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University of Nevada, Reno

**You Know What I Mean:
An Exploration of the Second-Person Narrative**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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by

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Abstract

The author defines the second-person narrative mode, and then uses the second person to write a collection of short stories. The definition of the second person breaks the form into the standard, hypothetical, and autotelic subcategories. This thesis explains the rhetorical effects of each subcategory as it applies to literary fiction, in contrast to nonfiction forums such as self-help books and guidebooks. The different forms of the second person are then demonstrated in a series of short, creative works written by the author. Preceding each creative piece is an explanation of how the second-person narrative mode functions within the short work of fiction.

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Introduction

You begin to read.

In the most basic definition, the second-person narrative uses the second-person subject pronoun, “you” to tell a story. But it is more complicated than that. To define the second-person narrative mode, we need some background on the way narrative works and how different modes are defined.

The point of view, or narrative mode, of a story is the “position in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented” (Prince 75). There are three basic categories of narrative mode: 1) first person, 2) second person, and 3) third person. Identifying subject pronouns used throughout the story is the easiest way to determine how to categorize a piece of work: first-person pronouns (I) suggest that the text is first-person, second-person (you) pronouns suggest a second-person text, and third-person pronouns (he, she, it) suggest a third person text. However, almost all stories contain an overlap of narrative subjects on the sentence level. For instance, the line, “He walked into the conference room” could appear in a first-, second-, or third-person novel. Although the sentence has the third-person subject pronoun, “he,” this third-person sentence turns into a second-person story when it precedes the line, “You followed him in.” As a result, narrative modes are more accurately defined by the relationship between the narrator, the narratee, and the protagonist. The narrator is the one who tells the story. A narrator can be someone who interacts with other characters, or the narrator can be an unnamed entity who observes and reports on the protagonist actions. The narratee is the one the narrator is addressing: the reader, a character in the story, or an undefined entity. The protagonist is the main character in the story. The way in which these three players interact defines narrative mode. (Prince 58-60)

Matt DelConte, a professor at Le Moyne College, defines the second-person narrative as, “a narrative mode in which a narrator tells a story to a . . . narratee—delineated by you—who is also the . . . principal actant in the story” (DelConte 118). The “you” of the second-person is based on the “coincidence of the narratee and protagonist” (DelConte 118): the narrator directly addresses the main character of the story, which makes the protagonist also the narratee. In the lines, “She said your name. That’s your name—Bobby” (Lehane 30), the narrator (an undefined entity) tells the protagonist (Bobby) his name, making Bobby both the narratee and the protagonist; this narratee-protagonist combination defines the text as second person.

The second person is widely used in the real world. Traffic signs order readers to STOP, greeting cards tell the recipients to get well soon, letters or emails often end with an, “I miss you,” forms tell people to sign here or to read all information carefully. The second person is also common in song lyrics. Some songs written in the second person include, “She Loves You” by the Beatles, “Just the Way You Are” by Billy Joel, and “Your Song” by Elton John. In verbal speech the second-person is relatively common: commands like, “sweep the porch” or “lock the door,” as well as a comments like, “you know what it’s like” qualify as the second person.

Second-person, nonfiction literature is not unusual either. Self-help books often directly address readers with instructions about living a healthier life. How-to manuals instruct readers how to fix microwaves and assemble bookshelves. The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook: Travel tells readers “how to survive an airplane crash” (Piven 39) and “how to foil a UFO abduction (58). Barry Lopez, in his nonfiction study of the arctic, describes the animal life with the lines, “You are afforded the companionship of birds, which follow after you. (They know you are an animal; sooner or later you will turn up something to eat.) Sandpipers scatter before you, screaming *tituek*, an Eskimo name for them” (xxiv). While the second person has

found a place in many nonfiction books—literary, instructional, and mainstream—the form remains quite rare in the realm of fiction.

The uncommon nature of the fictional second-person narrative may have to do with the fact that fiction stories use the second person in a *prescriptive* manner, rather than the nonfiction pieces, which tend to use the second person in a *descriptive* way. Nonfiction self-help books guide readers to performing actions that apply directly to the reader's life. If a reader seeks out a book to help them relieve stress, the book Women Who Worry Too Much will try to help by describing actions the reader can take to fix her problem. In fiction, actions, characters, situations, and identities are not real, and therefore do not apply to the reader's life. Works of fiction usually prescribe a new identity, a new situation, and new characters for the reader to interact with; works of nonfiction describe actions or situations that pertain more directly to the reader's life.

The second-person narrative is an “artificial mode that does not normally occur in natural narrative or in most texts in the history of literature before 1919” (Richardson 19). The only exception where the second person might sound entirely natural is in an epistolary novel (a story composed of letters sent between characters). The second person often seems bossy or controlling, telling “you” what to do and describing “your” actions. Writers tend to avoid the form because the readers resist it. While I could not find much academic literature that described reader response to the second-person narrative, one Amazon user seemed to concisely articulate many of the negative effects of second-person narration. She writes, “There are no good books written in the second person. It's a style that gets grating after a very few paragraphs” (“PamPerdue”). The rarity of the form, too, may increase its awkwardness to the reader: by “[b]eing rare in fiction, the ‘you’ voice commits the sin of drawing attention to itself—to

technique—and away from story and character” (Plotnik 15).

The lack of control the reader has over the action of a direct address may be another contributing factor to its unpopularity. When a first- or third-person protagonist performs an action, the reader has the choice to approve or disapprove, but the type of narration makes it obvious that the reader has no control over the protagonist. Consider the first-person line, “The killer is still on the loose, but I want to get home: I take the shortcut through the dark alley,” and the third-person version of the same sentence that reads, “The killer is still on the loose, but Jenna wanted to get home: she takes the shortcut through the dark alley.” Readers with common sense should think that “Jenna” and “I” are unwise for performing these actions, but it is also clear that the reader does not control the story: he or she only observes.

Now, the second-person version of that same sentence reads, “The killer is still on the loose, but you want to get home: you take the shortcut through the dark alley.” Although the protagonist is separate from the reader (the reader is *not* walking down a dark alley), the direct address can still make readers act defensive. A reader might respond to the line by thinking, “I would never be so stupid.” As the Amazon reader phrases it, “[h]aving the author tell the reader what the reader has done, or is doing, is a device that jars the reader out of any sort of suspension of disbelief” (“PamPerdue”). Choose-your-own-adventure stories sometimes elicit a more positive reader response because they operate by giving readers more control over the second-person narrative. In one of these stories, the line from above might read, “The killer is still on the loose, but you want to get home. If you want to take the long way home through the park, go to page 5. If you want to take the shortcut through the dark alley, keep reading.” While the reader still has limited control, the choices make the narration slightly less abrasive.

Despite all of the negative effects, there are some advantages to writing in the second

person: the second person has the potential to draw the reader into the story more completely. The form often increases the immediacy of the situation and amplifies the emotions in the story due to the direct address. The reader and the protagonist both hear the story in the same manner. Second-person fiction has a unique relationship with the reader of the text because while stories “always [offer] an invitation to identify with characters, whether they act in first, second, or third person... second person makes that invitation explicit” (Plotnik 15).

The first four creative pieces included in this thesis have to do with loss and grief, but sadness is not a theme inherent to the second person. Author Lorrie Moore uses the form for short comedies in her book Self Help; Chuck Palahniuk writes horrifying second-person, confession-like stories in Haunted; and Rumer Godden tells an empowering story of a blind girl in “You Need to Go Upstairs.” The form is versatile and is not limited to any particular focus or genre. The fact that my stories tend to focus on grief and loss reflects my personal writing style and is not tied to the form itself. However, the second person does serve to amplify the grief and pain through its “explicit” (Plotnik 15) invitation. The second-person narration invites readers through its direct address to empathize with the characters’ fictional situations. Second-person stories imply that whatever situation the main character is struggling with could happen to “you.”

Second-person stories have the ability—if written well—to draw readers closer to the protagonist through the direct address of the narrator to the narratee-protagonist. One author asks, “why open a story with, ‘Melanie woke up and saw blood on the ceiling’ or ‘I woke up and saw blood on the ceiling’ when you can write, ‘You woke up and saw blood on the ceiling?’” (Plotnik 15). An immediacy exists in the second person that can shock readers into empathizing with fictional characters and situations.

Brian Richardson, a professor at the University of Maryland, breaks the second-person

into three different categories: “1) the ‘standard,’ 2) the ‘hypothetical,’ and 3) the ‘autotelic’ forms” (18). These categories focus on the relationship between the actual reader and the narratee-protagonist of the second person. The standard form is the most common type of second-person narration: it tells a story about a protagonist in a direct address to that protagonist. The hypothetical form is similar to guide-books and how-to manuals, often using imperative or command sentences (wash the dishes, climb that mountain, decide to leave, etc.). The autotelic is the rarest form: it addresses the actual reader directly. An autotelic line directed at the reader of this thesis might read, “You are reading words printed on a piece of paper that is at least twenty percent cotton.” The rest of this thesis is devoted to defining these terms further and applying the information to creative works.

This thesis includes five original fiction short stories. Each of the creative pieces included in this thesis are preceded by a description of the type of second person (standard, hypothetical, or autotelic) that the story employs and an explanation of the role that the narrative voice plays in the writing. The first two stories “Remember” and “How the World Is,” are written in the standard form of the second person; the next story, “Clean House,” employs the use of the hypothetical form of the second person; and the last story, “पृथ्वी भावना” (pronounced Miṭṭī Bhāvanā), is written in the autotelic form of the second person.

After presenting a comprehensive definition of the second person and the creative pieces, I will reflect on how this investigation has changed my views on writing. The study of the second-person narrative has changed the way that I read as well as the way that I write, and I intend to continue my study of narrative theory.

The Standard Form

You stand at the edge of your world and begin a journey into the unknown.

The standard form is the most common form of the second-person narrative. Similar to more traditional first- and third-person narratives, standard second-person fiction describes the actions of a protagonist other than the reader, albeit with second-person pronouns. Although the reader experiences a story addressed to “you,” the protagonist of the story and the reader are two separate entities.

The reader is not Bobby, the protagonist from Dennis Lehane’s “Until Gwen,” when the narrator announces, “Your father picks you up from prison in a stolen Dodge Neon, with an 8-ball of coke in the glove compartment and a hooker named Mandy in the back seat” (19). The reader does not become the back-alley masseuse described in Chuck Palahniuk’s “Foot Work” when they read the line, “By now, you’re already running from flophouse to flophouse, giving back-alley foot jobs for enough cash to stay alive” (39). A reader of Bright Lights, Big City is not suddenly transported to a bar when he/she reads the line, “You are not the kind of guy who would be at a place like this at this time in of the morning. But here you are, and you cannot say that the terrain is entirely unfamiliar, although the details are fuzzy” (McInerney 1). The reader is the reader. The characters, the situation, and the protagonist are all fictional elements of the story, separate from the actual reader; although the story is written in a direct address, the narrator is addressing the protagonist and not the reader.

One of the problems with second-person fiction is the ambiguity of the “you.” Stories written in the standard, second-person narrative never begin with a disclaimer, warning the reader not to take direct address of the narrator personally. Even when it becomes clear that the protagonist and the reader are completely different entities, the reader’s expected response is still

unclear. Is the reader supposed to “play along” and pretend to be the protagonist? Is the reader supposed to listen to the direct address like a fly on the wall? The “very distinctiveness of second person narrative is one of its liabilities” (Plotnik 16) and because of the rarity of the “you” voice, readers have little knowledge of how to react and respond. The indistinctness that accompanies such a rare form can “drown it [the story] in confusion” (1).

The standard form is especially prescriptive in its use of the second person. The identity of “you” is often given to the reader rather than dictated by the reader’s identity. Self-help books, for instance, often declare the identity of the reader in their title. With titles like, The Emotionally Abused Woman and The Anxiety Workbook for Teens, the books seek out specific types of readers, and the “you” address, therefore, has a better chance of identifying with and describing the life of the reader. In contrast, standard second person takes the form of more traditional literature; the story is not real and is often so outlandish that the reader cannot possibly have gone through the same situation as the protagonist. Rather than trying to relate to the reader’s life, the standard form seeks to impose a new identity upon the reader.

Standard form is “usually [written] in the present tense” (Richardson 20), although there are a few instances in which this is not the case. Irvine Welsh, in his novel Crime, writes most of the story using third-person, present-tense narration; however, when the protagonist has flashbacks, Welsh chooses to give readers a second-person, past-tense account. Since the story still focuses on the protagonist’s actions, and does not address the reader directly, we still consider this a standard second-person narration.

The creative pieces that follow are written in the standard form. “Remember,” is the story of Teddy, an imaginative child whose grandfather (Grandpa Bill) comes to live in the spare bedroom. The story opens and closes in the first-person, present-tense narration, narrated by

Teddy's granddaughter. Teddy is an old man who, like Grandpa Bill, has Alzheimer's disease. As a result, he cannot remember his granddaughter. The girl tells Teddy the story of his childhood in the second-person, past-tense. The shift in narration from the frame story to the main account is necessary to keep a constant narrator throughout the story, and to give the text a circular pattern that made the second-person, past-tense combination make sense within the narrative. If the text did not have the frame story, the question of "why would 'you' need to hear what 'you' have already done?" would distance the reader from the story.

My main influence for this story came from Markus Zusak's The Book Thief. In his work, he uses many metaphors, similes, synesthesia (combination of senses), personification, and other figurative language. The style of his work is poetic and tactile. Zusak describes the day two characters reunite, writing, "There were heavy beams – planks of sun – falling randomly, wonderfully to the road. Clouds arched their backs to look behind as they started again to move on. "It's such a beautiful day," he said, and his voice was in many pieces" (512).

In this short passage alone, Zusak compares light to wood, he personifies clouds when he gives them backs, and the man's voice—an auditory sense—is described in a visual manner (synesthesia). In a story dealing with a character that had no memory of the events that took place, I wanted to create a fictional world that was as tactile and as colorful as possible. If Tommy's granddaughter is to make him remember and (also the reader) believe this long-ago time, the story needs to reach out to every sense.

I originally wrote this story in the third-person narrative mode. The second-person version of this story is not necessarily better or worse than the third-person version; however, the shift in narrative mode also shifts the focus of the story. The third-person version focuses on the relationship that Teddy had with his grandfather. The second-person version expands this focus

to invite a comparison of how Alzheimer's affects different members of the family, and examines the cyclical nature of relationships (Teddy grows up to become a version of Grandpa Bill; Teddy's granddaughter has a similar relationship to Teddy as Teddy's mother had to Grandpa Bill).

Changing "Remember" into a second-person narrative was difficult because of the past-tense. Because I had never heard the combination before, I kept reverting to the present tense at random moments throughout the story. The blend of second person and past tense sounded unnatural, but getting rid of the past-tense purged the piece of its frame and the revelation that Teddy grows up to have Alzheimer's disease just like his grandfather. Since I changed the piece to the second-person to reveal the cyclical nature of Teddy's disease, I keep the past tense as well.

The second story included here is "How the World Is." This is the story of "Child," a young, impatient caterpillar who learns the secret of what happens after death. The story is narrated in the second-person, present-tense, with the narrator left undefined. In the caterpillar world, everything is slow and thoughtful, and impatience is the least attractive quality. When one of the old and wise caterpillars disappears, Child must ask another elder about the mysteries of life and death.

My main stylistic influence for this story is Arthur Golden's Memoirs of a Geisha. The writing in Golden's book often slows down on single moments and stretches out the imagery. Consider the comparison of Golden's writing to a passage from one of the creative pieces included in this thesis, "How the World Is":

And her clothing wasn't the only extraordinary thing about her; her face was painted a kind of rich white, like the wall of a cloud when lit by the sun. Her hair,

fashioned into lobes, gleamed as darkly as lacquer, and was decorated with ornaments carved out of amber, and with a bar from which tiny silver strips dangled, shimmering as she moved. This was my first glimpse of Hatsumomo. (Golden 37)

Above and below and around you, sky and air slip through the leaves, seasoning you both with light and shadows. Grandmother's skin is pulled taut over her growing body: it shows her great age. Her arms stick out of her like buds about to give way to flowers; her mouth cuts through the leaves; her eyes look up. Uneven stripes of color stretch over her plump body like sun and shade on a blossom; and when she eats the flowers, she disappears into her surroundings. (Page 30 of this thesis)

In both passages, we see one moment. This moment is drawn out with long sentences of description and meticulous attention to detail. I wanted this story to move slowly and calmly; since the young caterpillar is fighting impatience, I wanted the reader to fight with it as well. I stretched out the description and slowed down moments through imagery, just as Golden did in his work, hoping to achieve the same, slow, methodical cadence as in Memoirs of a Geisha.

The first draft of this story was written in the third-person narrative voice, but the imagery of the caterpillar world was so alien that the slow pacing and attention to detail became monotonous. When I read the piece, I lost interest quickly, I confused the different characters because of the unusual names, and I felt like the prose sounded forced. When I experimented with the second person, the story came to life. Confusion between characters diminished since the main character became the clearly defined "You" protagonist. The second

person also created a personal relationship between story and reader that the third-and first-person did not provide: the “you” address gave the reader a personal stake in the life of an unfamiliar protagonist. The third-person version of this story did not address why readers should care about a caterpillar. The second-person version gives the readers an open invitation to relate to a creature that they may find insignificant and uninteresting in a first-or third-person narrative.

Both of the stories have thematic similarities dealing with grief and loss: Teddy’s mother and granddaughter, as well as Child, all deal with losing someone they loved whether to disease or death. The standard form of the second person, while not intrinsically sad, did work very well for sad themes. A second-person text always implies that “this could happen to you.” The narrator addresses both the reader and the protagonist in the same fashion, and this direct address implies that the emotions or the situations that the fictional characters cope with in the story could also happen to the reader. This direct address tends to amplify emotions in the story. When a “you” character must confront an axe murderer or the death of a loved one or a cheating spouse or even alien invaders, readers are forced to put themselves in the character’s place. In my stories, even though the characters are fictional, and even though my readers are not caterpillars, the use of the second person makes the emotions real.

Remember: A Creative Piece

I walk into the room and sit down next to the bed, moving a small pile of newspaper comics to the bedside table. I reach out to touch the hand on the bed; paper thin skin covers the bones like a puff of smoke. The hand backs away from mine; the eyes under the thinned out eyebrows squint, making them disappear into a pool of skin, with wrinkles like ripples around a stone. "Who are you?"

I look in my lap for a moment, eyes closed, lips pressed tight together, trying to keep from crying.

"Sit up straight, girl. You look like a question mark." The words hit me like a memory, and I can't help but look at the old eyes, trying to find some hint of recognition. But it isn't there. The words were habit formed from years of my slouching.

"Do you remember me at all?" I ask. And it's a cruel question, I know. When the thin white hair shakes out a "no," I do start to cry. I've heard the answers before, but it's not something you grow accustomed to hearing.

"I'm sorry, honey. I'm sorry. Don't cry. Who are you?"

I let my face fall into a smile. "Your granddaughter." And I can see the words punch the frail chest underneath the blankets.

The eyes widen, floating to the top of the rippled skin. "Are you sure?"

I nod.

"I'm such a monster." The eyes sink back into the pools of flesh and little drops of salty water start to drip over the wrinkled skin. "I'm sorry, honey. Everything is just a little fuzzy today."

I sigh slowly, and the room is heavy with the fog of it. "Do you remember who you are?"

The eyes look around, as if considering the question, but the only answer I get is, "Can you pass me the funnies, dear?"

I shake my head and smile with one side of my mouth, keeping my teeth hidden: Grandpa Teddy used to call it a comma smile. But the eyes in front of me don't remember. "Do you want to hear a story?"

I tuck the blanket over the frail shoulders.

"Which one? About Garfield?"

"It's actually a story you told me, a long time ago. It's about you." I point to the nose like it's sitting on a child. "I want you to try and remember for me. Can you do that?" And the head covered with thin, white hair nods; so I begin.

#

It was a long time ago. You were very young then.

Since the early morning, you had been in the garden. Your mind fed your eyes the images you wanted to see, and the garden transformed around you. The delphiniums became vast trees with cloud-blue leaves; the geraniums became vines full of poisonous flowers and thorns like claws; the grass became a soft forest carpet of ferns and pine needles and moss. The pink-grey air of the afternoon hung from the branches.

In the forest, you ran. You ran because there was something behind you: a monster. A friend that only you could see. Your monster. Three weeks earlier, you had visited the zoo and had seen a kangaroo: your monster had grown muscular haunches and a pouch. Two months before that, Papa had taken you to a football game, and your monster had looked like Bucky

Badger with a huge head and shaggy fur. But you were out of ideas that day and didn't know what to make of it. You did know to run, though, because it would eat you if it caught you, no matter what it looked like.

You could hear its hoofs behind you, feel its breath on your back, and smell it behind you, its rusty scent attacking your nose. When you were far enough ahead of it, you would hide; hide behind trees, in ferns, even in the thorny vines. When it passed, you would run in the other direction, giggling. It would find you; it would chase you; the game would go on.

The monster would change as you played, sprouting spikes or horns or tails or heads. Somewhere in the back of your mind, right behind your imagination, there was a voice whispering, "that's too scary!" and "that looks too funny to be a monster" and "I don't like that at all!" But you didn't notice those thoughts, not really, not as you were playing in the garden. You just knew that your monster was changing and that you were running away from it.

Inside, your mama and papa were having a serious conversation, and when they were done, they decided to go outside and drink mugs of coffee on the garden's stone bench.

You ran from the creature behind you, and when it was far enough away, you made a dash for the cave ahead. You hid in the lip of the opening and caught your breath when Mama sat down. Your mind dropped the monster game like an old toy, and you tried to decide whether or not to come out from under the bench. Then Papa sat down and you decided to stay hidden.

"Everything's going to be all right." Papa's voice was lined with fishing lakes and hunting shacks and failed dance lessons. His feet kept their distance from each other, facing straight ahead like palace guards.

Mama's feet were stitched together, ankles crossed, toes covered in mismatched socks – polka dots and argyle. The bottoms of the socks were grayed with dust, and now dirt, from the lack of shoes. Her toes curled in on themselves for a moment before straightening. "I hope so." A pause. "I just want to get through this week. After that, I suppose, we'll fall into a pattern."

"We'll get used to it."

Your mother then heaved a great sigh that filled the garden like fog. "I don't think this is one of those things you get used to, sweetie."

"I know, but we'll get through it." Papa's feet shifted slightly to the left, slightly over to meet the socked feet of Mama. "Everything's going to be all right."

The feet and the words stilled. When Mama and Papa had finished their coffee, the feet supported the weight above them and walked away. You stayed underneath the bench, waiting until you were sure that your parents had left. You wondered, briefly, what they were talking about, but when you heard the garden monster's hooves outside of the cave, you forgot about the conversation and focused on the more important matter of escape.

#

Papa walked in and out of the spare room at the end of the hall: he took sheets out of the dryer and spread them over the extra bed, he started the dishwasher, and he poured some milk and cut the crusts off of a peanut butter and honey sandwich. He walked to the garden and lifted you off the ground in the middle of your chase. You squealed.

"What are you running from, eh?" Papa asked.

You smiled. "Monster!"

“Oh, yeah? What does it look like?”

You looked over at it, and its nose melted into a snout. You giggled.

“Let’s go and have some lunch: we’ll leave the scary monster out in the garden.”

You ate and then crawled underneath the table, watching your father wash the dishes.

When the clunk of a car door wandered in from the driveway, Papa gently opened the door and waited. Mama walked in, an elaborate expression of happiness and sadness and a little worry stitched to her face, and an old man followed her in. You didn’t recognize him. It wasn’t your fault. You were simply too young to remember the man who held you as a baby, who had played with you when your parents went out for the night. You were just so little when all that happened that it was impossible for you to remember your own grandfather.

You sat under the table and watched as Papa helped the old man walk down the hall to the guest room. He was bent over, balancing himself between his two thin legs and a wooden cane. His skin and clothing hung away from his bone, wrinkled and worn. There were card games and loud jokes and the smell of better times etched into the skin next to his eyes, but then he frowned. The wrinkles shifted like a pond in a rainstorm, and the etching was gone. For a moment, all he did was walk down the hallway, but then the old man’s eyes brushed against the little thing sitting under the table.

The old man began to cry. He inhaled sharply and backed against the wall, and the rain started to come out of his eyes like a sudden summer storm. Mama’s face came undone: the thread was pulled so that her jaw dropped open, her eyelids slipped up, and her eyebrows rose. The old man’s sobs sounded like far away thunder. They sounded so unlike the sobs normally

heard in the house: they came from big lungs; they were punctured by coughs; they came from a man. Your pale cries were so different.

“What’s wrong, Dad?” Mama asked the old man, her face unraveling with his tears. The old man covered his face and leaned on his cane. And he cried. “Dad, what’s wrong?”

When he spoke, the words were soft, as if the storm had weakened the sound-makers in his throat. “There’s something over there.” He cried again: short, punctuated, rolls of tears.

Your mother looked in the direction of the table, and when she saw you, she stopped. She might have been wondering why her father was so upset at the sight of the child under the table. She might have been wondering how to introduce the two of you, or if this was even the proper time for introductions. She might have been wondering how to stop her own tears from spilling.

Papa moved to the table softly, quietly, slowly. He held out his arms and pulled you to him with the words, “come here.” You crawled cautiously into his arms and let him pick you up. Your father walked back to the old man. You started to cry then, your soprano wails harmonized with the old man’s bass thunder rolls. Mama pulled you out of Papa’s arms then, and wrapped herself around you like a blanket.

“Shh. Shh. Calm down,” Mama whispered. Her perfume smelled like the pink color of her lipstick and the warmth of her hands when she tucked you in at night and the sunlight in the garden. “Calm down, Teddy, it’s okay.” You breathed her perfume in for a few unsure breaths that rattled when you inhaled and softly moaned when you exhaled.

Mama turned to the old man once you had stopped crying. “Dad, this is my son, Teddy.” She introduced you and told the old man that you were his grandchild; she told him that you

were very nice. She told him to say hello, and the old man's cloudy eyes settled on you and blinked. "Hello," he said.

You buried your face in your mother's neck, but she said, "Be polite, Teddy." You could feel the words vibrate against your cheek and forehead; you turned around. Your mother gave you a lacey smile. "This is Grandpa Bill. Can you say hi?"

You shook your head.

"Be polite, honey."

And you smiled at Grandpa Bill before hiding your face in your mother's hair.

Then the old man went away. Mama set you down, and by the time you reached the safety of the table, Grandpa Bill had left for the spare room at the end of the hall.

#

That night, you didn't move: you were flat, pressed against your bed by the darkness of the house. You heard something outside your door. It was one thing to imagine a monster; it was an entirely different thing to hear one in your own house. Mingling with the muffled sounds of papa's snores and the dull moan of the fan near the window, there was the sound of muttering and footsteps. The imagination that provided you with thousands of different monster shapes and sizes in the garden went blank in the darkness of your house. You didn't want to be stuck – alone – in your room when it decided to come in.

The darkness pressed against you, but you slowly stood up. You reached up to the doorknob, pushed against the door, and ran. You didn't look down the hallway. And you didn't giggle like you did when you were running from the make-believe monster in the garden. You ran, and you didn't stop until you were nestled between Mama and Papa.

Dreams had already started to fill your head when the door creaked. Through Papa's snores and Mama's soft breathing, you heard the footsteps. It didn't occur to you to think that they belonged to the dream: you knew they were real. The footsteps in the hall were at least as real as the beast that had chased you from your bedroom. You wondered if it could follow you into Mama and Papa's room. No nightmares before this had ever dared to come in. You wondered if this was your garden monster, suddenly turning against you in the night.

You heard the door handle creak open slowly. The monster stalked into the room slowly, moving like a cat who had spied a wounded bird. It was cautious, halting, slow.

It stood over the bed.

The monster, this thing that had appeared outside your room, reached out and shook Mama. You tried to scream, but it was like you were in a dream: the scream came out as a breath of air, not even as loud as Papa's snoring.

"I'm scared." The monster shook your mama again. "I'm scared."

You were still and silent. Mama woke up with a small spasm of shock, and then sat up and faced the monster; she stood up from the bed and wrapped herself around it like a sweater. "Come on, Dad," she whispered. "I'll make you a cup of tea."

In the light of the hallway, you saw your mama and the hunched over form of Grandpa Bill walk out of the room, and you cuddled closer to the protection of Papa's snores.

#

The morning light beckoned you out to the garden again, transforming the flowers and grass into a forest once more. You slipped through it and hid among the ferns, dashing away from your garden monster, who had sprouted wings and an elephant trunk since the last

sighting. You ran, you hid, you ran, you hid. Your giggles wiggled out of your mouth and flew around the garden. As your monster came closer and closer, its rusty hawk-feathers slicing the air, you knew it would catch you unless you did something drastic.

Thankfully, there was the cave. It was coming up on your left, and as you neared it, you slid into the opening. The monster looked confused: it swung its head from left to right, it pulled its crocodile tail towards its body, it whined and trotted off in another direction. You had confused it, and it left you alone. Then another monster came on two feet covered in loafers the color of ashes.

The feet were huge, and they were made to look larger by the skinny, socked ankles connecting the shoes to the pants. The toes pointed away from each other; the feet didn't even look at each other, unaware of the other's existence. A hum dribbled down from above the feet. It was a song without words, tune, purpose. It was rich and dark and it had no pattern, like mulch or shadows.

You shrank deeper into the cave. The old man's scent, filled with dust and dark blues, began to wrap around you. The tips of his fingers peeked over the edge of the bench, and his fingernails, thick and tan, made you hug your knees to your chin. His humming dripped into your ears.

A moment later, a wrinkled and spotted and upside-down face loomed into view. Grandpa Bill had found you, and you blinked at the thin tendrils of white hair that gravity pulled away from his head. It looked like snow that refused to fall. You wanted to reach out and grab it, but you were too afraid of his cries.

“What are you doing?” The old man’s voice was a leafy breeze; it sounded soft and cracked. It sounded dry.

You shrunk into the cave of the garden bench. His head disappeared from view as he sat upright. You crawled out cautiously and sat by his knees.

“What are you down there for?” he asked.

Your eyes peered through the blue-leafed trees, but you didn’t see it anywhere.

“Monster.”

“Oh!” The man’s eyes swept over the garden. “Where is it?”

Your eyes rested on a patch of darkness behind the garden gnome, and you pointed.

The monster snarled at the wrinkled, wispy man sitting above you. It snarled at this new cloudy-eyed creature.

Grandpa Bill squinted. “What does it look like?” You didn’t answer, because the monster kept changing. You didn’t really know what it looked like. The old man’s mouth widened in his squared chin. “Is it a bad monster?”

You shook your head and squinted through the trees again. The monster seemed to be made of smoke; it kept changing and mutating. Its wings were gone, replaced by a third pair of legs. The rust color had faded, and now the monster was the shade of sun-bleached terra cotta. You couldn’t decide what it looked like. You couldn’t see it.

Grandpa Bill’s eyes were sunk into a sea of crinkled skin. “I can’t see anything.”

You saw it through the trees, pacing and swaying its head and snarling.

“No, nothing,” Grandpa Bill announced, “but everything’s a little blurry.”

You nodded, paused for a moment, and then darted out of the bench. You ran through the garden and crept closer and closer to The Monster. You saw it gnash sharky teeth and claw at the ground with polar bear feet. Its ears fell and elongated so that they looked like they belonged on a bunny. A giggle wriggled out of your mouth; the monster spotted you and the chase began. You darted under branches, leapt over dead logs, crawled through the ferns, and back to the cave behind your grandfather's legs. You watched as Grandpa Bill's head lowered over the opening of the cave.

"What are you doing down there? Who are you?"

You could see the storm starting in his eyes, and you ran away.

#

You crept out of your bed because of the noise. Mama was crying: that much was obvious. You could hear Papa's country voice, but you couldn't make out the words, so you crept closer to listen.

"He's gotten so bad." Mama was undone, untied, unraveled. You could hear it in her voice.

"Everything's going to be all right."

Mama continued as if she hadn't heard him. "He doesn't remember where he is, or even who he is half of the time."

"Sweetie, everything's going to be all right."

"I miss him." Her tears sliced at the thread holding her together. "I miss my dad."

"Shh. I know. I know. Shh." Papa's eyes looked over his wife's hair and spotted the little body crouched behind the arm of the couch. You walked out, then, and crawled into Mama's

lap. You felt her heart beat. You felt your father's breathing. There was the sound of tears and split seams.

After a while, your mother seemed to come together again, and she whispered, "What are you doing out of bed?"

You didn't move, and Mama picked you up and placed you back under the quilt. There were still tears spilling out of your mother's eyes as she left the room.

#

"What are your bad dreams about?" After you crawled into your parents' bed for the fifth night in a row, Papa had taken you to the living room. He put you on a chair and knelt in front of you.

You looked down the hall at the spare bedroom. "Monster."

"And you're scared of the monster?" Papa's eyes looked like they had spilled: there were dark half-circles of brown underneath the brown irises that were looking at you. His eyebrows sagged underneath the weight of his frown.

"Yeah... Papa, get the monster!"

"Why are you scared of the monster?"

"Big!" You flung out your arms.

"Big." Papa ran a hand through his hair; you thought it looked like pine needles and strands of fishing line lying limply on his head. "There's no monster in your room, honey. It's just pretend."

"No!" And your little mouth and your big eyes both turned into circles. "It walks there in the hallway." Papa understood, but he signed.

“It’s just pretend. Come with me, sweetie.” He took your hand and walked down the hallway, towards your room. He waited for you to crawl in bed before he sat down on the edge of the mattress. “Why are you so afraid of this thing?” He tucked the blanket in around you.

“Big.” You don’t fling out your arms this time because they were already tucked in.

Papa paused. If the lights had been on, you might have been able to see the thoughts landing in Papa’s pine-needle hair. “What if it’s a nice monster?”

“No.”

“Have you asked it?”

You shook your head.

“Be nice to it. That monster isn’t trying to eat you; it’s trying to get to know you better. The next time you see it, ask it its name. Say, ‘What’s your name, Monster?’” Papa kissed your forehead.

“What’s your name, Monster?” Your words sounded littler than Papa’s, and they blended together. Your father smiled and walked to the door. He left the room, but the monster did not come back.

#

Mama made cornbread and baked asparagus for dinner the next day, while Papa put chicken on the outside grill. You and Grandpa Bill sat on opposite ends of the couch and watched a discovery channel special on gorillas. You glanced over at him every few seconds, looking at his skin, full of ripples, with spots and hair floating on the surface. You looked at the way his back curved forward and the way that his clothes hung off of his body. Every once in a

while, you caught him looking at you with his cloudy-blue eyes, and you turned back to the television.

When Mama called you to the table, you caught a glimpse of your garden monster on the other side of the window. It was hunched over, and it moved like an ape. You sat down, and Papa picked up Grandpa Bill's plate, and Mama picked up your plate. Mama and Papa dished out vegetables and sliced the meat. They set the plates down in front of their rightful owners. Mama said, "Eat your food" to no one in particular.

When dinner was done, you started to head to the garden, but Papa stopped you. "Stay inside tonight: that garden is getting into your head. Maybe a few days away will stop those nightmares, eh?"

You frowned up at him, but sat down in front of the television. As the light of the T.V. came on, Grandpa Bill caught your eye. He paced in front of the garden door. He moved slowly to the kitchen, and then slowly to the edge of the television. Every few steps, he squinted at the garden as if he had seen something moving through the flowers. You let him sink into your eyes as he paced, watching him move to and fro, and here and there, and back and forth, and to and fro.

#

You woke up from a dream. You couldn't tell what had broken your sleep, only that it had been a noise. The shadows of your room seemed to move and slither about, and then you saw a darker shadow, a hulking form just outside the reach of the nightlight. It stood, hunched over like an ape, but it had spindly legs.

Somewhere, in the back of your mind, a voice whispered, "I didn't imagine it this big." And then just, "I didn't imagine it." You almost screamed, then. You almost jumped out of your bed and ran to the safety of Mama's bed. But then you remembered what Papa said. You looked at the monster. "What's your name, Monster?" The words came out as a whisper. And you could almost feel how proud Papa would be and how brave he would think you were.

"Eh?"

"What's your name, Monster?" Louder that time.

"William," it answered. There was a pause, then. "I'm lost."

"Do you live in the flowers?" You thought that, even if it didn't, your monster could share the garden. You didn't want a real monster living in your bedroom.

"Eh?"

"Follow me." You moved slowly, hoping that the monster wouldn't eat you. By the orange glow of the nightlight, you wrapped your hand around one of the monster's giant fingers and led him out of the room. You didn't look at him until you reached the garden.

It was lighter outside, and your mind slowly recognized him. "Grampa Bill?" The moonlight smoothed his rippled skin and cleared the clouds from his eyes. You couldn't smell his dusky-blue scent over the delphiniums in the garden.

And then you saw your garden monster, rolling around in the geraniums. You could see its gorilla body and dinosaur back and bullfrog legs. You sat down on the bench, and your grandfather followed your example. You looked at the creature with bullfrog legs and a tiger tail and then back at Grandpa Bill. He was looking at the geraniums. "You're not a monster."

And neither are you.

“Nope,” said Grandpa Bill. And two pairs of feet, one small and bare, one huge and slippered, dangled over the opening of the cave.

Try and remember.

#

I smile at the frail body under the blankets.

“That was a very nice story, dear. What happens next?” His face sinks into a smile.

“I don’t know,” I say. “You tell me.”

When he doesn’t answer, I nod and look down at my feet. He doesn’t remember. But his hand reaches over and touches mine. I feel his skin, smoothed by the years like driftwood is smoothed by the waves.

His hand squeezes mine. “Come on, dear, don’t look so glum. Let’s take a look at the funnies. Or you can tell me something else; I did like your story.”

“Yeah,” I tell him, and I guess it is my story. Even if he doesn’t remember, I do. I remember the way he used to pull me in a little red wagon on the way to the library; the way he told me not to pick geraniums in the garden; the way he shuffled cards when he taught me how to play sheepshead. I remember Grandpa Bill, even if I never even met him: Grandpa Teddy told me stories about his life on rainy days. We listened to the drops of water hammering the tin roof of the porch, and he told me about his childhood. I rub my thumb over his smooth knuckles and say, “I remember you, you know.”

Grandpa Teddy nods absently, his gaze fluttering around the room.

“How about another story, Grandpa? I remember them all.”

How the World Is: A Creative Piece

You call, and then you wait. You know how the world is; you know how slowly Recí will come to you. She is probably wondering what you want, and then she'll decide whether or not she should come, and then she'll consider which path to take, and then she'll inch her way over to you. So you wait.

There is a lot of waiting in the world of caterpillars: everything is slow and thoughtful and quiet. Time passes differently between the milkweed leaves. Time is the subtle shifts of shadows and light, and the blooming of fat buds, and the evaporation of morning dew. Time is a leaf becoming a meal. The caterpillars fill the time with thought and conversation and meals, often mixing them together. When Recí finally appears, she is holding a scrap of leaf.

“What do you need, Child?”

“I couldn't see you; I got worried, Grandmother.” No one knows where the eggs come from; but she is old, and you are young, so you call her “Grandmother.” Thoughts drift through a pause as your grandmother decides what to say. You know that you shouldn't voice worry: worry is a form of impatience, and impatience is an odd emotion for a caterpillar, the way that patience is odd for an ant, or mercy is odd for a spider. Besides, you know that when everything is thought out calmly, there is nothing to worry about; but somehow worry still seeps into your thoughts. When Recí speaks again, her voice travels to you, gently stirring the foggy silence, but not getting rid of it altogether.

“You worry too easily.” Grandmother sounds calm, but her words drip out of her like oily shadows.

“What's wrong, Recí?”

You lean closer so that you can see her better. Your eyesight is not good, but you can make out the black skin covered in stripes of yellow and white, like sunlight on a milkweed flower.

“You shouldn’t worry.” Her voice grows into words. “I’ve taught you how to eat, and where to sleep, and Isep can help you if you get into trouble.” She lets another pause fill her voice with shadows and her thoughts with fog. “I may not be here tomorrow.”

“Where will you be?”

“Stop questioning now, Child: give me time to eat.”

You eat with grandmother, glancing over at her between bites. You can almost see the thoughts swirling around her mind. She keeps gazing at the sky and opening her mouth, as if she’s tasting the air.

Above and below and around you, sky and air slip through the leaves, seasoning you both with light and shadows. Grandmother’s skin is pulled taut over her growing body: it shows her great age. Her arms stick out of her like buds about to give way to flowers; her mouth cuts through the leaves; her eyes look up. Uneven stripes of color stretch over her plump body like sun and shade on a blossom; and when she eats the flowers, she disappears into her surroundings.

As she chews through the leaves around her, Grandmother points out the small, slow things. “Look at the difference between the light and the dark, Child. Think about it. Look at the blossom: it is white; when the light presses against it, it turns yellow; when the dark presses against it, it turns black. Think about it, Child.”

You think about it; thinking is easy enough to do. You creep along the leaves; your mouth carefully cuts out meal after meal out of the surrounding green. Eat and chew and swallow and—every so often—look at the colors on the flowers. “It’s not really black,” you tell her, still cutting and chewing and swallowing and looking. “They turn a bluish gray when the dark presses against them.”

Your grandmother nods in approval, as she always does, but she doesn’t look at you today: she looks only at the air around her. The leaves turn into a green lace as you and your grandmother continue to eat. When Grandmother Reci speaks again, the sun has shifted and the shadows have moved. “Yes Child. Now think about how the leaf looks before you eat it and after you eat it. Think about it and understand it.”

You look at the leaf you’ve just eaten through: you’ve cut holes in the thick green meat. You can see the marks of your teeth and body in its darkening veins. The light pours through the holes and lands in piles on a firm, uneaten leaf. You watch the sunlight and the holes and the greens until you make up your mind. “Grandmother Reci?”

You wait and eat another bite while your grandmother decides to answer. You push down the urge to be impatient with her slow answer: you don’t want to be like an ant. You know she’s thinking: she’s trying to figure out what you’ll say and how she’ll answer and if you’ve even thought long enough to give an answer. Reci lowers her torso and head to the leaf, still not facing you. “What is it, Child?”

“The leaves, Grandmother, we make them pretty when we eat them. The yellow air can fall through them.”

Your grandmother rests on the leaf, silently. You can hear her breathing and tasting the air. "Look over here, Child. Look at this leaf. Look at this leaf we ate yesterday."

You move to see around her. "Where?"

She doesn't answer and lets you find the leaf on your own. When you do, you feel sudden cold rush through your body. You rear up and press your pudgy arms against your chest. "What happened?"

Grandmother looks at you, and you realize you've spoken without thinking. "Slowly, Child," she says. "Do you want to be like an ant? Always running through life and never seeing anything? Always acting and reacting and hurrying? You are a caterpillar: think before you speak. Think and be slow; you will understand the world better that way. Now, do you want to be an ant?"

You shake your head. Of course not.

Reci steps so that your sides are touching. You can feel her arms move with each breath; and you slow your breathing down to match hers. "That's good, sweetheart. Now think about that leaf while we make our way to sleep."

You lower yourself back onto your legs and let your gaze hit the dark and withered leaf. When Grandmother Reci starts moving down the stem of the milkweed, you follow her, but you can still see the leaf in your mind. The shadows replace the sunlight. When you speak, your voice doesn't sound like your own: you do not sound calm and slow. "We broke it, Grandmother. We made it ugly."

"Yes." She curls onto the thick stem. On the other milkweed stems, you can see other caterpillars your age beginning to fall asleep next to their older partners. Every caterpillar

hatched and tried to find an older caterpillar to learn from. Recı touches antennae with you, and you feel her fuzzy, leafy scent drift along your skin. She lets out a breath of air. "We kill the leaves. But we need to eat; the milkweed field won't mind a few missing leaves."

#

In the morning, the sunlight slowly fills the air around you and pulls you away from your dreams. The milkweed field is drowned in a saffron glow; you raise yourself onto your torso and look around to find Grandmother. You call her name, and wait, and make your way to a leaf to begin a new day of eating. When the leaf turns lacy with your meals, you start to worry, and call again for Recı. After a few more mouthfuls of delicious green, the saffron sun starts to suffocate you; the air thick turns with worry.

You call again, but there is no answer. You stop moving, stop eating, and start thinking of what to do. Like Recı did the day before, you look up, and your eyes fall on Isep. He is in the leaves above you, eating. You think back to yesterday and remember that Recı mentioned the old worm. Maybe she is talking with Isep.

You begin to crawl up the stem and over to this other plant, pulling yourself along with your legs and arms. It is hard work: you aren't as huge as Recı or Isep yet, but you're getting there. You've molted three times, shedding taut skin and stepping into looser coverings so that you can grow. The familiar itch is starting again, like dust caught underneath your skin. Soon, you'll wriggle out of your hardening top layer and crawl out feeling smaller, so that you can grow bigger.

When Isep sees you, he greets you by looking up from his meal and flinging out his plump arms. His body trails behind him on the leaf, and a scar bulges out of his chest like an

unopened bud. An ant grew impatient with his slow movements; he told everyone the story. You move forward. "Grandfather, have you seen Reci? Is she with you?"

The old worm takes another bite of food. He chews. He swallows. He thinks. You are starting to struggle with your patience when he finally answers, "She left."

"Where did she go?"

"Patience, Child! Patience! Don't be an ant." Isep pauses in his eating to point to the bulging scar and laughs. You look down and feel your antennae vibrate with embarrassment, and you wait for the old worm to speak. Isep puts down the bit of leaf in his hand and devotes his attention to you, if only for a moment. "I suppose you're old enough now. You've molted three times, yes?"

You nod, and the sandy-itch becomes a little more apparent as you think about it.

"Reci went to die, Child. She's gone."

You breathe; you suck at the air. Spiced and thickened, it rushes into your sides, and you focus only on how the air and the leaf feel against your itching skin. The light settles onto your back and head like thick, golden saffron: its weight presses down on you. Breathe. When you can, you pull yourself up. It takes so much effort. You feel the sun filling you up with spices and drowning everything in the milkweed field. "She didn't say goodbye."

"Reci said you worried, Child. Fret not: we all have to die."

You breathe and breathe and breathe. "I loved her." And of course you still do.

Isep nods through his meal. "We are all loved." The old caterpillar cuts another piece of the leaf out of its surroundings. "We all love someone; someone loves each of us. We still have to die."

You breathe: it is all you can focus on right now. The itch of your skin becomes nearly unbearable, and you cut out a piece of the cool green leaf and press it against your head. You eat and you breathe. Your mind is gone for a long time: you only eat and breathe. When your mind starts to move again, you think about your grandmother. You think and you eat and you breathe. Then you speak. "Where did she go?" Isep continues with his meal: you can almost see him grow fatter as he eats. He chews and does not answer. You start growing impatient: you want an answer more than anything. You feel your confusion knot up underneath your skin. "Where did she go, Grandfather?"

The old worm looks at you and chews his food. When he finishes chewing, he swallows, and he answers, "I heard you the first time, Ant-Child." He laughs again and points to his scar. Then he takes another bite, and chews, and chews, and swallows. "The air told her where to go, and she followed it. It happens to all of us. I can feel the sky tugging at the back of my mind, asking me to follow it. I'll be leaving soon too: the air around us wants me to find a spot under the shade of a fat green leaf where I can curl up and give up my conscious mind. It will happen to you as well, Child."

You nod and imagine Reci curled up on the stem of some plant, almost as if she is sleeping. You can see her body becoming empty as death takes her. Then you straighten up with curiosity. "What happens to her? Is it like sleeping? Does she dream?"

"I don't know, Child: I haven't died yet." He pauses and chuckles to himself, and the two of you chew through the leaf. You think about what it would be like to die; you try and hear the wind call to you, but there are no sounds. Isep leans back, letting his fat belly face the sun. The scar looks as though it will rip open against the old caterpillar's girth. "I would guess that you do

not dream in death, Child. I would guess that dying is like waiting to be born: no memories, no thoughts, no life. I would guess that it is just slow and silent and peaceful. Just dark.” The old worm looks around him. “You will stay on my leaf tonight, Child. I fear that the light is leaving us too quickly for you to get home. Come, come—don’t look so sad.” He flung out his arms, “Think of how often Recı told you not to worry!”

The sun still spills down on the both of you, although the shadows are long; you might have been able to make it to your leaf in time, but you are young and do not refuse the invitation. The thought of sleeping alone, without Recı to keep you company, makes you feel heavy. You rest your head on the leaf again, flattening your body against its crisp surface. You watch the saffron dust of the sun pour through the lacey leaves, but it doesn’t seem nearly as beautiful as it did yesterday.

You follow Isep to the stem of the plant where birds and foxes will be less likely to see you. Isep’s voice drifts through the growing shadows and settles around your antennae. “I miss her too, Child, but she lived a peaceful life. Sleep well, Child.”

“Sleep well, Isep.” You, however, do not go to sleep right away. You watch the leaves above you until the shapes blend together in the dark. Sleep covers you like a shadow, filling your body with heavy darkness and wrapping your body in comfort; you lean your head away from your body, letting your antennae fall towards your back. “I love you, Recı. I hope you’re dreaming.” Then you let your head sink back towards the stem, and you let sleep wash over you.

#

You wake when the stem starts moving up and down, bouncing under Isep's weight. The old caterpillar pulls himself over the leaf, his fat hands pulling the mass of his body forward faster than you thought possible, faster than you thought any sensible caterpillar would move.

You almost call out after him, asking him where he's taking you, but you decide not to. The answer will take too long to come. You crawl after him in silence, over leaf after leaf, stopping every so often to cut out a meal. You don't stop enough, and you can feel your stomach clenching in pain with the lack of food. You keep crawling forward, following the old worm who keeps moving and looking at the sky. When the sun is up in the sky, you realize that you have traveled beyond the limits of the village: there are no more caterpillars here.

You almost call out to him, "Isep, where are we going?"

But you don't. You keep silent, and you follow your grandfather. He is moving so fast, and you struggle to keep up, grasping the leaves and stems underneath you and pulling your body forward; and then he stops. He looks up at the underside of a leaf for a long time, unmoving, before pulling himself to the tiny point where the leaf meets its stem. You rest on the leaf behind him and begin eating to soothe your aching stomach while you watch him.

When Isep reaches the top of the leaf, he falls slowly backwards, letting his body elongate and tuning his head to the sky. He holds onto the leaf with his last two feet, and you are astounded that he is so strong. The thick scar faces the ground and glistens in the sun. He begins to pull threads of skin and shadows and air around himself; his skin is hardened and darkened and he blends into the shadows under the leaf. The hands at the ends of his pudgy arms, running down the length of his body, work furiously, faster than you have ever seen them

move. They pull gracile strings of skin and silk towards his head; he is halfway done creating his coffin when he sees you.

“What are you doing, Child?” His voice sounds far away, as if something in him had already drifted away on the wind. He looks back towards the sky.

“Watching. What are you doing?”

“The sky is speaking to me, Child. It’s calling to me. I can feel it inside me, pushing on my skin, making me want to crawl out of it. It’s like molting, Child, but dying is more pressing. It’s urgent. And fast.”

You lean back and press your hands to your chest. You can’t understand what your grandfather is telling you: how could you? You’ve been told your entire life that things are slow and thoughtful and quiet. “Fast? Grandfather, what do you mean?”

“It’s urgent, Child! I need to hurry.” You draw yourself up and raise your torso as high as it will go to get a good look at Isep. You expected to wait; you expect to eat through a leaf while the old worm thought about the question and the answer; you expected the slow and calm that crawled along with you over the leaves and branches every day. Isep pulled his skin and strands of blackened silk around his torso. “I can feel the air pulling at me, Child. I can feel the wind in my antennae. Life should be this way; it shouldn’t be so slow.”

“But you always said to be slow,” you say. You curl in on yourself, looking toward the ground and pressing your arms tighter into your sides. You can feel the heat in your antennae and joints from every time you have been yelled at and called an ant for being more impatient than the other caterpillars. “Everyone says to slow down. You say to enjoy the light and to notice the veins in the leaves when I eat. You tell me to—”

“Don’t listen to what they say, Child.” Isep’s voice is farther away; his eyes are covered by the layers of skin and silk. His voice is the wind: soft, distant, fast. “Listen to what I say. Live quickly! I have never felt so alive: I wish I were not dying. I can feel the sky pulling at my antennae and licking my back; I feel the sky, Child. I feel the sky. Goodbye, Child.”

The old worm’s mouth disappears behind the coffin the color of shadows.

You slip to the ground, your body shaking. The sun still sprinkles you with its yellow dust, but you feel cold and stiff. Recı and Isep were the only caterpillars you really knew, and as the sun throws the shadows farther and farther, you realize you are completely alone and away from the village. You cut a leaf to lace and wait for the sun to set. Now that you have permission to be impatient, time seems to slow and you only sit and eat and breathe and think at the pace of the most respectable of caterpillars. As night seeps in from the east, you stop eating and crawl onto a thick stem; you can still make out Isep, hanging from his leaf, as the shadows blur together.

“Are you dreaming?”

You fall asleep waiting for an answer.

#

You don’t bother going back to the village: you don’t know the way, and now that Recı and Isep are gone, you have no one to go back to. You eat and breathe and think and talk to Isep and Recı, even if they don’t talk back. Time passes, but the only marker is your skin: it is growing hard and taut and feels like sand against your back and belly. Isep’s coffin, too, is changing; it is growing paler, almost white, and you think to yourself that it will disintegrate soon. Then you will be left with no company.

After three days of eating and itching, you begin molting. You thrash back and forth against the confines of your skin, and when you can't stand it any longer, you bite at yourself and slice open the husk of your dead flesh. It feels refreshing and painful at once. When you make your way out of the opening in yourself, you look back at your hollow skin. It looks back at you for a moment before the wind sweeps it away. Your new skin is loose and soft and wet: you stretch your arms and your body and roll around on the leaf, laughing to yourself at how good you feel. The wind on your wet, new skin makes you feel like a leaf: fresh and crisp and tender.

You stop fidgeting because you notice the crack in Isep's coffin. You lean closer, and see antennae dripping out of it, and it sends a sickening shiver down your back. The coffin is white and broken, and something black is falling out of it. You hide behind leaves and watch as the coffin expands and contracts, and a leg, almost as long as your entire body, shoots out of the opening. With every movement, another leg or antenna or thick chunk of body is visible. It is slick, wet, dripping; all strings of legs and antennae attached to a black body.

With every movement, another leg or antenna or thick piece of body falls out. The coffin is inhaling and exhaling, inhaling and exhaling – breathing – and you can see the wetness shining on black skin. The coffin is inhaling and exhaling and breathing, beating and pulsing and breathing. It sucks in, and with one final exhale, its burden spills. Isep is gone. Isep is gone, replaced by a monster, wet and thick and black. You stop breathing and shrink down as far as you can behind your leaf. The monster flings out two of its long, thin legs and pulls itself onto the stem of the leaf and stops moving. You can hear it talking to itself, and you move a closer to make out the words.

“Slow. Be slow,” it says. “Slow. Don’t try to leave yet: let your blood fill your veins. The dream said to be slow, be slow, be slow.”

You recognize its voice, and you cautiously move around the leaf. “Isep?”

The thing turns its head towards you, and it’s not hideous like you thought it would be: the fur on its body is starting to dry out in the air, and it starts to look soft. “Do I know you?”

“You are my grandfather,” you say, and Isep’s antennae fly through the air, catching your words.

“Perhaps.” He slowly opens up his body, revealing wings, thin and huge. The wind starts to dry them and brush color onto them like golden air and black shadows.

“Isep, you have wings,” you say. You look at how beautiful he’s become; the wind keeps brushing color onto his wings, and his body becomes softer and softer. The wings astound you; Isep looks more brilliant than any flower with those colors surrounding him. Orange brighter than any light and black darker than any night surround him, and soon, the colors will lift him into the air.

“I can’t use them yet,” he says, more to himself than to you. “I have to be slow. It is so hard to be slow: I just want to fly.”

“Then why don’t you? You said that life should be fast.”

“It should be, but I have to be slow, or my wings will not work. In the dream, life is slow, and that is how I must be for a few moments, even when I only want to fly. I can feel my wings; they are soft and thin, there is no lifeblood in them yet, they are not at all good for flying. I have to be slow. Be slow, be slow.”

You watch him, and your impatience evaporates like last night's dreams. You'll turn into one of these things, and then you will get to be fast. For now, though, the world is slow. Isep sits in the sun and both of you wait. Isep chants his mantra of slowness to himself, until, with quick snap of his wings, he lifts himself into the air. You notice that his scar on his chest has disappeared, and he flies towards the sun.

"Goodbye, Isep," you call, and then you wait. You know how the world is.

The Hypothetical Form

Do what you're told and decide you love the slight point of view shift

The hypothetical second-person text takes the form of recipes, choose-your-own-adventure stories, manuals, and how-to guides. This form tends to use “three features generally absent from the standard second person narration: the constant use of the imperative, the frequent employment of the future tense, and the unambiguous distinction between the narrator and narratee” (Richardson 29). In the following passage from Lorrie Moore’s “How to Become a Writer,” the narrator constantly commands a young writer named Francie—to “try,” to “count,” to “show”—throughout the piece, and addresses the actions of Francie’s mother in the future tense.

First, try to be something, anything, else. A movie star/astronaut. A movie star/missionary. A movie star/kindergarten teacher. President of the world. Fail miserably. It is best if you fail at an early age—say, fourteen. Early critical disillusionment is necessary so that at fifteen you can write long haiku sequences about thwarted desire. It is a pond, a cherry blossom, a wind brushing against sparrow wing leaving for mountain. Count the syllables. Show it to your mom.... She’ll look briefly at your writing, then back up at you with a face blank as a donut. She’ll say: “How about emptying the dishwasher?” Look away. (Moore 1)

The hypothetical uses the imperative similarly to guide books and self-help books. The difference between the two is the imposition of fictional characters and situations included in the text. Consider the following text from the self-help book, Women Who Worry Too Much:

Think of a clear, concrete problem that can easily be solved. For example, say it’s your turn in the carpool to pick up the kids, but you need to go to a doctor’s

appointment. Notice how this is a concrete problem that can be solved with a specific course of action. (Hazlett-Stevens 15)

The difference between Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer" and the preceding quote from a self-help book stems from the level of concrete detail included in the text. In Moore's piece, the "you" character performs certain actions and meets certain people and is put in certain situations. In the self-help book, the "you" is vague; the use of "for example" allows readers who have no children or medical insurance to distance themselves from a character who would need to solve carpool problems, and this distance can occur without the reader pulling away from the text. While both of the texts make use of the imperative, Moore's sounds more aggressive because she is forcing a fictional situation in a direct address.

The hypothetical form of the second person is intrinsically bossy because of the constant use of commands: the reader must decide whether or not to play along, and reader response is often negative to the hypothetical form. Because the narrator commands Francie (protagonist) in such a way that readers hear the same commands without being Francie, the text takes on an aggressive tone. Readers can often feel bullied or bossed in the way that the narrator constantly commands them to do things that they often cannot do while reading. Problems also arise when the narrator describes characters or places or facts about the story: a reader might say, "But *I* never wanted to be a writer," or "My mother would never act like that." The conflict arises because the narrator addresses and commands the two distinct "yous" of the protagonist and the reader without differentiating between them.

One way that authors approach these problems is to give their work a title that declares the hypothetical nature of their text. Lorrie Moore's "How to Become a Writer," Junot Diaz's

“How to Date a Brown Girl (Black Girl, White Girl or Halfie),” and John Updike’s, “How to Love America and Leave it at the Same Time,” all announce the “how-to” nature of the text. This sets up the reader for the experience of the hypothetical story and tells them what to expect: in doing so, it lessens the shock and prepares the reader, which in turn makes the reader less defensive.

The choose-your-own-adventure tale actively employs the second person in a way that puts the reader in control of the plot. For this reason, this type of second-person narrative often seems less abrasive than “how-to” stories. Consider the following excerpt from Terry Frostywillow’s story “The Bus Ride of Doom”:

You are Timmy, a quiet, shy, and harmless little boy. Although you are relatively smart... your marks are lower than they should be, and you ended up as an Arts student at the University of Waterloo. If you feel shame, go to paragraph 5. If you decide to transfer to the Math Faculty, go to paragraph 10. (Frostywillow)

There are two distinct “you” characters addressed in the piece: one is Timmy, the protagonist of the story, and the other is the actual reader, addressed by the imperative commands of “go to paragraph 10” (Frostywillow). In a choose-your-own-adventure story, the reader trades identity as the narratee for control over the protagonist’s actions.

Guidebooks often employ the same technique of giving the reader options. In the following excerpt from a survival guide, the authors explain “How to Escape from the Trunk of a Car”:

Many new cars have a trunk release lever on the floor below the driver’s seat. These cars should have a cable that runs from the release lever to the trunk. Look for the cable beneath carpeting or upholstery, or behind a panel of sheet metal. If

you locate the cable, pull on it to release the trunk latch. (If not, continue to step 3.) (Piven 84)

Although guidebooks give the reader choices, however, the text fails to address two distinct “you” personas. The text addresses a reader in the situation or who could hypothetically come to be in the situation. Guidebook and self-help book “yous” never observe their surroundings or reflect on their experiences as fictional characters do. If the above quote were a fiction story, the “you” character might panic at the thought of being locked in a trunk.

The following story is written in the hypothetical form. “Clean House” is the story of “You,” a compulsive hoarder and retiree who freelances as an artist for medical textbooks. You lives alone in Milwaukee when the neighbors threaten to call the city and complain about the state of You’s house. Maggie, a local honors student, tries to help You clean out the house, but after You returns from a trip to the store, the house has burned down.

My stylistic inspiration came from Lorrie Moore’s “How to Become a Writer.” I’d had no experience with hypothetical, second-person, fiction prior to beginning this thesis, and so I tried to mimic her matter-of-fact tone, although since I also have no experience writing comedy, I did not try to imitate her ability to create comical situations. Consider the following comparison between “How to become a Writer” and “Clean House” (included in this thesis):

Decide that perhaps you should stick to comedies. Start dating someone who is funny, someone who has what in high school you called a “really great sense of humor” and what your creative writing class calls “Self-contempt giving rise to comic form.” Write down all of his jokes, but don’t tell him you are doing this. Make up anagrams of his old girlfriend’s name and name all of your socially handicapped characters with them” (Moore 1)

Move the shoeboxes of receipts off of the stove to make room for the teapot.

Double-check to make sure nothing is touching the burner before turning on the heat. The pot already has water, so you don't have to move the dirty dishes away from the faucet; while waiting for the water to boil, open the second trash bag of the morning. (Page 49 of this thesis)

Both use the imperative form throughout the entire piece by directing the protagonist's actions throughout the story. I wanted the voice to sound as bossy and self-loathing as possible, since I wanted this hoarder's embarrassment and shame to reflect in the narrative. The first few drafts of this piece were written in the standard form of the second-person, but since the main character is a compulsive hoarder, the second-person imperative voice fit the situation better.

The hypothetical form amplifies the hoarding disorder of the main character. By employing the hypothetical form of the second person, the narrator issues a steady stream of commands at the protagonist in the same way that the constant "buzz" (46) of the disease orders the protagonist to collect items. Since the reader experiences the same direct address from the narrator as the protagonist, the reader is also bombarded with commands and orders. The reader, therefore, experiences this "buzz" in the same way as the protagonist does.

The hypothetical form requires that the narrator and the narratee be separate entities, and by fulfilling this requirement, the commands were amplified further. The distinction between the narrator who gives commands and describes actions and the narratee who listens to them is clear. Lines like "So be sure to feel a dash of shame mixed in with whatever other emotions come from a clean kitchen" (page 49) implies separate identities, since this is not a usual type of internal dialogue. Internal dialogue often takes the form of pep talks ("Your speech will be perfect," I say

to myself) and explanations for awkward incidents (“You know how, when you play a practical joke and someone gets hurt, you end up losing all your money in a lawsuit? Well, I’m broke...”). People do not usually issue themselves commands about feelings, as in the quote above. A narrator commanding a protagonist to “[f]eel a sensation” (page 48) or emotion implies a separation of narrator and narratee. The narrator, then, commands the protagonist not only in the physical actions, but also in emotional ones. Likewise, the character’s mental and physical health are both dominated by the hoarding that controls his or her life.

This is also a gender-neutral piece (“You” is neither male nor female): I wanted to experiment with gender neutrality in the second person, and since this piece is already so commanding in its use of the imperative, I felt that the added command of a gender and a name might detract from the piece and make the reader defensive. By maintaining gender neutrality, I hoped to make it easier for any reader to step into “You’s” identity.

“Clean House,” is a less extreme form of the hypothetical than Lorrie Moore’s work. I employ the imperative command less often than Moore; the sentences of her stories are either imperative commands or written in the future-tense. My story has more in common with the choice story since the story has a mixture of imperative and indicative sentences and not many sentences in the future tense. The story still qualifies as the hypothetical form due to the many imperative sentences that the narrator directs towards the protagonist.

Clean House: A Creative Piece

After Mrs. Peterson threatened to call the city to complain about your house, Mrs. Peterson's niece, Maggie, stepped in and convinced everyone to just give you a little time. She wants to go to a nice college, and that nice college wants to hear about her work in the community. So you've become her project. Two garbage bags full of your things every day for the past eight months, and now your basement is clean. You can see the floor and the island counter in the kitchen.

Maggie will come by the house at three o'clock to collect the garbage and to drive you to the Piggly Wiggly. You've promised her two bags a day, which she helps carry out to the curb on Mondays and Wednesdays after school lets out, and on Saturday mornings before she goes to her debate competitions.

Move the shoeboxes of receipts off of the stove to make room for the teapot. Double-check to make sure nothing is touching the burner before turning on the heat. The pot already has water, so you don't have to move the dirty dishes away from the faucet; while waiting for the water to boil, open the second trash bag of the morning.

Open trash bags look like colossal leeches with gaping mouths, but they get a little less imposing every time another one fills up. When you first started filling up bags, Maggie held up each thing and said, "Do you want this or your house?" And you sighed, you cried and fought. The need for your possessions buzzes in the back of your brain. You've always been unorganized, cluttered, a pack-rat. But the buzz got louder when you retired, and after ten years of living without the need to organize—no work, no brother to nag you now that he moved to Denver, no friends over to visit—you can't walk through the house without first clearing a path.

Pick up a yellow cat collar with rhinestones and a heart-shaped tag that says, "Kitty."

Kitty has been dead for three years, but it's nice to have a reminder of him around the house—it might come in handy if you ever get another cat, even though the Humane Society will never believe that your house is fit for another living thing—and pieces of his yellow-orange fur still cling to the collar. Set it on the window sill, the place for the “maybe throw away” pile.

A crumpled napkin sits on the front burner of the stove: pick it up and unfold it. A drawing of a baby penguin looks up from its center: a game you used to play at lunch with your coworkers before the food came. The game would start when you drew something cute and fuzzy—a duckling or a kitten—and then passed the napkin around the table. Then each person at the table would draw a dangerous creature springing, open-mouthed, at the frightened baby animal. You drew the snake; your coworkers drew the lion, the cave-man, and the shark. Throw the napkin into the trash bag, but not before remembering your friends from work and the lunches. This is why cleaning takes you so long: it's hard to throw away anything without first giving it a memorial service.

Carefully unwedge a toaster from underneath a bag of clothes. Apart from the dust, it still looks new. Push it under your arm and walk to the front door. Pick up a box, step, find a place for the box, put it down; pick up a bag, step, put it where the box left an empty space. Set the toaster in the “donate” box just as the teapot starts to whistle, and then dig back to the kitchen. You can put things in the “donate” box without remembering, because the donated items have never left the house.

Pour the tea. The water in the mug looks a little brown, but the teapot is old and probably a little rusted. Dip the tea bag and mix in some sugar while the water is still hot enough to dissolve it. Then look back at the trash bag: the only thing inside is a tiny, crumpled drawing of a frightened penguin. Take a deep breath. Try to hear Maggie's voice saying, “If you get evicted,

you'll have to throw all this stuff away anyway, because there's no way a moving van is going to hold all of these magazines," and "Do you want your old receipts or your house?"

Take a sip of tea and stick your tongue out of your mouth, scraping the dorsum against your teeth. It has a strange, numbing flavor—like the aftertaste of black licorice. Take the lid off of the teapot to see just how rusted it is. But it's not rusted at all. A long brown cockroach is floating in the water. Feel a sensation like little cockroach legs crawling up your spine and throat. Try not to throw up, because then you'd have to move the dishes out of the sink, and you really don't know what's crawling in there. Try not to cry, because then you'll swallow and maybe throw up.

Dump the water in the sink and add the teapot and the cockroach to the garbage bag. When you almost, unconsciously, take another sip of tea, throw the mug away too. In fifteen minutes, you've managed to throw away a teapot, a cockroach, a napkin, and a mug. That numbing taste hits your throat as you look into the bag. Take a break to brush your teeth. Then come back and trash everything you can before Maggie arrives.

#

When Maggie shows up, have the fourteen garbage bags waiting on the front porch: the two from Sunday and the twelve from cleaning the kitchen. You've nearly uncluttered the remaining counter, but even five hours isn't enough to make it spotless—leave a few magazines and the shoeboxes on the counter until you can find a better place for them. You're not a superhero.

"Oh my God!" Maggie says. She says "God" like it rhymes with "sad." She's from farther north than Milwaukee, although you've never asked where. "What got into you? We're way ahead of schedule now!"

Smile, but look down at the floor and feel heat crawl into your cheeks and ears. Cleaning a kitchen is not something for which an eighteen-year-old girl should congratulate you. The child is supposed to be the messy one—not you, the adult. So be sure to feel a dash of shame mixed in with whatever other emotions come from a clean kitchen.

“Why don’t you show me what you’ve been working on for the book?” Maggie asks, and she follows you around back to the storm cellar doors. The storm cellar doors offered an easy way to get the boxes of receipts and magazines and old clothes out onto the lawn without disturbing your life too much. Besides, the basement was the messiest part of the house, and Maggie wanted to take on the hardest tasks first. Now the basement is beautiful: Maggie covered the floor with a rug that used to be rolled up in a corner, and you hid the water damage under two worktables. Lead Maggie to the table closest to the door and show her the picture of the spine you’ve just finished drawing. She likes looking at the work you do for the medical textbooks. She wants to be a doctor someday, and so she studies the photographs the doctor sends you and then looks at the drawings too. Send her a copy of the book when it comes out: it’s the least you can do, after all the time she’s put into you.

When she sets down the photographs of the spinal dissection, show her your latest creative piece. You like pointillism, and you’re almost finished with the picture of a deer with an arched back and long, pointy legs. Your days fall into this pattern: technical drawing before 9:00, creative drawing between 9:00 and 10:00, cleaning until Maggie comes over or until dinner, and then reading old magazines and newspapers until bedtime. Maggie smiles at the deer. “How can you organize all of these little dots, but not your living room?”

Her words burrow into your ears. Look down at the ground. “I don’t...” but your words trail off into empty air. Why *can't* you organize your living room?

Maggie covers her mouth with her hands and looks at the ground for a moment before looking back up at you. “I am so sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant—” She pauses for a moment and takes a deep breath. That’s probably how she looks in one of her debate tournament when she forgets what she’s supposed to say. She recovers: “Let’s go celebrate with some ice cream. I am so proud of your kitchen.”

Take four trips down to the end of the driveway with a garbage bag in each hand. Maggie squirts hand sanitizer into your palm, and then takes some for herself before climbing into her yellow jeep. Ride shotgun and don’t complain: you don’t drive well anyway.

“So where do you want to go? Did you throw away food?”

Nod. The refrigerator is officially out of expired food. Say, “I got rid of everything that expires before July. And I threw away a jar of dill pickles I wasn’t going to eat.”

“Fantastic. Then we’ll go to the Piggly Wiggly for sure to get some groceries. We’ll see if they have cleaning supplies, and I’ll help you scrub the kitchen on—” she pauses and pulls some air through her teeth,”— on Tuesday, tomorrow. Tomorrow after school. I’ve got a test on Thursday, so I won’t make it on Wednesday; is that okay?”

“Sounds good, Maggie.” You should tell her that she can skip a day if she needs to: you can abide by the honor system for one day. But you keep your mouth shut, because you like her to come over and talk to you, even if she’s only doing it so that she can get into that nice college.

“So here’s the important question.” She sits up straight and glances at you from the driver’s seat. “What kind of ice cream do you want? We’ll stop by Sheppard’s on the way home. Chocolate like always?”

The cockroach hovering in the teapot water jumps into your mind. Clench your teeth. “How about vanilla?”

#

In the Piggly Wiggly, push the cart through the aisles. Maggie talks about the boy she likes in her chemistry class. He's got a crooked nose, but he always sets the curves on the tests, unless she does. You usually end up with a full cart, even if you just need milk or eggs or a bottle of juice, but that buzz in the back of your brain—the one that tells you that you need these things, that you need to save up in case Maggie stops driving you to the store, that some curtains on the kitchen window would remind you of the cabin you used to own, that dinner rolls would make your crammed house feel more homey—that buzz dims just a little. You can push it to the side and actually listen to Maggie's boy troubles.

The cockroach just keeps floating to the surface. Look at the raisin muffins, the apple juice, the blueberry yogurt, the French bread: you buy them every time you come to the store, but now you look at them, and you see that cockroach.

Oh, you've seen bugs before. Your house is full of dust and old food and probably Kitty's puke under all of those boxes of receipts and bills and cards and magazines. You've seen bugs, but this one is different—not least because you drank its juices.

“Why aren't you getting anything?” Maggie's voice is casual, but she's looking at you without turning her head and her eyebrows are high on her head. She usually has to follow behind you, pulling things out of the cart and putting them back on the shelves.

Shrug: act as casual as Maggie. “I don't feel like it.”

“Well good, but you need some food.” She grabs a few game hens and some pre-measured spice packets and drops them in the cart. “We'll just get you hens for dinners and some lunch meats for sandwiches. If you need anything else, just call me. We can run to the store again if you promise to shop like this. These trips usually take for-ev-er.”

Feel that tingly, guilty feeling between your shoulders and your throat for taking up so much of this girl's time: she has friends her own age, you know. She doesn't actually want to hang out with a senior citizen. Maggie smiles at you. "Cheer up—we're going to get ice cream! And I'm getting some cheese curds; do you want some?"

Nod and grab a box of hot chocolate because it would be good to have some when the weather turns cold again. Maggie puts it back on the shelf before you leave the aisle.

At the checkout, you only have twelve items. Pay, and then Maggie leads you back to the car.

"You're doing really well," she says as she pulls into the drive-through. "Keep it up like this, and we'll have your house finished by the end of the year."

Smile. The thought of a clean house is a good one. Dig in your wallet and hand Maggie a ten-dollar bill while she shouts the order into the microphone. She pretends not to notice, like you're giving her a pen or a pad of paper while she's on the phone. "Yeah, hi. Can I get two, small, vanilla, ice-cream cones and two sides of deep-fried cheese curds?"

While you wait for the food, give Maggie a real smile. "Thanks for helping me clean my house, sweetie."

Maggie gives you a serious nod. When the order passes through the pick-up window, she hands you the ice cream. "Congratulations. You're doing it."

#

The car turns onto your street, and your house is gone. At first, wonder if Maggie might have taken the wrong turn without your noticing. You might be in a different section of town altogether. Contract the frontalis muscle above your eyebrows and then rub it out with the tips of your fingers. Say: "Maggie, where's my house?" Turn your head away from the lot that should

be yours and over toward the driver: she's got a tight face with a clenched jaw and a thin mouth, and she's locked her arms into a straight line from her shoulders to the steering wheel. Look back at the street and then notice the flashing lights hovering like flies around the carcass of your house: a police car, an ambulance, a fire truck, a van from the Red Cross. How did you miss the smoke and the ashes piling billowing from the lot? You were eating and not paying attention to the surroundings, but Maggie wasn't talking.

Maggie drives up to a police officer. He's standing next to the yellow line of caution tape separating you from your home. The closer you get, the number you feel, and by the time Maggie rolls down her window to talk to the man, you can only feel your rib cage—and your heart pecking at the bars.

“What can I do for you, Miss?”

Maggie looks at you, but your mouth is hanging open as you take in the sight. Everything is gone. The fireplace and chimney stand alone above the blackened ruin of your house. Only a few beams, burned, and the skeletons of the stove and the refrigerator remain, but the art magazines, the books, the pictures, the bills, the receipts, the clothes, the furniture, the pictures... they're all gone. The air is thick with smoke and little ashy flakes of your life. When you don't answer, Maggie looks back at the policeman. “Um, this is, um, this house...”

“Is this your house? Did anyone else live here?”

“It's just me.” Nod, and the officer will lift up the caution tape. Fumble with the Jeep door, and when you stand up, goose bumps climb like ants over your legs and all the way up to your cheeks and scalp. You can't feel anything. Stumble once, then twice, before falling onto the ground and letting the asphalt bite your palm and kneecap through the deadened limbs. The firemen spray the water onto the ashes, and if any of your art survived in the basement, the water

just killed it. The pressure in your nose and cheeks means tears will come soon. Get up, walk a few steps, and then sit on the grass to cry. Feel how small and weak your lungs are when you try and breathe in the truth: everything is gone. The little dots of ashes in the air look like a pointillist picture, and when you think of the deer you drew, you can hear Maggie say, “Why can’t you organize your living room?”

Feel a hand on your shoulder and look up at Maggie. She’s crying with her jaw clenched. Wonder if she’s crying for you or for the failure of her community service project. “Come on,” she says. “Let’s go.”

“Where?” Look back at your house.

“Do you have any family?”

You do, but no one lives near your little suburb outside of Milwaukee. Your siblings long ago moved out west. Your favorite brother moved to Denver. Besides, no one will take in a hoarder. Tell her, “Not in Wisconsin.” You’ll have to re-do the drawing of the spine.

“Do you have anyone you want to stay with for a few days?”

Your brain lands on Mrs. Peterson, but she wants to call the city on you. You can’t think of anyone else. Shake your head, but don’t look away from the ashes that are making lazy loops in the air over your house. Mrs. Peterson probably didn’t even call the emergency line: she always said what your house needed was a match and some gasoline.

The police ask you questions, but you answer numbly and without really even hearing them. They ask about all of the papers and boxes; they tell you that the fire was an accident; they say that the fire was fast. The fire started, the fire department arrived ten minutes later, and the house was gone ten minutes after that. Flames eat up paper, the police tell you. Think about the papers and receipts and magazines and old drawings you have—had—lying around the house.

A man from the Red Cross listens with you and tells you that he'll help you find a new place to live. When the police finish taking your statement and telling you about the fire, you are still sitting on the grass.

"Come on." Maggie helps you stand.

"Where?"

"To my house. Just until you figure out what to do. We've got a spare room."

Sit in the passenger seat and just focus on breathing. When Maggie talks, ignore her. When she clears her throat to get your attention, pretend not to notice. When she stops talking, try not to think of your chimney, standing all alone and blackened on the lot. Finally put your chin in your hands and say, "What about my things?"

"You'll get through this." She pulls into her driveway.

Say, "Yes." But doubt it.

#

You walk down the cement stairs that are blackened with ink made of ashes and hose water. The basement was flooded, caved in, but three days after the fire, the clean-up crew has cleared a lot of the debris. So much that you can walk into the basement and look for things that you might want to keep. Maggie said it's a good idea for you to stay away from the house while the crew is working. She doesn't say that you should stay away because you'll want to save every little scrap of your old life. She doesn't have to.

Soaked and stained papers cover the floor; crushed remains of the two tables cover the rug. The basement has no roof—it's not really a basement anymore at all. It's just a hole in the ground where your house used to be. The washer and dryer against the far wall seem okay, though, if the water from the fire hoses didn't ruin them.

Step carefully over the paper mache floor, trying not to crush the remains under your feet, and open the dryer. Pull a shirt into the air, fold it, and set it on top of the dryer. Fold the rest of the laundry. You won't be able to break old habits, especially when old habits are all you have left. When you get to the socks and washcloths and underwear, you pull them all out together. Something metal hits the bottom of the dryer. Set down the socks and pick up the ring of two keys and a key chain.

The keys are old—they belong to a cabin you no longer own up by the Dells. Pick them up and feel the weight in your hands. The soft clinking and the weight of the keys transports you back to the door.

You and Jessie spent summers at the cabin. Pelican Lake was unknown, then, only surrounded by three or four cabins. The two of you watched the loons when the sun set and ran into the house when the mosquitoes rose up like mist from the lake. During stormy days, you'd sit with Jessie in the big chair by the window and watch the waves and the wind. The cabin was tiny; your brother called it "the shack on the swamp," and borrowed it in October for duck-hunting season. Every August, you and Jessie spent the better part of two days cleaning up duck feathers and dust. Then you'd collapse onto the old bed together and pull the curtains closed on the bay window. The rest of the summer you'd spend on the end of the pier reading books and kissing and talking.

Remind yourself that there was no cheating—no fatal car accident—that tore you and Jessie apart.

The kissing blossomed into marriage; the talking blew up into divorce.

You sold the cabin to your brother, but you kept the spare keys in case you ever returned. Put the keys into your tote bag, and then sit down on the warped wood of your drawing board.

The basement without a roof makes you feel dizzy, as if you'll fall into the sky. Take a few deep breaths, and when you overcome nausea, stand up and look for other things you might need. Slide the clothes from the dryer into your bag. Check the washer, but it's empty. Open drawers and look under rubble. Collect a button, a broken frame, a water bottle, and wrinkled piece of silver matting. You find a plastic bag full of pens that weren't damaged by the fire or water, and you suddenly have the urge—the need—to draw. Push it aside since you have no paper, even though the need presses down against your chest and throat. For a moment, you can almost remember the feel of Jessie's fingers squeezing your hand, silently telling you that you'll get through this. But Jessie hasn't been there for you in a long time.

#

Two weeks later, you walk into the new apartment and stare at its blankness. The walls, the floors, the counter tops, the grout—everything is white. Even the light is white. Try to take Maggie's advice: "Think of it as a blessing in disguise. Now you can start over."

Bring your possessions into the living room: two suitcases full of new clothes and toiletries, two suitcases full of your life salvaged from the fire, a pillow, a blanket, new sheets that fit the bed you bought, the clothes you were wearing when the fire started, the cleaning supplies you picked up at the grocery store that you never used. When you open the suitcases full of salvaged goods, little black specks of dust fly out and land on the walls and floors. They add a thin layer of dust to the perfect new apartment. Maggie tried to get you to throw away the things that she didn't think you should keep—like the doorknobs and the half-burned toothbrush that rolls onto the new floor—but you couldn't part with the last few reminders of your life.

Wait for the delivery men to bring the bed and the couch: they'll arrive sometime between noon and midnight. In the meantime, unpack. Try to be neat, like you were when

Maggie was here. Put things in a place so that everything has a home: the charred remains of the house go in the hallway closet, the clothes hang in the bedroom closet, the pens and pencils go in a drawer in the kitchen because you don't have a table or a desk yet. Grab the soap and a wet washcloth and walk over to the spot where you opened the sooty suitcase; stare at the floor and the specks of ashes.

Stare at the little black dots that stick to the wall like flies. But don't move.

The Autotelic Form

You are reading Carolyn LaBuda's thesis

In the autotelic form of the second person, the narrator speaks in a “direct address to a ‘you’ that is at times the actual reader of the text and whose story is juxtaposed to and can merge with the characters of fiction” (Richardson 30). This ambiguous “you” makes the autotelic the rarest form of second-person fiction: it is difficult to keep the protagonist and the reader performing similar actions, since the reader is usually limited to sitting and reading. A reader cannot save a damsel from distress or battle aliens or break out of prison: a reader can only sit and read. Clive Barker achieves the autotelic form in his book Mr. B. Gone, the story of a demon trapped in a book. The demon oscillates between a first-person account of his deeds and a second-person account in which he urges the reader to destroy the book before the reader reaches the last page. Consider the opening lines of the book:

Burn This Book. Go on. Quickly, while there's still time. Burn it. Don't look at another word. Did you hear me? Not. One. More. Word. Why are you waiting? It's not that difficult. Just stop reading and burn the book. It's for your own good, believe me.... Every syllable that you let your eyes wander over gets you into more and more trouble. And when I say trouble, I mean things so terrifying your sanity won't hold once you see them, feel them. You'll go mad. Become a living blank, all that you ever were wiped away, because you wouldn't do one simple thing. Burn this book. (Barker 1)

This passage and passages like it in the story directly address the actual reader of the book: the reader's only action is reading, while the fictional character (the demon) interacts

with readers by acknowledging their presence with warnings and threats and recounting the story of his life to the reader. Barker's text uses the imperative, the future tense, and an obvious distinction between narrator and narrate, just like the hypothetical form does. However, since all of his commands and pleas and scenarios apply directly to the actual reader of the text, his work is considered autotelic.

Another example of an autotelic narrative is *If on a winter's night a traveler*, which begins, "You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel *If on a winter's night a traveler*" (Calvino 1). This and other autotelic accounts tend to be restricted to short bursts of narrative, rather than sustained novels. Some chapters address the reader directly, as in this line, while other chapters are excerpts of manuscripts that the "you" character reads (which, consequently, the actual reader *also* reads). The lines which describe the actions of the actual reader might originally be placed in the standard category of second person. For instance, the line, "Nobody ever thought of reading on horseback; and yet now, the idea of sitting in the saddle, the book propped against the horse's mane, or maybe tied to the horse's ears with a special harness, seems attractive to you" (1). The reader might not want to read on horseback; perhaps the actual reader of the text has equinophobia or prefers chairs. The autotelic form, however, plays with the distinction between the "you" character and the actual reader. This "you" that enjoys horses is still reading just like the actual reader is, and so at least part of the actual reader's identity still exists within the "you" character. Since so much of the book, like the first line, applies to *every* reader of the novel, the story is a stunning example of the autotelic form.

Self-help books often try to be autotelic accounts; details about the “you” character are vague enough to apply to most readers of the book. This genre is able to accomplish this by targeting specific audiences with their titles: Women Who Worry Too Much targets a reader who is an anxious woman and makes guesses and suggestions about this specific reader’s life. Fictional forms of self-help books, like Lorrie Moore’s Self-Help, often become hypothetical texts rather than remaining autotelic accounts. This is because actual self-help books have the purpose of uncovering the reader’s story; fiction books try to tell a new story to the reader.

The following story is an autotelic account. “पृथ्वी भावना” (pronounced Miṭṭī Bhāvanā) is the story of a spirit escaping into the world above. The title is the Hindi for “Earth Spirit.” The spirit travels up through the body of a reader to explore and live, and since the reader set him free, he travels elsewhere before causing any mischief.

While this piece was not necessarily the hardest creative piece to write, it was certainly the hardest piece to imagine. I was very concerned that I would accidentally plagiarize the ideas of Clive Barker or Italo Calvino, since my experience with the autotelic form is so limited (in part, because it rarely occurs in literature). Because of my fear of stealing ideas, this piece is the most experimental story included in this thesis. The experimental, nontraditional way in which “Mitti Bahavana” is presented helped me to maintain my independence from other stories in this form.

The punctuation of the prose splits the thoughts into a rhythmic “two-syllable then eight-syllable” pattern. This piece has the rhythm of poetry, but the form of a prose fiction piece. Since the autotelic form is such a radical way of writing, I thought that this would be a radical way to approach it. Punctuation rules are mostly discarded in the aim of controlling the

reader's pace and breathing. In a form that is so focused on reader interaction and response with the text, it seems only natural that even the syntax of the piece would focus wholeheartedly on reader response.

The inspiration and influence for this story came from taking a yoga class this semester. At the end of class, the instructor addresses the class on how to breathe and then recites a passage of poetry. I noticed that the breathing instruction was a verbal example of a naturally occurring autotelic account, and I wanted a story to capture the feeling of peace and emptiness of focusing on breathing. So I wrote a piece that focused on the reader's body and breathing rather than a fantastic adventure. Cadence in this piece is my prime focus: since the yoga instructor recites one line of poetry per breath, I wanted to have the rhythm of breathing into this piece. Therefore, the prose piece can be split up into a rhythmic pattern at each punctuation mark:

Breathe in.

Sit and try to divide your weight.

Breathe out.

Separate it over your halves—

your spine—

so that you balance evenly. (Page 66 of this thesis)

पृथ्वी भावना: A Creative Piece

Breathe in. Sit and try to divide your weight. Breathe out. Separate it over your halves—your spine—so that you balance evenly.

Exhale.

Rest your hands palm up on your shins, or thighs; these words sitting on top of them.

Rhythm. Feel the rhythm of your breathing.

Inhale.

Connect to the earth beneath you. Slow down. Let your eyes slip over the words, inky, black pressing up against the white, in you, as soul presses against body. Breathe in. Pull yourself straight and stretch your spine.

Breathe out.

Think of me as a seed planted—buried—just beneath the hills of your hips: sit bones. And imagine my roots running, running, down down down as straight as daggers.

Once free, I cause the earth to move and writhe. I can—if I feel like being helpful--*whisper* words to make the earth soak up rain; of course, I can tell it to dry and crack. Spirit, but both spiteful and kindhearted. And you: just read and you will set me free.

I am.

Into earth I am endless. Upwards, I am a thin and wispy thing, a vine (though no thicker than smoke or breath). Inhale. Imagine me growing into—[your spine]—wrapping around the bones and disks. I grow, faster faster to your rib cage, wrapping, draping thin leaves over your lungs you feel—nothing upsetting just a slight (almost) itchy prickling that's not quite there.

Slow down.

Let the breath fill your lungs and press, softly, against the thickening leaves there. That's me. Spirit spiral around your neck. Exhale. Climbing crawling slipping sliding, over [throat, jaw, teeth, tongue, lips, nose, cheeks, face] until, I crumble and fall through your eyes. Slowly. . . I am growing like a rock would.

Inhale.

Slowly while you breathe and read and, exhale. As I wrap around your brain you jyou must! let thoughts drift away like ripples. Read on. Only words and vine in your mind.

Deep breath.

Letters stumble under your eyes; I start to grow though the skull top, all out—[air and thoughts and breath and worries] [anxieties and straying thoughts]

and me.

Let me out of the earth as I—inhale—take freedom from my earthy home. Breathe out. And for your reward for your aid, I will, run far from you before I make *mischief*.

Put down the book but don't forget—to breathe.

Reflection and Conclusion

Your journey comes to an end

The scope of this thesis mainly focuses on the second person as it is used in fictional short stories, but the second-person narrative has found a home in nonfiction self-help books, guides, manuals, and in many works of literary nonfiction. However, second-person point of view is slowly expanding its ground in the realm of fiction. As technology becomes more and more a part of the reading experience, I expect that second-person narratives will grow more prominent. Reader-interaction with online texts is already growing: hypertexts allow readers to “click here” and pause to look up concepts or words outside of narratives, and so the second-person narratives of the future may exploit the familiarity of reader interaction with e-texts. Also, the rare, daunting quality of the second-person diminishes every time authors like Clive Barker and Chuck Palahniuk integrate the second-person voice into their stories. The more that the second person appears in fiction pieces, the more acceptable it becomes.

And while the form is rare in fiction now, its rarity can actually benefit writers. The second-person also allows new writers to stand out: writers who “[submit] a second-person novel or story [have] the advantage of offering something different—enough to catch an editor’s or agent’s eye” (Plotnik 15). In a time where publishing companies receive mountains of hopeful manuscripts, the distinctiveness can be a huge advantage to the second-person narrative.

The second-person narrative has a unique relationship with the reader of the text. The second-person text makes the reader an integral part of the story. As in the autotelic texts, the readers identity mingles and merges with the “you” character’s identity and the reader interacts explicitly with the fictional world of the story. If done incorrectly, the second person can push readers away with its awkwardness (brought on by its rarity) and bossy, imperative tone. If

written correctly, however, the distance between the protagonist and the reader can become almost non-existent. In addition to being distinctive, the form has already flourished in nonfiction forums, proving that the second-person narrative is not doomed to fail.

As the Amazon reader posts, “there is a reason why the form never caught on” (“PamPerdue”), and I believe now that that reason is a lack of understanding. Where once a narrator could hide behind the plot or the characters, the study of different narrative modes forces the reader to question the very existence of the story, the reader must now pay attention to the narrator, narratee, and protagonist and gain an understanding of the relationship between the three entities. Understanding the point of view of a story helps to shed light on a text’s characters, the narrator’s motivation for telling the story, and the meaning of the text. For instance, one of the reasons I think some readers find the second person irritating because they do not understand that the narrator is not addressing them directly in a standard, second-person text. In “Until Gwen,” Dennis Lehane is not addressing the actual reader of the story when he writes, “you look out the window, see a guy in a chicken suit carrying a can of gas in the breakdown lane” (Lehane 20). Readers that do not understand that the protagonist and the reader are not always the same entity in the second person may react defensively to reading a narrator who seemingly describes their actions even though they have never performed them. I know I did when I first began this project.

The study of second-person narratives also helps to further the understanding of writing, as well as reading. The in-depth study of narrative mode forces the author to define the narrator, the narratee, and the protagonist in her own writing. Creating and defining characters to fit these roles helps to strengthen and unify the text, and also allows the author to create deeper meaning and reason behind the story. Take for instance, my story “Remember.” Originally, I wrote this

story in the third-person, past-tense (ex.: He played in the garden); however, when I came to understand more about narrative modes, I rewrote it in the second-person, past-tense. This change allowed me to add the frame story of the granddaughter and to create the circular text by giving the protagonist, Teddy, the same disease that his grandfather had. Without the study of narrative mode, I would not have been able to broaden the scope of my work in this way.

Studying only the second person has also increased my curiosity about the other narrative modes. I would like to study, the first- and third-person modes so that I may choose the mode best for my writing, and to be able to assess the works I read with greater understanding. Ultimately, understanding the narrative helps the reader to enjoy reading and the writer to create better works.

Knowing the distinct types of the second-person narrative helps the writer create more effective stories. The categories are not exclusive of each other. There is no law preventing authors from merging styles and forms and ignoring the work of narratologists. For example, the story, “How the World Is” (beginning on page 29 of this thesis), contained imperative commands throughout the piece in an earlier draft. Because of the mixture of imperative commands and more traditional storytelling, “How the World is” became an awkward hybrid of the hypothetical and standard forms. However, once I had researched the different types of the second person, I changed the piece into a standard-form text. This made the piece more cohesive, unifying the style and the roles of narrator, narratee-protagonist, and the reader. Knowing the difference between types of second-person narrative forms help to create stories that draw the reader in. Conforming to Richardson’s rules of the standard, hypothetical, and autotelic texts helps to make the writing in the piece consistent.

The second-person narrative is only awkward until you get used to it. After focusing my

writing on nothing else for the past six-months, I find that the second-person has become my default mode of reading and writing. The study of the second-person narrative does not only shed light on this rare form of fiction, but also illuminates the broader study of narrative mode.

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