phone in hand.

"You have a call," he said.

"Can it fucking wait?" I said, vomiting again.

"How do you still get motion sickness?"

"It's not motion sickness. I have the fucking flu."

"It sounds like an emergency." He shoved the phone in my hand and walked away. His face was pale as hell. A dead man walking, he looked like a corpse. It was Sarah.

"I don't mean to bother you, Stephen, but I think we need to have a talk." She sounded drawn back, distant. This is unlike her, I thought, but I couldn't stop heaving.

"Can we talk later? I'm kind of in the middle of something." The boat lurched, and I got vomit all over my jeans.

"I think we need to end this, Stephen." This made me shiver. She never used my name in conversation, and her voice lacked all sympathy. Holy shit, I thought. She's serious.

I shifted backward, ass on the floor, stunned. We'd been together for years. "Are you serious?" I asked.

"Would I joke about this?" she said.

"I guess not." My stomach wretched bile into the toilet, and I smashed my fist against the metal stall door. Three, four, five times, because one time wasn't enough. I heard a sickening

crack, and my knuckles ran with blood. I was likely fractured, but I just grabbed the Ace bandage from the first-aid kit and wrapped it up.

She said she would have her stuff out in three weeks. Two weeks after I got back from the trip. I had a chance to convince her to stay.

Now I have a damp, filthy backpack on my shoulder, and Brian keeps looking back at me while he drives. He's probably disgusted by the smell of my boots. I'm disgusted by the fact that he doesn't have the nerve to confront me on it. We pull up to my house, and he pulls away without saying a word, wheels squealing as he banks the corner back towards downtown. He has hated me since I asked Sarah out. He never got over the fact that I went for the girl he had his eyes on.

Home at last, I walk through the door and throw down my things on the plastic rubber floor mat in the little mud room we made so that when I got back from fishing trips I wouldn't track this shit all through the house. In the kitchen, I turn on the water faucet and wash my face and hands. When I dry them, I finally get the chance to look at the room and instantly I realize that everything in the house is just gone. Missing. To be accurate, everything that Sarah owned is missing. The room is quiet, and it seems like there's just dusty hardwoods where Sarah's bookshelves and the dog bed used to be. Holy shit, I think. She took the fucking dog?

I call her and call her until she finally picks up the phone.

"Stephen," she says with a shaky tone.

"Sarah, what the fuck is going on? Are we just done or what?" I'm shaking my head and collapse on the couch, trying to focus.

“I’m sorry, Stephen. I figured it was better if I left before you got back and did a clean break,” she says.

“You said two weeks.”

“I got my affairs in order quicker than I thought.”

“That’s bullshit. You didn’t want to have to see my face. So are we done? Because if we’re done, that’s fine ,but I want that fucking dog back. He’s mine.” I haven’t been this pissed since my buddy George got drunk at the bar and thought he could rip the front pocket off my shirt. I beat his ass. It was my favorite shirt. I’d never lay a hand on a woman, though.

“William is mine, Stephen. I brought him with me because you were gone, and I didn’t want him to have to transition to another person again. You can take me to court if you want to see him—”

I hurl the cellphone across the room, and the screen splinters into a million pieces. I take a mostly-empty bottle of whiskey from the cabinet, grab my coat from the wall hanger, and rip my keys off the hook. I need a beer. I slam the door of our house, of *my* house, shut, and ten minute later I’m driving through the city in my shitty Ford pick-up, looking to go to McHenry’s for a drink. It’s a bit of a dive, but right now I just want to have some shots in front of a football game in that dark, smoky shithole of a bar. Beer bottles roll around on the truck floorboards, smashing against one another as they race around. There are no mats, just fish flesh and mud. I’m noticing as I drive through the streets how awful this place has become over the years. The buildings of Hanson’s Shopping Plaza are falling apart and condemned. My old man used to bring me there to buy groceries as a kid, and occasionally I could convince him to buy me one of the cheap wiffle ball sets. Florence’s Flower Shop is closed, too. Everything I remember seems

to be gone or on its way to being so. A kid runs after a ball out into the street in front of my car, and I slam on the brakes, almost sending my face through the steering wheel.

“Get the fuck out of the road!” I yell. He jumps, then runs down an alley.

I drive down an alley at the far end of town and pull into the parking lot for the bar, and only when I pull the key from the ignition does the *Out of business* sign in the front window become noticeable.

They closed my fucking bar? I think. This town is a complete shithole! It’s been a month, tops. How could they have closed? They didn’t seem like they were hurting, but the graffitied, abandoned walls speak for themselves, saying that it must have closed right after I went out on the boat. And somehow I’m honestly less surprised and more disappointed the more I mull it over.

I take out my lighter.

“Nothing is the same anymore, Pop,” I say. “Nothing at all.” I open the truckbed toolbox and fish around until I find the can of acetone I keep to get pitch off the windshield. I polish off the whiskey, and pour the acetone into the bottle. Then I rip the ace bandage off my hand and stuff it in there, leaving some hanging out as a makeshift wick.

“This is it,” I say to the lighter. “One last hurrah.” Then I flick it back, lighting the end of the bandage, and I throw that bottle through the McHenry’s window.

I get in my truck and crank it up, watching as the bar’s engulfed in flames. By the time I pull away, there’s a raging fire in my rearview, and I can hear the sirens coming; those bastards

must be flying. I'm thinking, In two weeks, I'll either be in prison or back on a boat, fishing like my old man. I'm thinking, That bar looks better than the day I first met Sarah there.

Number One Man

It was a particularly hot Georgia summer, and the flowers my Momma had put on the porch were already starting to wilt. I was just seven years old then, and it was just the end of June, but the heat was sweltering. Drooping petals of crimson red were falling off their stems onto a wicker chair by our front door. There had been a thunderstorm brought on just a night before; the winds howled all night long. I wondered if the gusts were going to rip the roof right off our house and found myself clutching a green cotton blanket beneath the covers of my bed. Pigs and cattle in the barn were screeching out into the night with terror. My dog Diesel hid under my bed, sheepishly trying to hide from the thunder's roar. My mother came into my room in her nightdress and held me close to her.

“It'll end soon, baby. Just a really bad storm,” she said. “Oh, I wish your father was still around. He woulda made sure everything was fine.”

Seeing her eyes dart from window to window and her fingers fidgeting with a rosary she had taken from her bed post made it clear that she didn't believe what she was preaching. A burst of wind from the raging gale snapped the beautiful oak tree in our yard in half. There was an earsplitting crack as it collided with the soil. The thunder struck so loudly that one of our horses, a white mare named Alexander, had been spooked. Alexander had always been my favorite horse. He ran off into the woods amid the chaos, breaking free of the cage which held him. The storm raged on into the morning.

My father had died the summer before, and my mother had since become a nervous wreck. We both felt his absence, magnified even more so by the perpetual silence that his voice used to fill. My mother's eyes always seemed sad and empty, but she would still feign a smile to

me. At first I thought she was just faking them to make me feel better, but looking back on it I think she did it more to convince herself. She was having trouble doing the farm work on her own, and it was showing. The bank said that if she missed any more payments they would have the county foreclose on the property and sell it for cents on the dollar, and that she would have to pay the difference. My mother lit a cigarette between her shaking fingers and took a deep drag over an ash tray. She smoked quite a bit. Even when she had her tooth pulled, she shoved gauze in the hole where it was missing and smoked out of the other side so she wouldn't get dry socket. She aggressively tapped her red finger nails on the dresser into the early morning. We got no sleep that night.

We were lucky to be alive, my Momma had said. The tree that fell was full of rot and we were blessed by God himself that it didn't land on our house. It already had a bad roof, she always said. It's amazing that storm didn't peel it back like a tin can; not much was holding it in place.

All I could think about was that horse.

I spent the days after the storm walking around the property, looking for any sign of Alexander, with my dog by my side. The only thing I found was a set of bear prints in the dirt, freshly imprinted after the rain storm, on the outskirts of our farm near the dense tree line. Diesel sniffed them and growled, backing away. I told Momma about it, but she said, "Don't you worry about that, honey. Daddy left us a pistol in the dresser to protect us. If anything came after us, we could take care of it."

I wasn't sure what kind of bear would go down after being shot with only a pistol. I also knew enough that if bears were hanging around it wasn't a good sign for my horse. I would walk

into the house every afternoon after hours of searching and collapse on the couch after dredging muck and cow manure across the kitchen floor. Diesel jumped up on the couch and lay next to me, exhausted. I pet his soft black fur and fell asleep against him, crying.

After a few more mornings of me yelling for Alexander while standing on the fence in our back yard in the muggy weather, mud covering my boots and snot dripping down my face, I knew that chances were that I wasn't going to see my horse again.

It was also that summer, three weeks after the storm, that Momma had started bringing Mr. Peter around our house. She had met the man at church on Sundays. She collected me up in the kitchen every Sunday at dawn and dressed me in little suits with fancy silk shirts and handkerchiefs of every color to match. Everything was freshly laundered and smelled like floral detergent. I hated the scratchy, sweat-inducing feel of those wool suits against my skin in the summer. I was forced to wear stiff dress shoes that were polished and shined to perfection. They squeezed my toes tight and gave me blisters. She liked to slick my hair to the side with far too much gel.

“William, stop fidgeting around. You want to look good if you're going to God's house, don't you?” she said. Her hair was done up, every curl perfectly in place and held by a bow. Her makeup was beautiful. Her skin was pale and flawless, and with her red lipstick just so she looked like a model on the front of one of those magazines at the A&P checkout line. I noticed that she didn't wear her wedding ring anymore. She did continue to wear her pearl necklace. It was a gift to her from my father for their anniversary, and she certainly loved those pearls.

“I don't think he'd want me to die from the heat,” I said, looking down at the floor, trying to avoid her gaze. “Mr. Peter is going to be there again, isn't he?”

“Don’t you say nothing about him, Will. He’s a really nice man.”

We went to church that July Sunday in our beat-up red Ford that had tears in the seat cushions, the foam and broken springs fighting out from behind the bright fabric. The doors were flaking and covered with rust. I climbed into the front seat with Momma as she tried to turn the radio on a station that wasn’t consumed with static. With every bump and pothole we rolled over, my whole body shook violently, smashing my side against the door interior. The truck made high-pitched wheezing sounds, a sign that it was time to put the old machine to rest. Everything was breaking lately. First the washer machine went, then the truck radio. Things always came in threes, so we were anticipating the water heater to be the next culprit. We eventually settled on listening to the news, which only broke in and out for half of the ride to the service. From what I heard, the newscaster said another heat wave was coming, we didn’t win the baseball game playoffs, and somebody was shot dead in a bank robbery that, easy enough to say, was unsuccessful.

As we pulled into the lot, she killed the ignition, putting the key in her purse with gloved hands. We blessed ourselves at the door and found our way over to our seats. I pulled at my shirt collar; the heat was suffocating. My mother looked down at me and smiled with her perfectly white teeth.

“I know you don’t like Mr. Peter,” she said.

I looked away from her gaze, fidgeting with the buttons on my shirt cuffs.

“But you’ll always be my number one man, honey. Remember that,” she said, leaning down and kissing my forehead as I flipped through one of the bibles without bothering to read a

word of it. The church filled up quick with all the folks from town, and the preacher stood up and walked over to the podium. Just as he began to talk, Mr. Peter swung around the corner and into the seat next to us. He smiled to my mother, whispering in her ear and putting his hand on her lower back. She giggled, shrinking against his shoulder.

“Hey, Billy boy,” he said with a crooked smile.

“My name isn’t Billy. It’s William,” I said. He laughed it off and scuffed my hair with his hand. I pulled away from him. My mother leaned over and hissed in my ear, “Be a good boy, okay. I don’t want to ask you again.” We had never gotten used to my father not being in church with us. There was an empty seat in the pews, and for the first few times it made my mother cry that he wasn’t there. She would hold me tightly and nod to the priest who read the scripture and gospel. One day Mr. Peter sat down and shook my Momma’s hand, introducing himself. He had taken a fancy.

“Hey, pal. Here’s a dollar,” Mr. Peter whispered, reaching it out from inside his coat pocket and folding it in my hand. I nodded my head, taking the bill, which ended up feeling damp and slimy in my fingers. Something always made me feel uncomfortable around that man. He had an eye that seemed to be bulging and always wiped his nose on his sleeve. He was dressed in a gray suit and had a hat that he made a habit of taking off his head and putting on my Mother’s lap. A gold-plated pocket watch that was flaking, revealing a corroded steel layer underneath, hung out of his shirt pocket. I saw Mr. Peter reach into his pocket again and pull out a roll of money. He put the money in my Momma’s hand and, putting his hand over hers, closed her fingers around it. She shook her head, trying to hand it back to him, but he whispered something to her and she reluctantly put the roll of bills into her purse. The church erupted with music and the choir started to sing, filling the church with beautiful sound that signaled the

beginning of the service. I looked at the preacher man, but I could feel the glare of Mr. Peter on me. My mother chuckled under her breath at a joke he whispered to her while moving his hand to her knee. So much for leaving room for Jesus.

Late that August, my mother and Mr. Peter were married.

One afternoon, just as I was getting used to my mother's remarriage, I realized that living with Mr. Peter as a father was going to be a lot worse than I could have ever expected. I was playing with my toy trucks, gliding their rubber wheels over our woven area rug. My truck looked just like our Ford and had matching red paint and little seats that were the same color and everything. My mother was reading the newspaper on the couch. It was a blue fabric couch that was brand new. Mr. Peter had just bought it as a present to her. She was complaining about how awful our old one was for quite a while; it was covered with spills and stains from the dog and me. The new one already had a big chocolate stain from a piece of cake that I spilled.

The front door of our house slammed shut, almost taking it off the hinges. Mr. Peter threw his boots down in the kitchen and hung his dirty jacket by the door. He had gotten the liquor from a stash he kept out in our barn in his tool box, and was drunk. He started early in the day and came in like this almost every afternoon. He had brought the bottle of whiskey inside and set it on the end table next to him.

"Hey. Do you think you could run to the store for me in the morning after breakfast?" my mother asked. He dropped into his recliner, putting his glasses on the side table and shutting his eyes.

"Honey, I really need some broth for the-"

“Elizabeth. Fuck off,” he said, squeezing the bridge of his nose between his eyes with his fingertips, sighing. “I’ve been working all day. You’re plenty capable. Go get the keys and go yourself.”

“Come on,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Can’t you just do this one thing? Bring William with you, he’ll love it.”

“I’m not going to be the babysitter for another man’s child. That’s your job,” he said, and what had started as bickering steadily turned into screaming.

“You know,” my mother yelled, “I thought that remarrying would be a good idea, but I didn’t realize it was going to be just more fighting!”

Mr. Peter jumped to his feet, and my mother tried to shove him back into the recliner. He threw her into the wall against the peeling floral wallpaper and ripped the string of pearls off her throat. He had the bottle he had been drinking out of in his hand and shattered it against the wall, next to her head.

She screamed, and I ran to my room. She started crying and I could hear the room fall silent. The cushions of the recliner let out air as they compressed beneath his weight, and for quite a while all I could hear was my mother crying in the hall.

A while later I could hear Mr. Peter through the walls, saying , “Oh, I’m sorry. You know I didn’t mean any of that. I’ll buy you a new pearl necklace. It’ll be even nicer than the set you had. Elizabeth, you know I have a temper. I’m sorry.”

Everything seemed to calm down with Mr. Peter for a little while. He and my mother were getting along, and she said he was a good man that had made one mistake out of anger, and

that we should forgive him. She said she shouldn't have pressed him after he had spent the whole day working hard, taking care of our animals. I noticed my mother becoming more reserved, she didn't seem very happy anymore and she kept blaming herself for what had happened. Mr. Peter started screaming with her, night after night, and in time took to hitting her. I never forgave him for it even though my Momma did. My father never would have laid a hand on her, and yet this man did so readily.

“He's helping us keep the farm, honey. He's paying the bank for us. He's being a good father. He's helping to keep a roof over your head, even when I couldn't do that on my own.” I had heard it time and time again. She sounded like an audio recording, playing on repeat. She was trying to convince herself that the violence within him was justified, as long as it was for the sake of taking care of me.

One September morning, I was outside playing with Diesel around the farm. Mr. Peter—who was insisting I call him Dad—was working on the old tractor, trying to get it up and running again. Since he'd married my mother, he had not only paid to keep the farm but had gradually taken over all the other responsibilities that went along with it. They didn't have money to hire another worker. Mr. Peter acted like he loved taking on the role, but over time he started growing resentful of the work, and lashed out even more so towards my mother.

That afternoon I have ingrained in my memory. It was sunny and the grass was lush green, blowing like waves across the fields. Flowers were starting to emerge from the soil, and our crops were doing extraordinarily well. We had peach trees that were healthy, free of pests and disease, and they were producing a nice profit when the fruit was hauled to the local farmer's

market. My mother was inside the house, baking pies for dinner and doing the dishes. I chased Diesel toward the road. In the woods I heard the rustling of branches. I looked up and saw a white figure amongst the trees. I thought I was losing my mind at first. I froze when I realized that it was Alexander. He didn't look like the same horse from when I last had seen him. He looked half-starved, and his once shining coat had bare patches. He was covered in dirt. He made his way over towards our barn, out of my sight.

I heard an earsplitting gunshot echo through the air, and Diesel started howling with panic. My mother came rushing out of the house. "William, what was that? Where's your papa?" she asked, throwing a dish towel onto the porch steps and running towards the sound of the shot. She ran around the corner of the barn and let out a shriek. Diesel ran to her, barking wildly. My heavy work boots hit the ground as I flew around the corner, screaming..

Alexander was on the ground and bleeding from a shot through the neck. Mr. Peter stood there wiping off the gun with his hand. "Why did you do that for?" I screamed. He was my horse. *My horse*. Why did you shoot him?" I collapsed onto my knees and reached my hands towards Alexander, his eyes still twitching. He wasn't one hundred percent dead.

"Get away from that animal, Billy," Mr. Peter said, grabbing me by the back of the jacket collar and ripping me away from the horse. "That horse is sick, dangerous even. He tried to go after me, he must have gotten some disease. Look," he said, pointing at Alexander's leg. The skin was torn up, gnashed by teeth. The muscle was festering with infection and reeked of rotting flesh. He pulled me off the ground and pushed me towards my mother. She held me back as I fought against her, kicking and screaming. Mr. Peter walked towards the horse with his gun, pointing at its head.

“No! Don’t kill him, please,” I choked out.

He pulled the trigger. The horse’s head hit the ground with a sickening thud, and blood dripped down Alexander’s face. The gunshot left my ears ringing, and my forehead was pounding. Heat rushed to my face, and I felt like I was going to faint.

“No! My horse,” I said, leaning against my mother, who held my wet face to her dress. We could hear the fire alarm going off in our house from the hill.

“Oh no, the pies! I left them in the oven this whole time! Damn it, I’m going to set the house on fire!” My mother ran towards the house, looking back to me with sadness in her eyes.

Mr. Peter came over to me, putting his hand on my shoulder.

“I’m sorry, Billy,” he said.

“My name is William,” I said, wiping my nose.

“Maybe we can get you a new horse.”

“You didn’t have to kill him. He just needed medicine. He wasn’t crazed or nothing,”

“Oh, calm down, Billy. I’ll see if there are any listings in the paper on Sunday.”

He walked over to the animal’s corpse and lifted its leg with his foot, giving it a look over.

“What a shame,” he said, and then he smiled. “What a real shame.”

“Elizabeth! Where’s my beer?” Mr. Peter’s voice resounded across the house. He was wearing a white shirt with suspenders and jeans covered in mud. He planted himself on the living room

couch in front of the television. He lit a cigar between his fat fingers. He was drunk and more often than not of whiskey. His head rolled back against the sofa, and I watched him from the crack of my bedroom door in the hall, trying to peek just enough to not draw attention.

“Elizabeth!”

“It’s right here, Peter,” my mother said, rushing the beer to his side table. The bottle was dripping with condensation, and he wiped his hand across his forehead, trying to get rid of the sweat. Another episode was about to start. Everyone in town used to say that Mr. Peter was a stand-up guy. I doubt they knew anything about what he was really like.

“A coaster would be nice,” he grunted.

“I’m getting one for you right now,” she said, panic setting in her voice.

“It would have been nice to have when you brought the beer,” Peter said, slamming his hand onto the table as she went to put down the cork coaster. Beer spilled across the floor. She pulled back, hesitating.

“Let me get that, Peter. Don’t worry about it,” she said, grabbing a cloth and bending down to wipe up the spill.

“I’m not fucking worried about it.”

He was loud. If we had neighbor’s, I thought, they would have heard him, and the cops would be in our driveway. But nobody lived for miles in either direction, so we were trapped.

She turned to my door and saw me looking back at her through the crack.

“You can’t do this in front of my son! He doesn’t deserve to see this. He’s only a young boy,” she said, anger welling up in her voice.

“I don’t give a fuck, Elizabeth. He’s a little bastard. You coddle him too much. He needs to learn how to be a man.”

That’s when I heard him strike her across the face. She fell to the ground with a thud, pushing herself away from him across the floor. His heavy footsteps came towards my room, one after another. He looked me in the eye, and I looked to my mother, terrified, as she scrambled onto her feet and ran to her bedroom in the next room.

“Don’t you fucking touch him!” she shrieked. I could hear her yank open the drawer of her oak armoire, throwing things to the ground in a desperate search. She appeared behind him, gun pointed at his back. Her hands were shaking as he stepped towards her.

“Drop that thing. You know you can’t shoot me. Who will be the mother to your little boy then?”

The loaded gun fell from her hands and, stepping on it, he kicked it away across the room. He wrapped his arms around her with anger as she wept. He began to shake her. “Who would be his mother?”

A gunshot went off. One, then two. A third for good measure.

His body fell to the floor. A gurgle came from his throat and a cloudiness came over his eyes as he exhaled a final breath, covered in a pool of blood that came from his chest. The gun felt heavy in my hands. Before he died, my real father would bring me duck hunting. He made sure I knew how to shoot. He said it would come in handy.

“You don’t have to worry anymore, honey. We don’t have to worry anymore.” She was crying uncontrollably, and I had put the gun on the floor. “You’ll always be my number one man, you hear me? You’ll always be my number one.”

Looking back on it now, it all seems surreal. The police came to our house, and at first they thought it must have been my mother who shot Mr. Peter. When I told them I had done it, they didn’t believe me until the doctor told them that it must have been me because of the angle of the gunshot wound. My mother had bruises all over her face from the times he hit her and they eventually believed us. Nobody went to the man’s funeral but my mother and me. From time to time, even after all these years, I would swear I can still hear a ringing in my ears.

Bleach

It was Saturday, March 23rd in Kenton, Ohio. Vincent pulled into the parking lot, took the key out of the ignition, and slammed shut the door of his 2015 Subaru Impreza. The air was sharply cold and rain splattered violently on the pavement. People were running out of the store to their cars, trying to avoid getting soaked. One woman hurried along her children to a blue van, helping them all topple in. The bumper was emblazoned with Ohio State University Alumni stickers, and one of Brutus Buckeye, the anthropomorphic nut in all his glory—all fading and badly weathered. Vincent walked into the store, his itchy polo shirt now wet and sticking to his frame. His shoes filled with water quickly because of the holes ripped in the seams, and they squished with every step.

“Welcome to Genfold’s Group! We have a fantastic deal going on in our deli today,” said the store greeter, handing him a flyer. The man was older, in his sixties, and he sat in a rusted metal fold-out chair. He had indecipherable tattoos across his knuckles, and his hair was tied back. He didn’t make eye contact. If Vincent had believed in souls, he would have agreed that this job had drained that light from this man. A group of workers in their bright green polos and one donning a neon orange traffic vest had nested themselves into the customer service area, surrounded by carts full of overstock that needed to be returned to the shelves. They might have gotten to it sometime later that evening, but they most likely would leave it for the morning crew to deal with. They all turned simultaneously and glared at Vincent, hushing their conversation. He grabbed the flyer, and they went back to their talk.

“Thanks,” Vincent said with his head down, walking quickly past and skimming through the flyer. He turned into the kitchen goods aisle, passed the blenders, and stuffed the flyer underneath a pile of saucepans. As he walked away, the whole pile crashed to the floor and a young employee from the next aisle over let out an exasperated sigh of defeat. “Fuck, not again,” he said. A voice crackled over the old decrepit speaker system. “Hello, customers. Would the customer with the white Impreza come to the front of the store, please? You left your lights on.” It looked like Vincent might need a jump start again, and he didn’t have money to pay for a tow truck to come out and do it, but he kept walking rather than head back out to brave the rain. He would have to ask patrons in the parking lot if they could spare some jumper cables.

He pulled his worn-out leather wallet from his back pocket and searched for dollar bills while standing in the middle of the pet care aisle. After sifting through coupons and old, stained receipts, he found twelve dollars. It was the only money he had left to his name. He had stopped receiving checks after failing to show up to his job for a week straight. Fish food would cost him six and some change. All that he had left of any value was his wedding ring, which he could pawn up the road if he could get a jump, but with the rain coming down like it was, it might take awhile to find someone willing.

Vincent remembered what other items he needed to get on this shopping trip—contact cleaning solution, chicken for tonight’s dinner, and trash bags. He only had enough to cover one of those. All of his savings had long gone to his divorce lawyer. His wife was suing him for anything she could get her hands on. He felt anger in his chest but remembered that most of what led to the divorce was his fault. He didn’t put any time into the commitment. He put things on the back burner, worrying about his job. Vincent didn’t take care of her enough, and she was tired. That’s what she’d said. Tired. So, so tired.

* * *

One year before, Vincent had been in bed, naked under the sheets as light from street lamps showed through the slightly closed window blinds. A small lamp on their desk would normally be on, but the lightbulb had burnt out, and Vincent hadn't replaced it in the three weeks since Chloe had brought it to his attention. His wife had been in the bathroom, washing her face with a cloth she had run under steaming water. She took her time with this, ensuring every arc and line on her face was adequately attended. She had spent a long day at work and weariness filled her muscles. She worked as a nurse on a psychiatric unit. Her features were so soft and delicate under the light of the bathroom fixture. He had been working from home all day. His IT solutions job rarely required leaving the house except for doing the occasional tech installation or teaching an inservice to new clients.

Chloe sat down on the edge of their bed and, one by one, took out her pearl earrings, placing them in a small jewelry box with significant care. Vincent reached his arm towards her, placing his hand on the small of her back. She pulled away ever so slightly from his touch. They had been married for a little more than five years. He wasn't good with dates anymore; the anniversaries seemed to blend together after the first year. The first year had been the most important.

"How was your day?" he asked.

"It was fine. I have to get to bed, though, I have to go into work early tomorrow," she said, her tone flat.

"But hon, it's Tuesday. You really don't have time?" He wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her face to his. He reached to give her a kiss, but she looked away.

“No, I don’t. I really need to get to work in the morning, and I’m tired, Vincent,” she said. For a moment, her gaze met his. Her eyes had once been so warm, so often filled with joy. Now they were cold and distant. Everything about her seemed to have grown less kind towards him. Now she grabbed her pillow and a blanket from the closet.

“I think it’s just better if I sleep on the couch tonight,” she said.

“No, Chloe. I’ll go sleep out there, you take the bed. You need it,” Vincent said, calling after her yet making no effort to move.

“Like I said, I’d rather just sleep out there.”

She walked out the door, dragging the blanket behind her. Normally this would be unusual, but it was the third time this week. They used to make love every night, and now it was seldom that she would even allow herself to be held in his arms. She flinched at his touch, and he felt that every time he reached for her, the gentlest of movements made her react as if she had been startled or saddened.

“Do you remember what today is?” she asked from down the hall.

“Tuesday?” he asked.

“My birthday,” she said. The house fell quiet inside except for the sound, just audible, of crickets outside in the warm summer night.

Now Vincent stared at the fish flakes in his hands. He knew he couldn’t let the fish go hungry. They depended on him. He had an entire aquarium that he had made into his own little utopia, and the fish were all well taken care of. He always monitored the water temperature and pH balances, and whenever he saw a resident showing signs of illness like ich or fin rot, he would

put them in quarantine and give them the proper medications they needed to make a full recovery. He couldn't let them starve. It wasn't their fault that he was drained to only a few dollars remaining.

A young woman entered the aisle, meticulously searching for something among the pet supplies. Vincent turned towards her and stopped in shock. She was young, couldn't have been older than twenty-five, and had bright blonde hair that fell in curls over her shoulders. She wore jean shorts that fit to her form and a pink tank top. She was rifling through her blue plastic purse, trying to find something from its depths. She pulled out a wrinkled shopping list, and her eyes scanned down the page. The woman was the spitting image of his soon-to-be-ex-wife. The only difference that discredited the charade was that this woman lacked Chloe's sunny freckles across her cheeks, and her nose didn't have quite the same, graceful curve. He had been trying not to think of her, but here was her double, fleshed out in front of him. The woman, after searching the shelves, grabbed a can of gold fish flakes. They were the cheaper brand.

"What kind of goldfish do you have?" Vincent asked.

"I don't," she said. "I have beta fish, though. I kind of inherited it when my sister moved to college."

"If you're going to be feeding a beta, you shouldn't use those. They can really damage the intestinal tract of the fish, you'll want to use the granules. They're small and you only need two of them. They're also easier to track so you can make sure they're eating."

"These will work just fine. I throw in a pinch or two and he eats it right up, so it must be okay if it's lived this long," she said, tapping her foot and crossing her arms across her chest.

“They won’t live much longer like that. You’re killing them. If they eat too much it will expand in their stomach and they’ll get bloat. There’s a Petco a few towns over. They’re sure to have the right kind. I can write it down for you,” he said. He reached for the piece of paper in her hand and pulled a pen out of his pocket.

She stepped back. “No, thanks. I think I’ll just be getting these, thanks.”

Vincent watched as she walked away. She pulled a cell phone out of her pocket and answered it. With every step away that she took, Vincent felt the knot in his throat tighten as angered heat manifested on his face. He felt like he was suffocating. Her curls bounced back and forth as she gracefully held the phone in one manicured hand while carrying the fish food in the other. When she turned the corner, he could hear her say from the next aisle, “Some guy was trying to tell me to get certain food for the fish! People can be so fucking weird.”

Seven years before, when he worked at Petco, Vincent held a plastic gravel sifter in his left hand, disrupting the brightly colored rocks while the numerous finned creatures fled from beneath their vinyl underwater castles. He hated the weekly procedure that disrupted the kingdom he had created but felt an extreme sense of pride once the tanks were cleaned. He carefully added fresh water into the automatic top-off system and added a pump of dechlorinating compound. Through dedication he had made their department the best in the district. Beta fish were in small stacked plastic cups with an airhole in the top, each with two pellets of food. Vincent could recognize each of the fish individually by the patterns of shimmer in their scales. One was missing an eye, and another had to be taken off the shelf and was in seclusion behind the counter due to a discovery of fin rot. On the merchandizing shelves were tanks and accessories. One of these

stood out to him, it was a plastic yellow sign that had the words ‘Another Day in Paradise’ etched into it. The sign was next to a skull wearing a pirate hat tilted playfully above glimmering ruby eyes.

Vincent happened to be cleaning a tank of bubble eye goldfish, a fancy breed that were very particular in their maintaining requirements. The large inflated pouches on their cheeks puffed out and were delicate. If the fish were handled incorrectly, the pouches could burst open, leading to infection and a slow death. He had taken a liking to a specific one, which he had named Summer. His hand slipped as he attempted to avoid the goldfish with the large sifter and the gasket screwed into place to hold it together popped off. Tank water splashed across his red, thick cotton shirt and onto the floor. He removed the worn-to-hell plastic name badge from above his breast pocket and wiped it clean on his pants, then repinned it crookedly back in place. Vincent was young, but his hair was already a mix of black and gray. He pushed his glasses, lenses covered with sticky technicolor splotches, to the bridge of his nose, where they had sunk down from.

Vincent couldn’t believe how that woman had treated him. She was a moron. Why even have fish if you can’t take care of them, if you can’t give them the attention they need? He walked around the corner to the aisle where the aquariums were displayed. It was then that he noticed the living graveyard. The plethora of fish moved slowly through the algae-infested water. Three Red Oscars, an aggressive breed of freshwater fish originating from South America, were eating the long-dead corpse of another fish. Its body had turned completely white against the black gravel. Vincent approached in disgust. How could anyone let this happen? These beautiful creatures deserved to flourish and would do so if given a properly controlled environment. He felt his

hands twitch, and his tongue felt warm. His eyes darted back and forth, noting all the horrors that these poor animals were enduring due to being left unattended. A tank of assorted Guppies, a breed that naturally schooled, only had three members in such a large space. What the fuck was happening in this hell hole? Anyone, with a little care, could maintain this ecosystem.

He could hear the woman laughing in the next aisle. ‘These will be fine, thanks,’ kept replaying over and over in his mind. And this is what happened when people acted that way. Fish died because people were arrogant. Algae was caked onto the ceramic castles, and pirate coves and dead fish were lining the bottom of the tanks, pale white of their flesh determining how long they lingered there dead. He put his hand up to the glass. “This is no life at all,” he said. He slammed his fist into the metal shelf, busting open his knuckles, and something inside him opened along with them.

Vincent walked to aisle 13, the cleaning department section of the store, cutting his finger on an endcap. He swooped under the barrier and grabbed a bottle of bleach off the shelf while the clerk putting away detergents was in the restroom. “You don’t deserve this life.” He walked back to the tanks and opened the bottle. He sloshed the liquid into the tanks, one after another, the blood from his knuckle dripping into the tanks in thick drops. He stepped back from his work, watched all the bodies float slowly to the water’s surface. “Now no one,” he whispered, “will ever have to bother taking care of you.”

Religion

You step up into your blue Chevy truck and shut the door. In the backseat sits the case your hunting rifle is locked in. You pull the seatbelt across your chest and, because the buckle tends to stick, must force it until you hear the click. You look at your wife who is standing just inside the house, her image blurred slightly by the frosted glass of the stormdoor. She is still beautiful to you but she does not seem somehow like the same woman you remember her being. You start the engine. She waves to you, her thin frame covered by a white dress making her figure appear more like a ghost. A ghost you are leaving behind in Washington for Alaska, a one-week endeavor. Dan died on Tuesday, and you hope to be sitting in Will's living room by Friday so that he has the dignity of hearing the news in person.

You can see her mouth, *You said you weren't going to leave*, from behind the stormdoor glass. You debate taking the key out of the ignition and getting out one more time to hold her, trying to ease her mind, but you know that won't help anything. You still need to leave. You wave to her, backing the truck out of the gravel driveway and onto the street. Soda pop cans rattle on the exposed metal floorboards as you drive around corners a little too quickly.

These trips to Alaska happen every year, but something seems less nostalgic about it from this seat. You have been, over the years, the passenger while Dan did the driving. Together you made the yearly pilgrimage to Will's cabin to pay homage to nature and to brotherhood. You know that these hunting trips have gotten you as close to God as you will ever feel. Hunting is the religion, Will's cabin the church.

The miles seem to blend together after a few hours. You've already mapped out what cheap highway side motels you're going to stay at. Your radio is broken, and that alone is

enough to drive you insane. The only sounds you can hear are those made by the cans, still rattling, and the wind through the one inch of opening in the window. You think, If Dan were here—but then stop yourself because thoughts like that are dangerous. You’ve known this ever since you caught yourself wishing you had done something. You felt like all the signs now were there, and you just didn’t see them when you should have. Maybe if you had done something you would have been able to help him. You shake your head, trying to not think too hard about it. You remember your wife, standing in the doorway today and all those other years. Years ago, when she waved happily, your daughter there beside her, holding onto your wife’s dress in her tiny fingers, before the girl was lost in the accident. The years after, your wife begged you to stay home with her every morning, every single morning, but you’d kiss her head and said you had to go. You couldn’t stay home, too, you had to work. But today, when she was holding back tears, why didn’t you stop. Why didn’t you pull the key out of the ignition? Why didn’t you stay?

After three days of driving, you are exhausted despite sleeping well each night. You pull up to Will’s cabin and cut the engine. You start collecting your things from the truck, your small bag and the locked case with your gun. The lights on the porch turn on, and the yard has gone from total darkness to illumination. You hear the door slam, and William makes his way outside, coming up to greet you. “Where’s Dan?” he asks.

You both go inside and Will opens a bottle of whiskey, pouring shots for both of you in large glasses over his kitchen counter. “Is he okay?” he asks. You tell him no, that Dan committed suicide Monday night, that they found his body on Tuesday. You tell him that you rushed to get here because he deserved someone telling him face to face, unlike the phone call you got from Dan’s bitch of a wife. Will sits down at the counter, clearly turning everything over

in his mind. You grab the bottle of whiskey and pour him another shot. "Suicide?" he asks, a look of confusion on his face.

"He hung himself, " you say, and Will smashes his fist onto the countertop, shaking.

"He was a good kid, you know? I really liked him. He was a good shit," he says.

"Dan was good people."

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me, though. Suicide?"

"Wish I was."

"Shit. Wonder why he did it." Dan had always been the happy sort, but something had seemed off in the past few months. When asked, he'd said he was okay, but his eyes had no happiness left in them. He would smile, but his eyes held a sadness. Now you can't stop yourself from thinking that you might have helped in some way. Maybe one more phone call and he would've been here today with you and Will, a glass of whiskey in his hand.

"Thank you for telling me. You didn't have to do this, but I appreciate it," Will says to you. He clearly needs someone to be here though he doesn't want to show it. "I can't believe you drove up here. Sleep in the guest room tonight. I was going to stay in tomorrow, but as long as you're here, do you want to go hunting?" he asks. He sees you have your gun case and nods, walking towards his room. You let him go without a word. He has a lot to think about.

You go to your gun case and search for the key on the key ring. You put the key in, but it won't turn. You look for the second key, which usually sits right next to the first on the loop. You put that key in, but it will not turn either.

What the hell? you think. You take a closer look at the keys, and you realize they are actually the ones that fit a tiny toolbox you have in the shed for your wife's garden supplies. It dawns on you. She must have switched them out the night before you left, when you were arguing with her.

You had yelled at her, telling her that she needed to realize that this trip was important, that it was necessary, that it would be the last.

"You always say it will be the last trip. You said it last time, but look where we are, you're going again!" she said. She started to cry. "You leave me in this house constantly and I just want you to stay, or at least take me with you. Do you know how lonely this place gets?"

You told her that you couldn't bring her on hunting trips with the guys, that it was a ludicrous idea. But this time, before you'd gone, while she stood behind that stormdoor glass, she'd held such a sadness in her eyes. It hadn't always been there, it took time for the happiness to leave them. Just like it had for Dan.

Now you polish off your whisky. You put your keys on the counter. You yell down the hall that you'll have to pass on the hunting, that you're going to leave first thing in the morning.

"Are you sure?" Will calls out. "You came all this way."

You tell him you're sure. It's your wife, you say. Your wife really needs you at home. She needs you, and you want to make sure you get back.

Reflection on Craft

This thesis was a fantastic opportunity for me to be able to work on developing my abilities within the writing craft. Throughout this process, I have learned a significant amount, not just about technique but also regarding how to prepare for writing a longer collection of works in a limited amount of time. There are areas of writing that I have significantly improved upon by working on these short stories, and I have become able notice things that I personally hadn't recognized about myself. For instance, I habitually struggle with and have learned to identify and fix certain writing behaviors. This process has been invaluable to helping me improve my work in the craft, and it has offered a critical capstone experience for me within the major.

In looking at my overall collection of work, I must begin this reflection by addressing how I have utilized different points of views to benefit individual stories. The first story in this collection, "Boats," along with the second story, "Number One Man," are both told in a first-person point of view. This first-person perspective I chose for these stories because it gives especially concentrated inner access to the character's thoughts and emotions. I wanted to accentuate their subjective views and interpretations of what was happening around them. I felt like, given these environments, this point of view provided an amazing opportunity for the protagonists to describe their sensory perceptions of what they are experiencing, and I wanted to utilize a first-person perspective to capitalize on this. The third story in this thesis, "Bleach," I set in a third-person limited perspective. I wanted to stay close to the protagonist and his happenings, but I also felt the need to retain the ability to offer descriptions outside of those

filtered through the body and consciousness of the main the character. This point of view offers two lenses—that of the character and that of the narrator’s storytelling voice.

In the final story, I chose to take on a bit of a challenge and write in a second-person point of view. I thought that challenge would be interesting but also extremely valuable as a way for me to grow in my experience of narrative craft and technique. I had no experience in writing second-person narratives prior to this, so it was a difficult undertaking, one that felt a bit uncomfortable at first. My first draft of the story was written in past tense with a great deal of exposition at the beginning. It wasn’t effective at bringing the reader into the “fictive dream” of the story, implicating the reader imaginatively into assuming the identity of the protagonist, and I know that reader’s willingness to “suspend disbelief” is critical to any realistic story’s success. To help address these issues, I wrote another full draft in which the exposition at the beginning was eliminated and the story was recast in present tense. This tense-based revision really helped, and when it is coupled with use of second-person point of view, it sets up a story in which the audience instantly wants to suspend believe and get involved with living the life this character, despite how different that character may be from the reader.

Another artistic matter I was very conscious of while writing these stories was the thematic unity that connected all my works. In this collection, I wanted to focus on regionalism. Each of the stories is set in a different geographic region of the United States. The characters that I have developed also all work blue collar jobs and, while all having different occupations, are working class individuals that work hard for their income. “Boats” features a fisherman on a fishing pier in Maine, while “Number One Man” follows a young boy whose family owns a farm and relies upon the agricultural economy. “Bleach” dramatizes the life of a man who is unemployed following his divorce but has worked as a retail aquatic pet specialist and as an IT

specialist in Ohio. The final story in the collection features a man whose only relief from his job and daily life comes from his yearly hunting trips with his friends. I wanted to focus on individuals who worked blue-collar jobs because I felt that there were many opportunities to examine the emerging conflicts, across regions, that stem from the increasing inability of the working class to provide for their own and their families' financial and emotional wellbeing.

Manipulation of time and space was another narrative craft element that I worked on while developing these works. My ability to clearly and concisely portray scenes across spans of time has been an issue for me in my writing before, and without mastery of this skill I have seen how it can make the work unconvincing. Through reading, I have studied how other authors do this and have edited my pieces to use crot breaks to establish long breaks or significant shifts in time. Another thing that I generally do at the beginning of each of these established breaks is to include, quite explicitly, how much time has passed or how far we have gone back in time. This helps to orient the reader in time, and the same strategy can be used to establish physical or spatial setting. For example, in "Number One Man", in transition between scenes I began a section following a crot break with, "We went to church that July Sunday in our beat up red Ford that had tears in the seat cushions, foam and broken springs fighting out from behind the bright fabric." I wanted to quickly establish the day and month, while also giving a sensory description to help immerse the reader in the dramatic scene. This method also helps in teaching the reader how to read the story, as successful narratives do, and delivers all the information necessary for the quick comprehension of the scene's setting.

While at work on this thesis, I also learned that I have many habitual traits in my writing that are challenges to the clarity of my work. Mechanical in nature, they are problems that I now can recognize and have learned through careful revision to fix. For instance, I had formed a habit

of incorrectly formatting my dialogue. Every time I believed that I was formatting correctly, there turned out to be a mistake, whether it be punctuation or incorrect capitalization. After getting help with this from revision and through studying a lot of dialogue in other short stories, I learned how to get over these issues in technique and now can now easily recognize when there are formatting problems with my own dialogue. Another issue that I have come to recognize is that I tend to write in my initial drafts many moments that depict activity (rather than action) of my characters. While action helps increase tension, reveals character, and develops the dramatic arc, activity does very little. This tendency was especially pronounced in "Bleach." I wrote many scenes in which characters' activities were depicted, but the scenes never truly helped to create tension or increase reader understanding and empathy for character. That story in particular underwent a thorough revision process to make the story more concise and clear while also cutting out moments that were not vital to the dramatic effect of story.

Overall, work on this thesis has provided me with an amazing experience, one that has helped me learn about the full development of a successful short story collection. I have learned a great deal, not only in development and execution of craft techniques, but also about how to develop plans and then to make adjustments when personal goals aren't met and need to be reconsidered. Taking on a longer project like this has really prepared me for higher level work. I am no longer afraid to take on longer pieces, as I was before, and in the future I won't shy away from the hard work of longer and more challenging creative projects. This work has inspired in me a desire to dedicate myself to the craft of creative writing and to continue writing fiction so that I can improve my skills through practice and feedback from others. I greatly appreciate the opportunity that I have been given to work on these stories.