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Fragmented Worlds, Fractured Families - Narrative Levels in Graphic Memoir

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**FRAGMENTED WORLDS, FRACTURED FAMILIES – NARRATIVE LEVELS IN
GRAPHIC MEMOIR**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Hank Essman

May 2021

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GRAPHIC MEMOIR**

English

Missouri State University, May 2021

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ABSTRACT

This collection of creative writing explores the dynamics of parent-child relationships, as well as the way time can cause these roles to shift and reverse, bringing into question who has the right to tell another's story. The individual pieces are both in the mediums of prose and graphic narrative, often focused on themes of family and trying to reconcile fractured perspectives. These works are introduced through an essay demonstrating how graphic narratives are uniquely situated to show narrative levels, and how narrative levels are key to showing the shifts in part-child relationships and the way perspectives can differ while still feeding off one another.

KEYWORDS: narratology, narrative levels, characterization, memory, fiction, graphic narrative, graphic memoir, fictional worlds, one-person worlds

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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INTRODUCTION

Comics have been a fascination of mine all my life. Much of my interest came from how the pages felt suspended in time. The self-guided pace of reading combined with the visual element found in films or television meant that comics presented to me a collection of still moments which lasted as long as I cared to look at them. My childhood was full of visits to the library, where I'd often try to borrow whichever comics I hadn't yet read. This led to me reading a wide variety of genres at a young age, from more traditional superhero fare like the Lee/Ditko *Spider-man*, to the mundane stories of Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*. This interest did not go unnoticed by my comics-loving aunt, who sent me copies of both Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. As I grew older, I began to realize that comics were something that could be studied in the classroom. I chose to attend the undergraduate college Macalester specifically, in part, because of a comics class I sat in on while visiting. Unfortunately, that class was removed from the docket the year I started. Despite that setback, I became an active part of the comic club, and became co-president in my second year, along with co-hosting the club's radio show every week. I would continue to hold both titles until I graduated. It was in graduate school at Missouri State University that gave me the opportunity to pursue my interest in more serious study of graphic narratives. Graphic Narrative II was a class that gave me the opportunity to both discuss theory of comic storytelling and try my hand at making comics myself. It was both gratifying and difficult, and gave me a new appreciation for the amount of effort that goes into making the art of even more simply drawn comics.

In this introduction, I delve into my knowledge of narrative theory as it informs my creative works. For example, I describe the one person world theory as laid out by Lubomír

Doležel in his book *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, and relate it to my own approaches to writing, using Jack London's short story "To Build a Fire" and my own story "Fatigue, and Loss of Appetite." Then I discuss the literary theory of narrative levels as laid out in Wolf Schmid's *Narratology: an Introduction*, and how it informs my approach to both point of view and structure in prose and graphic narrative storytelling. Using the graphic memoirs *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman and *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant* by Roz Chast, as well as the scholarly paper "No Time Like the Present" by Erin McGlothlin, I demonstrate the ways in which graphic narrative is a medium uniquely suited to using narrative levels in order to communicate different points of view. This ability to show different perspectives can be used as a lens through which to examine strained familial relations, the unreliable, fractured nature of memory, and how a child can become their own parent's caregiver late in life.

One-Person Narrative Worlds

In his book *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Lubomir Doležel describes his concept of the narrative world. He writes, "Fictional semantics does not deny that the story is the defining feature of narrative but moves to the foreground the macrostructural conditions of story generation: stories happen, are enacted in certain kinds of possible worlds. The basic concept of narratology is not "story," but 'narrative world,' defined within a typology of possible worlds" (31). To better explain how this world gives way to narrative, Doležel separates the forces within into three main stages. The first is the world of states. It encapsulates the static, unchanging physical properties and relations within the world. Without the other two stages, it stays completely stationary and without incident. The second world introduces nature force,

abbreviated as N-force. N-force creates change in the state of the world through the laws of nature. The third stage establishes the category of person. Dolezel defines the narrative world's understanding of the person as something that "possesses, in addition to physical properties, mental life (mental states, properties, events, acts)" (32). He further elaborates that the narrative world can be separated into either a one-person world or a multi-person world, established by whether or not multiple person entities exist within the world.

An example of a short story that uses the one-person world is Jack London's "To Build a Fire." Though it may not give that impression, as within the story, the husky accompanying the narrator is given a certain amount of focus and interiority. The ending even shifts to the perspective of the dog after the main character's death, making it the last impression the reader has of the story. But within the narrative, London draws a clear line between man and beast:

The dog did not know anything about thermometers. Possibly in its brain there was no sharp consciousness of a condition of very cold such as was in the man's brain. But the brute had its instinct. It experienced a vague but menacing apprehension that subdued it and made it slink along at the man's heels, and that made it question eagerly every unwonted movement of the man as if expecting him to go into camp or to seek shelter somewhere and build a fire. (464)

By questioning the awareness of the dog near the beginning, London both emphasizes the isolation of the main character and the contrast between him and the dog, the disparity upon which the story will be built.

The husky within London's story may have intuitions and feelings, but the omniscient narrator continues to cast doubt on what it can consciously understand, with passages like, "He spoke to the dog, calling it to him; but in his voice was a strange note of fear that frightened the animal, who had never known the man to speak in such way before. Something was the matter,

and its suspicious nature sensed danger,--it knew not what danger but somewhere, somehow, in its brain arose an apprehension of the man” (474). This lack of conscious understanding is what marks the dog as an outsider, as the main character’s moment to moment observations are what form the narrative of the story. The dog, lacking full mental life, cannot be categorized under Dolezel’s definition of the person. It is instead a manifestation of the N-force that aids in enacting change upon the main character. Dolezel describes this sort of interaction as a “quasi-interaction,” which is when the N-force “is metamorphosed into an animate, supernatural partner” (41).

The first impression of the main character the reader is given comes from another outside element - the environment itself. John Gardner’s *The Art of Fiction* describes this approach to characterization: “The writer may use metaphor directly, as when he tells us Paris is like a dapper, slightly foolish fox, or he may work for symbolic association in subtler ways. He may place a character in the weather that metaphorically expresses his nature, so that unwittingly we make a connection between the gloom of Menelaos and the gloom of the weather at his back” (68). London uses weather within his story to subtly highlight the blank, straightforward approach of the main character’s approach to danger. The landscape is described, “The Yukon lay a mile wide and hidden under three feet of ice. On top of this ice were as many feet of snow. It was all pure white, rolling in gentle undulations where the ice-jams of the freeze-up had formed. North and south, as far as his eye could see, it was unbroken white, save for a dark hair-line that curved and twisted from around the spruce- covered island to the south, and that curved and twisted away into the north, where it disappeared behind another spruce-covered island” (London 462). The featureless, unchanging nature of the landscape is emphasized by London, to which the main character reacts with unimpressed indifference. “But all this--the mysterious, far-

reaching hairline trail, the absence of sun from the sky, the tremendous cold, and the strangeness and weirdness of it all--made no impression on the man" (462). The two are reflections of one another, both unchanging, emotionless wastelands. The main contrast is revealed as the story continues, when the underlying N-force of the natural world forces sudden change upon the unsuspecting protagonist, which he is ultimately unable to adapt to.

That unassuming surface is what ultimately spells doom for the man. Dolezel, when discussing how the one-person world manifests within Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River", describes something he calls the minimal mind: "A person who leaves behind 'the need for thinking' can be expected to have a restricted mental life. As we observed, Hemingway centers Nick's mind in two outward-oriented domains, the practical and the sensory, and the accompanying emotions. Even these domains of mental activity are minimalized and generally subdued" (Dolezel 47). The man at the heart of "To Build a Fire" is clearly not an expert at wilderness survival, but there is still a confidence in him that drives his lack of reliance on his practical mind, based upon advice he has been given by experienced natives. London writes, "Fifty degrees below zero stood for a bite of frost that hurt and that must be guarded against by the use of mittens, ear-flaps, warm moccasins, and thick socks. Fifty degrees below zero was to him just precisely fifty degrees below zero. That there should be anything more to it than that was a thought that never entered his head" (463). This is what makes him unafraid, while the dog is nervous. The man, armed against his feelings of cold and discomfort by knowledge, sees only a blank, manageable landscape. The dog, an avatar of N-force, is unable to form conscious perception of abstract ideas like exact temperature, remains wary and cautious, driven by instinct.

Within my own writing, while many stories may not be examples of one-person worlds in whole, they still focus on feelings of isolation, and can often feature scenes exclusively featuring the lead character working through emotions in their head. For example, within the opening of the short story “Apologia,” I focus on the main character, Frank, alone in his room, struggling to finish a writing assignment. The entirety of the conflict during this scene comes from Frank struggling with his impulse to apologize or downplay a recently-finished book he believes turned out poorly. The story that follows involves him becoming famous for his ability to write apologies, and escalates until he finds himself employed writing apology notices for a company known for faulty construction. The climax of the piece is an earthquake striking a building constructed by his employer, bringing it down on top of him. His final, screamed apology is aimed at himself. This finale’s driving conflict comes from Frank’s choices clashing against the N-force, which is somewhat personified as a source of ironic punishment. As the story began with Frank alone, so too does it end. “Apologia” is ultimately a story of one man being undone by his own choices, with the N-force carrying out the punishment.

Narrative Levels

It was *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* that first sparked my interest in narrative levels, even though I didn’t yet have the term for it. The book is split into two volumes, with the first titled *Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History* and the second *Maus II: A Survivor’s Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*. It is a memoir about the author, Art Spiegelman, interviewing his Holocaust survivor father about the harrowing historical event. The book incorporates themes of father-son relationships, the effect of trauma on memory, the ethics of writing the stories of others, and the generational effects of the Holocaust. Both *Maus* volumes manages to jump

seamlessly between the framing device of Spiegelman's interviews with his father, Vladek, to the stories told by Vladek about his own experiences, to the metaleptic or "super-present" where Spiegelman can express his anxieties in creating the book. It's a work that draws attention to its constructed nature, making it an excellent introduction to how narratives can nest within narratives. One conversation even has Spiegelman offhandedly mention to his wife that the conversation they are currently having was invented for the book; this metafictional moment gave me permission as a young writer to explore the question of authorial performance and hierarchy.

The study of narratives themselves – and by extension the field that studies the ways narratives can nest inside one another, is known as Narratology. In his book, *Narratology: an Introduction*, Narratologist Wolf Schmid, director of the Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology at the University of Hamburg, and chairman of the European Narratology Network explains narratives within narratives through the concept of "narrative levels." He explains these levels as arising from the inherently constructed nature of writing novels. That even omniscient "Narrators" are themselves fictive constructs, and act on a level beyond the author simply communicating with the audience. He posits, "The *narrated world* is the world created by the narrator. The *represented world* created by the author is not limited to the narrated world. The represented world includes the narrator, his or her addressee and the narration itself. The narrator, the listener or reader whom the narrator assumes and the act of narration are represented in the fictional work and are fictive entities. Therefore a narrative work doesn't just narrate, but represents an act of narration" (Emphasis in original) (33). He then goes on to define the top two forms of communication as "author communication" and "narrative communication." "Author communication" is the level on which the author of the piece is trying to communicate with their

audience. “Narrative communication” is the level where the narrator within the piece is trying to create a world through the act of narration. Schmid defines “character communication” as “The case when a narrated character acts as a speaking or narrating entity” (34). By asserting their own (fictive) perspectives, characters are creating an entire constructed outlook, or narrative, that operates on a level different from a book’s narrator. Schmid’s explanation of the levels can be summarized as first comprising the “literary work,” where the author speaks in an approximation of their own voice directly to their imagined audience. Second is the “represented world,” which is the constructed world of the novel as created at its most basic level. The “narrated world” is created by the act of having a fictional narrator tell the story. The “quoted world” comes about from having a character narrate or speak (usually to another character) within the world of the narration (35).

Erin McGlothlin, Professor of German and Jewish Studies at Washington University, writes about how narrative levels relate to *Maus* in her essay “No Time like the Present: Narrative and Time in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*.” McGlothlin begins her piece by describing the way in which panels depicting the present and far past are framed in a way that encourages the viewer to read them as flowing into one another. In one scene in *Maus I*, for example, Spiegelman’s Father, Vladek, describes being inspected by Nazis during the Holocaust to see if he is physically fit enough to be spared being put to death. He recalls how the men inspecting him would keep asking him to turn to the left – and for two panels in sequence, he is shown, in the present, giving a quarter-turn left each panel as a physical demonstration. But the panel following suddenly switches to showing Vladek in the past, in front of a Nazi guard. But Vladek, while younger, still occupies the same place in the frame his older self did in the previous two panels, and has given yet another quarter-turn from the preceding panel. McGlothlin explains,

“Vladek's gesture of turning and the visual representation of its continuation from the present to the past reveal the intricate relationship between the two temporal planes, performing visually the narrative process by which Vladek "returns" to his Holocaust past” (4). This idea of past and present blending together is key to how McGlothlin sees the narrative levels in *Maus*. She writes, “According to Gerard Genette, a narrative level is distinguished from other levels not only by the scene and the agent of narration (who tells what story), but, more importantly, by the time of the narrated story. Each narrative possesses its own temporality, even if the narrative time overlaps with that of other diegetic levels” (9). McGlothlin then breaks *Maus* into three main narrative levels. First in the inner narrative, which is Vladek’s first-hand account of his experience during the holocaust. Second is the middle narrative, which comprises the scenes where Vladek is shown recounting his experiences to Spiegelman. The third outer narrative consists of Spiegelman’s narrations to the reader, and his depictions of himself having difficulty in writing his book.

The impact narrative levels have upon both the perspective and temporal location of their subjects makes them uniquely equipped for grappling with parent-child communication. The expected roles between a parent and child are constantly in flux, with time bringing about changes in authority and “voice.” Through time's passage, parent and child can also switch places within the hierarchy of knowledge. Few relationships are more defined by such change over time. This flux in roles and authority then raises the question, who between them has the authority to tell the other’s story, and when? How does this authority change over time, as a child grows? And how does it change as a parent grows older or, as in the case of Roz Chast’s parents, suffers from dementia? Does this change if the parent/narrator has experienced trauma, such as Vladek in *Maus*? What, then, are the ethics of narration in relationship to hierarchy and

authority? Through its juxtaposition of images that can immediately communicate different temporalities and perspectives, graphic narrative uniquely poised to examine these complex subjects.

Narrative Levels in *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* by Art Spiegelman

In *Maus*, while the stories that feature Spiegelman's father Vladek are presented as being narrated by him, there are times where the author steps in to remind the reader of the constructed nature of the story. For example, a recurring device throughout both volumes is presenting Jewish characters as mice, and German characters as cats. During one of Vladek's narrations on the events of Auschwitz, a mouse character steps forward and protests his inclusion in the camps, declaring "I don't belong here with all these Yids and Polacks! I'm a German like you!" (*Maus I* 50) The story then grinds to a halt, as the panel is repeated with Spiegelman and Vladek in the foreground, discussing the man's ethnicity, as seen in Figure 1. But in this repeat panel, instead of a mouse, the man is a cat. Vladek's narrations normally offer a somewhat straightforward example of the narrated world, with him as the character doing the narration, and Spiegelman



Figure 1. Spiegelman adjusts his framing device in *Maus I*.

as his presumed audience. But in this moment, not just the narrated world, but also the represented world begins to break down. Spiegelman intentionally draws attention to the fragile nature of the book's core metaphor by showing how easily it can become muddled.

Further muddling the border between the represented and narrated world within *Maus* are Spiegelman's attempts to balance his own research on the Holocaust with his father's recollections. In a brief, four-panel sequence in *Maus II*, Spiegelman illustrates his father marching out the camp gate to go work. This can be seen in Figure 2. In the first panel, an orchestra is clearly drawn playing as the prisoners leave. But when Spiegelman asks his father about whether he can remember an orchestra playing as the prisoners left the gate, Vladek insists that he remembers no such orchestra. Spiegelman notes that the orchestra was very historically well-documented. Then the final, fourth panel illustrates the same march, but with a crowd dense enough that the orchestra can only barely be seen poking out the top of the crowd. By



Figure 2. Vladek's memory conflicts with Spiegelman's research in *Maus II*.

intentionally showing the scene before and after Spiegelman's adjustments, the book draws attention once more to the ways in which the narrated perspective of Spiegelman's father has to be filtered through the choices in telling performed by the concrete author (as well as abstract author and fictive narrator), Spiegelman. But instead of the core metaphor of the represented world breaking down, this change acknowledges the ways in which memory is not fact, but rather constructed; the tension between what Spiegelman claims to know and what his father actually experienced raises questions for the reader, highlighting an interesting and important tension related to narrative authority.

This frailty of perception, the gap between memories and reality is a subject that has long held my interest. I have returned to writing about this ambiguity time and time again. A short story that offered inspiration for my written pieces is entitled "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age." For years, I worked as a tour guide for the Laura Ingalls Wilder Museum, and the discrepancy between recorded facts and her memories were a subject of intense study. When writing the story "Core Sensation," I played with the idea of memories as a more emotional reality, rather than a recording of events. Something that inspired the writing of the story was the idea that memories change a little bit each time you access them- something I ran across in my high school psychology textbook which gave me an existential crisis. That memories are constructed from specific touchstones of sensation. So then, what would it mean to try and reconstruct a memory? I wanted to get at the idea that even if the physical elements of a memory are perfectly recreated to stop decay, the emotional relationship to the memory still can't help but be changed by time. That the physical, recorded facts around a memory don't always directly relate to the emotional aspect of it.

Parent-Child Recollections in *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant* by Roz Chast

Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant, while generally focused on the period of time during which Roz Chast's parents began to decline both physically and mentally, sometimes flashes back to the author's childhood. For example, in the sequence shown in Figure 3, Chast first imagines herself as a baby being watched by her mother and then transitions to talking about the various maids who looked after her throughout her childhood. In this short six-panel sequence, the first row of three panels focuses on events that happened while Chast was an infant. Chast's narration remains outside the story, suspended over the panels, but her mother turns towards the reader in the second panel and takes over the narration. Instead of narrative captions, the third panel has a word balloon attributed to Chast's mother, allowing her



Figure 3. Chast reflects upon her childhood.

to take over and transition into the narrated world.

But this interplay is not simply the mother narrating a story to Chast in the represented world. Within these panels, the mother is the same age she would have been at the time the incident occurred, yet she is talking as if telling Chast the story at a time far removed from the event. The implied audience is not, then, Chast at the time within the represented world. It is a story that Chast had been told by her mother at an unspecified time. Chast inserted her mother's version of the story into her own narration to fill gaps in her memory. The intended audience of the mother's statement is the present day Chast, using one of the characters within her story to talk herself through events she was not present for. Instead of a character interacting with another character within the represented world, as is often the case, Chast the character speaks to herself through her memories of the narrated world of her mother.

In the first panel of the second row of the same sequence, Chast's mother asks where the maid is. Thus, Chast's mother has reverted to existing within the time of the narration. The second panel shows two of the maids as Chast remembered them, as the narrative continues to stay within the bounds of the narrated world. But then the third and final panel shows Chast as an adult, within the present, represented world, flanked on either side by floating representations of cruel maids she had suffered under. The narrated world nips at both sides of the represented. Both quoted and narrated worlds directly feed into the represented within the entire six-panel sequence. They show how Chast's sense of reality comes not just from a dry recollection of the main events of the story-but also from distant memories. Even the accounts of her mother factor into how she sees the world.

This interplay between the narratives of parent and child relates back to how, in *Maus*, the present of the book and the past of Vladek's story often begin to blend together. While

Spiegelman suggests the way the past and present can run together by creating an implied continuity between images, Chast instead contrasts the images and text. It is Chast's mother speaking from the story directly to present-day Chast that causes the temporal levels to overlap. These two stories show different ways that narrative levels can be shown through graphic narrative's unique combination of still imagery and text.

Collective Consciousness and Graphic Nonfiction

In *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Impossible Worlds*, Lubomír Doležel writes, "The existence of groups and social organization gives rise to collective consciousness. Its cognitive form is socially based knowledge... ..Social representations and collective emotions are essential for group cohesion, splitting the world into 'us' and 'them' and, consequently, motivating interacting between groups" (101). Though they may be a small group, this sequence illustrates how Chast has formed a sort of "collective consciousness" within her family. The mother that Chast uses in the sequence is a construction, but she is a construction which relays information Chast took from her real mother on faith. Chast's represented world rests on a foundation built, in part, by her mother. Narrative level theory relies on drawing attention to the constructed nature of reality in books. What this sequence illustrates is that even these personal, constructed worlds are affected and shaped by the loved ones of the author. The narrative each person creates around their own life, and their outlook, is inseparably connected to the people who've played an important role in their life.

As Chast's mother becomes senile, Chast shows the division in the quoted world of Chast's mother and the narrated world of the story. In a brief, six-panel sequence, Chast's mother begins telling a story she mistakenly believes happened to Chast as a child. This sequence can be

seen in Figure 4. The speech balloon in the first panel which begins the narration of the quoted world completely obscures Chast's face. Then, as the dialogue of Chast's mother takes the place normally reserved for narration boxes, the reader sees a short depiction of a young Chast



Figure 4. Chast's mother tells a story

storming onstage during a play and taking a whip from the hand of a performer. The final panel finally reveals the face of Chast within the narrated world with an expression of clear disbelief.

A caption following the sequence reads, “Needless to say, I am 99.99999% sure nothing like this ever happened” (192). If the earlier example of childhood memories showed the interplay between the narrated, quoted, and even represented world, this example starkly separates represented Chast from the narrated version of herself. Her mother has firmly receded into her own head, acting as the only speaker during this entire sequence. The only communication from any other character within the represented world is Chast’s expression within the final panel. Chast’s connection with her mother is no longer able to give Chast information about her own childhood.

Narrative Levels in “Three Boot Dog”

This idea of a character’s upbringing and memories subtly factoring into how they tell their story is one I try to grapple with in my own graphic memoir, “Three Boot Dog.” In that story, I also depict my mother’s words second-hand, with my internal monologue being conveyed through caption boxes while my mother speaks. But instead of my actual mother of the present, the art style based on childhood drawings communicates her as being a sort of abstracted mother, existing only in my limited recollection of her words. This recalls more a childhood relationship with a mother. How, to a child, a mother is more an abstraction or “role” than an individual. As an adult, that perspective has changed. Through graphic narrative’s ability to “show” images to the reader, I can show a more childish understanding of my mother’s grief, contrasted against my current, more adult understanding. The entire comic is narrated by an omniscient, abstract narrator, talking through and musing upon the emotions presented throughout the comic. This narration can be understood as what Schmid calls the abstract author. It’s my personal voice addressed to an imagined audience of readers. But there is a moment

within the comic-where the fictive representation of myself imagines a scenario with his mother. The moment causes the comic to briefly slip from the Represented World into the Narrated World. This transition between worlds is told purely visually, as a panel of my fictive self looking at a childhood drawing of his mother transitions into panels of the childhood drawings speaking- and acting out an imagined scenario. While not narrated through speech by my fictive self, the scenario played out by the childhood drawings still operates separate from the omniscient narrator. The scenario provides the only instance of spoken dialogue within the entire comic.

The irony of the only spoken dialogue coming from this abstraction of my mother is that her words still only exist within my head. When I wrote this comic, I was feeling isolated and lost within my own thoughts. Even though I wasn't consciously working in multiple narrative levels at the time I was writing it, my need to show my relationship to my mother through the prism of my conscious experience naturally brought it out. Having a framework through which to view this narrative technique gave me more room to experiment. For example, now I notice that I only had the narrative caption box speak in the same panel as the mother once. Bringing out the contrast between the two voices, even if they exist as part of the same conscious experience, could help strengthen the scene by highlighting the tension of narrative authority.

The one-person world continues to play an important role in my writing, as stories with strong themes of isolation must often draw upon the one-person style of narrative in order to tell a story. "Apologia," while a story that features other characters, is at both its beginning and end a story that focuses upon the one-person world of its main character Frank, and tells the story of how his actions lead to his own downfall. Both *Maus* and *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant* utilize narrative levels to show alternating separation and community between parent

and child and to expose questions about narrative authority and how this causes tension between parent and child, especially as they “tell” their own stories in ways that might contradict each other. Through close study of these theoretical texts and creative works, I can better understand my own writing process, and take this knowledge with me into future projects, both creative and scholarly.

APOLOGIA

Before I start, I just want to say sorry. Sometimes ideas I hold in my head don't take to the page. I've been tired. Strung out. And deadlines are a stifling, hellish concoction, created to kill, not cultivate. All to sate a culture being pulled beneath the waves by a great clock tied around its neck. Don't think less of me for what follows. Instead, take it for what it is. Read my books not for...no, don't gaze upon my work expecting... maybe more like, When you peruse my prose, Ah, God. No.

Frank Blaise moved his laptop back from the floor to his desk, free hand scraping at his stubble. His book was both finished and long past due, but he'd stayed up all night rewriting the preface. He'd insisted on including it, claiming that it gave the reader a look into his creative process, handed them the tools to dig into his personal insecurities, frustrations, triumphs, all like wasps trapped mid-sting in amber, frozen deep within the words upon the page. It also explained why the hell he'd shuffled Mrs. Jackson out of the story on page 15(!).

His glasses were thick-framed, plastic, but with a printed finish to give them a classy oak look. Pristine jeans and a flannel shirt hung loose off his frame, kept from before his eating became erratic, lost in hunching over a screen that occasionally displayed his manuscript. It was a tasteful manuscript. Some excitement, a protagonist with real moral fortitude (he was especially proud of the character's subtle jabs at private schooling on page 178), but a flimsy structure overshadowed the whole damn thing. Why the hell couldn't he figure how to believably land his characters in Cancún? And of course how to start the plot rolling without that useless Mrs. Jackson (page 15!).

As he opened a new tab to double-check between the use of *aesthetics* or *esthetics*, his eyes wandered to his computer's taskbar. 3:00 AM. Hell. Something within him gave. Less the toppling of a proud oak tree, and more the give of a sapling, living, but kissing the ground, bent into an embarrassed bow.

In one smooth motion, he highlighted the entire preface with his cursor. Exhaled through his nose. And deleted it. But as his right hand motioned to close his laptop, his left stayed glued to the keyboard. Maybe he was thinking about this wrong. If structure was the issue, then why write such a rigid apology? It was a creature of emotion. To show that he could write free of narrative, to give a cry from his raw, bleeding heart? People would be so moved, they couldn't help but look at the story as the unfinished product of a wounded man. "Ah," they'd say, "perhaps we should not jump to conclusions. This is not a book, but a letter from inside a mental cage. A preview! Perhaps when this man finally finds the circumstances he seeks, we can see his true potential find form upon the page. But for what we were given? I liked the private schooling bit."

He shook his head. No, he was overthinking things, running away into fantasy. Just an intro to make sure everyone knew he wasn't obliviously unaware of his book's shortcomings. That was it. Just type. Type! He banged away at his keyboard, ignoring the red squiggles that popped up under his near incoherent stream of thought. Just move forward! Get it done! With a final, deliberate gesture, he added a period to the last sentence. Sank into his chair. Sprang forward, dropped the period in favor of an exclamation point. *Now*, it was done.

After hitting "save" five times, he sent the complete preface and manuscript to his publisher. Ignoring the pangs of regret already sinking in, he pinched the bridge of his nose, and stretched out his arms in a yawn. Before they fell back to his side, he was already asleep.

Awareness gradually seeped back into his body. What time was it? He lurched his head towards the digital clock crookedly hung on his apartment wall. Batteries long dead. Grumbling, he forced himself off the couch and fumbled around his coffee table, finally yanking his phone from its charger. The screen blinked into life, displaying... 20... no... 26? 26 notifications? Who the hell had been texting him all night? Or morning. How long was he out? 2:00 PM, flashed his phone. The first message was from his editor.

“Fantastic submission, Frank. I hope you don’t mind, but we’ve fast-tracked the publication on this one. Digital copies are already set to go online in about an hour. Don’t worry about editing! We’ve decided not to touch a word.”

Message received 10:15 AM.

Frank stood up, took his shoes off, and walked over to his bed. He then pulled the covers over his head and tried to force himself to sleep. In his pocket, his phone continued to buzz, message after message piling in. It was 3:30 before he worked up the courage to check the rest of them.

“So I suppose the first thing the public wants to know, Frank, is where you’ve been hiding all our lives?”

Polite laughter rolled in from all sides. It was now 11:40, and Frank was sitting on the couch of a late night talk show. Not just any talk show, mind you, but Duncan Krane’s *Nearing Midnight!*, an illustrious program that had started 30 years ago under the name *Morning Sickness*, a local pre-news segment in LA. A simple variety show with a barebones cast, Krane spent a few years honing his craft under the hot lights and low pay of local broadcasting. But Krane was catapulted into stardom when his “Cereal Inspector” sketch gained national attention. Bouncing between comedy specials with diminishing returns, Krane finally found his groove

with his move to New York, under the mantle of a late night television host. Back during the few years when Frank thought he was going to be an actor, he'd practiced a few of Duncan's classic sketches before a mirror, and occasionally his parents. Now, at last, Frank had finally landed a spot on Duncan's show. He didn't entirely know why.

All he'd been able to gather from his publisher between all their fast-paced jargon was that the reaction to his book had been outrageously positive (really?), and that all sorts of television personalities had been fighting to land him as a guest. He was given his choice of interview (Duncan, of course), and from there, it was a relatively short drive from New Jersey to Duncan's Manhattan studio.

"Oh, I've, uh, been around. Been writing. Just never really got attention. Like this. Duncan."

The TV host nodded, signature smirk held gently in place.

"Well, if you've been writing like *this* Frank, then I'd say that's our loss. What goes into your writing process?"

"Oh. Well, I mean. For example, when I was writing *Pierce Tanner*, I tried to imagine--"

"Who?"

Duncan's smile hadn't disappeared, but Frank felt himself sputter, struggling to draw breath. It was fine. Duncan was just the host. He probably hadn't read the damn thing himself.

"Ha ha ha sorry, Duncan. *Pierce* is the main character in my novel."

"Novel?"

Frank made an ugly, hacking cough.

His publisher was fired, he swore to himself. Not that he could fire them, more fire himself *from* them, but they'd told him his writing was a success! And all after publishing it so quickly without warning, something he'd never thought could even-

“No, Frank, we're not here to talk about your book. Most of it, anyway. We're here to talk about what has America buzzing.”

Duncan took out a paperback copy from under his chair and pointed to the first page.

“This. What has been considered by some the most beautiful apology ever written.”

The lights seemed to blur together into one continuous streak.

Frank barely felt conscious, nodding every time Duncan spoke, thanking the host for his generous insight. Then he found himself backstage in Duncan's dressing room, fidgeting in a seat as the host lit himself a cigarette.

“It wasn't bullshit.”

It took Frank a second to realize he was being talked to.

“What I said out there, I mean. That apology? It's some heavy shit. Tore at my tear ducts. Which is why...”

A folder fell into Frank's lap.

“I'm having some trouble with... well, whatever the hell she says, the marriage wasn't officiated. Isn't real, never was. But she's threatening to go public. And when this breaks? I want you to get America back on my side.”

Frank stared down at his phone, still buzzing with job offers. Then he looked back up at Duncan Krane in his pristine suit, painted-on eyebrows cracking under the strain of arching in a plea for sympathy.

“Yeah. Yeah, I'll do it.”

Then the lights began to blur again, the events of the day weighing on him all at once. As Frank collapsed onto the plush carpet, the last thing he noticed before losing consciousness was the floor's subtle odor of pet dander. "A cat, perhaps," he thought. "I didn't know Duncan liked cats."

Eight months later, he'd already finished his second book. *103 Disreputable Confessions* was not so much a novel as it was a tearful series of apologies for regrets from his youth. Of the time he'd intentionally given an annoying friend of his a birthday invitation with the wrong date, or thought about kicking the family dog when it chewed his new shoes, only to settle on kicking his brother, instead. It was praised for its raw emotional insight.

Frank was at a book signing when he ran into the first woman he'd ever loved, or at least, dated. Chelsea Horne. He couldn't help but notice her lack of a book, or the way she impatiently fumbled with her zipper as the line moved closer to the front. When an opening finally appeared between them, she strode to the desk and slammed down her hands.

"I didn't agree to this."

Frank sat up in his chair, carefully folded his hands in front of him, and avoided eye contact.

"To the book?"

"To my being in the book, yes."

Frank personally thought the section she was accusing was tasteful enough. About how after she (in the book renamed "Abby") had told him she didn't like kissing with tongue, he'd tried it twice more before taking the hint.

"I didn't name you in it."

"Calling me your first girlfriend isn't enough?"

“Chelsea, please... no one's keeping track.”

(He'd had three ex girlfriends?)

Frustrated, Chelsea stepped back from the table and paced a moment, collecting her thoughts. Frank signed for a small group of schoolchildren.

“It's not just that I'm in it, that bothers me. It's how it's said. Framed.”

Frank quietly scooted his writing pad towards himself and turned to a new page.

“Then, how do you think I wronged you?”

Chelsea looked at him, then at the pad, then back again.

“Is this... are you joking?”

“Joke? No. I just want to know what I did wrong. In exact terms.”

Chelsea took a moment to compose herself in the bathroom on the way out.

Of course, Frank had more lined up than just book deals. Ever since his initial dealings with Duncan, he'd become a well-respected PR man. His most frequent client was a New York construction firm Duncan owned stakes in, known for building cheap and quick. Every time there was an accident, a man in a tan suit and Frank's words in his mouth would tell the people how unfortunate it all was, and that the company would do everything in its power to keep drywall away from any load-bearing functions in the future. Frank only wrote for accidents he was fairly sure no one had been killed in.

But as time marched forward, Frank found himself forced to rely more and more upon these side jobs to support himself. He was running out of material. He'd, of course, tried an apology for how his material had been going downhill lately, but it was just seen as an obvious imitation of his earliest success. At least his previous fame was still enough to land him the occasional television ad or public service announcement.

“If more people just said sorry whenever they could,” he said to the camera, “the world would be a kinder place.”

It was exactly twenty years to the day Frank had first found success, that he finally gave up. The construction company had been offering him a permanent spot for ages, and his writing work had almost completely dried up. So when his phone buzzed that afternoon, with an intern on the line to tell him about all the fantastic benefits the construction company offered, Frank finally said yes.

The ceremony was a small one, given in a three-room conference center the company used about three times a year. Frank wore a tie over his shiny new button-down and jeans, and champagne in hand, finally relented to the crowd’s chanting request for a speech.

“Now, I ... know what you think I’m going to start with. But let’s keep S-O-R-R-Y for work. I’m sick of it. Absolutely sick of it.”

Frank’s new boss took a sip from his glass and leaned forward in his chair.

“And why should I say it? At this point, it’s in my best interest to say thanks. Thank you to everyone who got me here.”

Frank took a slightly champagne-soaked index card from his left breast pocket.

“So, first of all, I’d like to say thank you to-”

Was the floor running away from him? Frank privately lamented that third glass of champagne, until he realized the other partygoers held his same, shocked expression. This wasn’t in his head. It was-

“EARTHQUAKE!”

The partygoers screamed and scattered. In any other situation, the vibrations would have been harmless. Sharp snaps rang from the walls. The company, of course, built all its own office buildings.

“One side, everyone! Please! Let me through, I-”

Frank choked on dust shook loose from the ceiling. He kneeled, coughing, as the rest of his coworkers pushed and clawed to get through the solitary exit.

Gazing to the sky with bloodshot eyes, Frank began screaming at the top of his lungs.

He screamed against Duncan. Against the company. Against whatever stupid streak of luck had landed him there in the first place. Against. And as he screamed, a young employee, waiting out the exit way struggle behind an overturned trash can, set his phone to record.

Years from now, a nephew of Frank’s will try to write an ending to this indignant rant, claiming a desire to “uphold the proud legacy of my family.” Most critics will ignore it. For in that speech was Frank at his most focused, raw. An apologia not meant for the outside world. Aimed squarely at himself. It will be widely agreed upon as his unfinished masterpiece.

FATIGUE, AND LOSS OF APPETITE

Dozens of thick, quivering grapes stacked high, stems like brown knotted thumbs shoved deep within to keep juice and pulp from spraying over the hungry dinner guests. Piles of mashed potatoes, glistening, sweating greasy globules of butter. And of course, the roast turkey, growing soft in its own juices, yet stubbornly retaining the texture of sinew and gristle.

Anise did not want to eat.

Not that she'd ever wanted to, not really, but she'd always found a way to tolerate it. The vegetables that smelled like damp dirt. Fruit leaking sickly sweet juices. Whatever the hell polluted the dough in that souffle her aunt always insisted on making.

When she was young, Anise had been shooed away from the picture book section of her school library.

“A child at your level can't just stay looking at pictures. We have books you'll find far, far more engaging.”

That was the spirit of what either the librarian or the principal had told her. She'd been in first grade, you can't expect someone in first grade to remember every single word someone or another says to you.

But what really stuck out to her, the part she remembered, was when she was looking through the books with half, or even a third as many pictures as the ones she'd read before. It was one about all the ways people from the past had imagined the future. Especially through the World's Fair. At the 1893 Chicago World's Fair (Anise had looked up the date when she thought back on this in study hall her junior year) a woman (but not the presenter's name) had promised that the solution to all the world's feeding problems was not far away. For the scientists of the

future were developing a pill. A meal pill. Simply pop one down your throat, chase it with water, and you wouldn't have to eat for several days. How efficient! And what a boon for the guts, not having to lurch and strain against piles of chewed mush. You'd only have to set aside a place in your stomach the size of a penny.

But that was then. Now, she had to follow her usual routine. So she stacked her plate with the bare minimum of each (excepting turkey) and took a deep breath. Pushed a few stray wavy black hairs out of her sickly face. Chewed as few times as she could. Swallowed. Took a swig of water. Repeat. As the pile in front of her dwindled down to the plate.

“So, Anise! Honey. How's all that studying treating you?”

“I dropped out.”

Chew. Swallow. Anise tried to ignore her aunt, who silently mouthed a hideously long “Oh.”

“Now, Howard, I thought you said she was doing fine at school!”

When Anise's father looked up from his mashed potatoes, it was with his eyes. His nose stayed about the width of a chopstick from being buried in them. A drop of butter fell from his thin beard to the table.

“Fine in her own way. Ann's smart. Doesn't need a textbook's worth of jargon to tell her where to point a freakin camera.”

“Oh, but if she doesn't know the words, all those magazine bigwigs will make fun of her. Right, honey?”

“Sure.”

Anise resisted piping up to say that she decided to leave college herself, that she wasn't really interested in being in any magazine. Photography was more than just some black-and-white photo of a woman in rags, placatively? nibbling her fingers.

Chew.

Anise's Aunt, Maple, was in town for the Thanksgiving, bringing her dog, Trooper, in tow. Maple was five years Howard's elder, and slightly taller than him, at that. She wore her hair in a bun, her jeans with a belt, and told Anise that if they ever needed to have a talk "as girls," she'd be there for her. Trooper was a small black terrier, mixed with some other sort of dog that must have made him persistently tired. They were the only family Anise and her father had bothered to invite. Maple stayed in the room that was normally reserved for when Anise's mother would visit.

"Well. Tell me she'll at least have to get a job, right?"

"Yeah, I guess. Can't hurt to have her live here for a year or two, though. Could always use more hands on the farm."

"May I be excused?"

Anise slid her near-finished plate towards the decorative pumpkin and maize at the center of the table. Howard and Maple's eyes fixed onto it. As if trying to find inspiration in its splotches of gravy, or bare stems, tips still hanging to slivers of green plant meat. A single grape lay uneaten, tucked in the corner, beneath the stems. Howard glanced at Maple, briefly shook his head, as if trying to chase out sleep, and nodded.

"Sure. Just don't play your music too loud. Maple's got a headache."

"Oh, Howard. I know what I said, but she's young. Let her enjoy the senses while--"

"Not too loud. Headache. Got it?"

“Yessir” Anise muttered.

She clomped up the stairs, paused to step over Trooper’s sleeping form, then gently closed her bedroom door. No use waking the poor thing.

Anise had always taken pride in her bedroom’s deliberateness. No strewn clothes, piles of stuffed animals, or party lights. A bed, dresser, two posters, a desk (with chair), a lamp, and a throw rug Howard had bought her for college, anchored to the same spot it had always sat. The only out-of-place decoration was a tape player her mom had given her. She didn’t really listen to it anymore, but she’d gotten it with a small collection of picture books, each accompanied by a tape that narrated the action on every page. The first time she’d used it, she must have pressed something too long, or inserted the tape the wrong way. But a vicious shriek came from the machine as the tape inside it began spitting up a stream of black, gleaming strips. She’d stared, wondering how so much could come from inside such a small sleeve of white plastic.

Anise slid her book of photos from under the bed. On the first few pages, a few photos of fields of white corn poked out from between shots of concrete and furniture. It would how you could tell it showcased her earlier work. At first, she’d tried to squeeze her art from the farmland that surrounded her. But she could never stop the scents from infusing her pictures. To look at vegetable fields was to smell damp dirt, smashed tomatoes, pesticide’s hint of sulfur. And looking at the animals...

Anise turned the page.

About two years ago, when she’d first started college, she’d flitted between a number of friend groups. At a house party, she admitted to a senior that she was worried she’d turned down too many offers to meet people over lunch, limited herself by only taking pictures of buildings, concrete, wasn’t sure anyone would find her interesting.

“Interesting? Why would you need to be interesting?”

Nervously staring into a still unsipped can of alcohol, Anise asked what the senior meant.

“I mean, like, friends don’t ask for a lot. It’s not about being interesting. Just make sure you can be funny, do a trick every now and again. I don’t talk to people to be fucking impressed.”

Anise didn’t go to a lot of house parties.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a firm tapping on her bedroom door.

“Anise? You okay?”

Howard’s voice had taken on his attempt at a softer, gentler tone, which, if anything, reminded Anise of the sleepovers she’d gone to in fourth grade, staying up later than everyone else, trying to watch old cowboy movies with the volume turned as low as it could go so all the posturing and growling came out a rumbling whisper.

“Yeah, Dad, I’m fine. Is something wrong?”

The door opened, Howard’s left hand holding aloft a single, green grape.

“Oh, no, I said I’m fine, Dad. Not hungry. But thanks.”

Howard’s hand stayed steady, slowly extending to hold out its green globule.

“Please. Ann. You know the rules.”

Anise looked at the grape, then her dad, and the grape again.

“Long as you live under this roof, I want you to finish your plate, that’s all. You don’t even have to touch the meat. We both know you won’t eat otherwise.”

Anise still didn’t move. Howard strode to her bed, sat next to her. From his pocket, he took a dull fruit knife.

“Here. I’ll even peel it for you.”

“Dad! I said-”

“You ever seen a peeled grape before?”

Anise leaned forward, waiting for a bitter retort to rise from deep within her chest, but none came. What the hell was he talking about?

“No, but wh-”

“Then watch.”

Howard struck the familiar position he always took when whittling wood on the back porch. Carefully slid under the grape’s skin.

“Dad. I really-”

Howard didn’t need to say anything. He turned the grape in his hands, skin falling to the ground in a corkscrew. Beneath his thumb, a deep, black hole constricted from the sudden influx of light. Iris twitching.

“Dad - how could – what, Dad?”

Anise could barely hear herself. Her hand flew out, smacked the eye from Howard’s hand. It rolled to and fro on the floor, propelled by its spasms.

A dozen movies flashed through Anise’s head. She’d been living in a family of secret cannibals. No, or maybe this wasn’t her dad, but a killer trying to get close to her, wearing his skin. Maybe she was simply crazy.

Howard crossed his arms.

“It’s natural. We all came from the ground. Just the same.”

Anise planted her palms against his shoulder and shoved him as hard as she could. Rammed against the corner of her desk as she turned to run. The pain brought her to her knees. She heaved a teaspoon of stomach acid.

“Goddammit, this is exactly why I never—”

In Anise’s head Howard’s voice took on a distant, ringing, echo, like it was being muttered to her through a cardboard tube. But clearer than his voice, she heard his footsteps. A rhythmic thudding towards where he’d dropped what she once thought to be? a grape.

Her hand slipped on her bile as she forced herself to her feet.

Whatever Howard said to her as she flew through her door frame, she spared no thought. Instead, she focused on slamming the ground with each step, almost hoping to push herself away from the world beneath altogether. But instead, her feet thudded into a furry, sleeping, form, and both her and Trooper painfully crashed to the ground.

“They don’t come from people.”

The voice came from Howard, who had walked through the door frame, turned to face her.

“I’m telling you. All that comes from the ground is bits.”

Anise couldn’t see through her panicked tears, had to feel for the guardrail for a sense of direction.

“Cast-off. They were made by the ground for people that never were. Who knows why? It’s all we can do.”

Two at a time, Anise ran down the stairs, caught the dinner table to stop herself, only to see Aunt Maple sitting at the far end.

“Oh, lord. I told him you wouldn’t take it well.”

An open pumpkin sat in her aunt’s? lap, a handful of something stringy and softly trembling halfway to her lips.

Anise hastily picked one of the ears of white corn from the table, wound back her arm to throw it. At Maple or Howard? She paused. Felt the texture with her thumb. Instead of being perfectly round, each kernel curved inward, forming the shape of a molar. She felt hard enamel.

Howard tackled her.

Anise awoke in her room. But that wasn't the first thing she registered. It was the stench. In front of her door, all the way to the ceiling, piled pumpkins and squash and maize and cranberry and carrots and poppyseed and turkey and chicken and pheasant and beef.

From the other side of the door, Howard spoke.

"I'm sorry Ann. I couldn't let you hurt my sister."

He waited for a reply. When it became clear none was coming, he continued.

"But you have to understand. What we take from the ground... they're just possibilities. Not even full people, just parts of people, things that could've been, but aren't. You can't live without killin' some of what coulda been, that's the goddamn minimum. But me? That's not enough. I gotta eat more than just maybes, I gotta take in something that LIVED."

Again, there was no response.

"Eyes. Lips. Assorted other bits. We just have to take it in. Head to toe."

Nothing.

"You know the only way I'm letting you out of there. Or well, the only way to get *yourself* out. I hope for both our sakes, you do."

He turned back to Maple, who was running her finger along the bottom of her pumpkin, then idly licking it clean.

"Well, either way, she's learning *something*." Maple muttered to herself.

ACUTE DISCOMFORT

“This seat taken?” My uncle reached to tap me on the shoulder, but upon seeing a flash of acknowledgement in my eyes, changed it to a brusque shove to make room for himself on the church pew. “Awfully warm,” he muttered to my father. Then glanced at me, gave a smile, and rolled his eyes. “Adult talk,” he mouthed.

My uncle had never been much for church clothes. He wore a ratty sweater vest with the texture of his apartment’s shag rug, on top of a thin, hideously stiff collared shirt, the color of bubblegum cough syrup. He absentmindedly tugged at what was left of his vest’s collar. “Warm.”

Now that he was lost in his own muttering, I snuck another look. His face was the first thing people gravitated to - it was red and jolly, but a bit lopsided. Almost like someone had pinched his nose, twisted it (just a hair), and the rest of the face had followed suit. But the unevenness gave it a dopey, earnest quality that made people tend to let down their guard around him. I didn’t.

A twitch. I resisted the impulse to turn my head, and instead carefully observed him from the corner of my eye. He was moving his mouth. Chewing? Then it was over. I went back to staring at the grease stain in my hymnbook.

Twitch.

This time I couldn’t resist snapping my head to look at him. And as I turned, I just barely saw a long, brown thread finish snaking its way inside his mouth. He smacked his lips, saw me looking at him, and pressed one finger against his lips before crooning the next verse of the hymnal.

I looked to my dad, only to see that he was firmly focused on the front of the church, mouthing along to the church's chorus.

At this point, my uncle had thrown out any sense of caution. He was slurping on one of his vest's many loose threads, as it began to unravel before my eyes. He paused to cough, thumped his chest, bellowed out a "Hallelujah!" along with the rest of the church, then went back to his swill.

"Much better." He breathed, now vestless, fanning himself with the hymnal.

My father tapped me on the shoulder. Without taking his eyes off the front of the church, he evenly intoned under the swelling screams of the choir: "We're on page 867."

Were we that far already? I struggled to remember what came next. How many movements were left? There was the sign of peace, the-

Crunch.

This time I was almost scared to turn my head, but that part of me which pushed through crowds surrounding dead frogs or birds on the playground would not be denied.

Crunch!

Uncle, still not satiated, had begun to break off parts of his starch-soaked shirt like a dry cracker, and was shoving them into his mouth. This didn't stop him from roaring along to the songs with what looked to all the world like a mouth full of drywall.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Suddenly, everything was quiet. The priest stood at the front of the congregation, voice still echoing, hands outstretched. I unballed my fists. My uncle had stopped chewing and bowed his head, eyes closed in reverence.

"Turn to page 524."

The chorus cut back in, fiercer than before, smacking their tambourines against their wrists, ankles, anything nearby. My uncle gripped the pew for support, as he bellowed his love for his fellow man, shirt hanging in tatters, white crumbs tumbling over his chin to the sage velvet below.

“Dad!” I hissed, first at a whisper, and reprised gradually, cautiously louder. I dared not tug at his sleeve, lest it tear apart, too.

“DAD!”

All was quiet. A tambourine dropped with a short, embarrassed jangle.

“Is everything alright?” The priest droned.

“Yes. Fine. Sorry. My son’s just. Wound up.” My father pushed through a specious smile, eyes trying to bore an escape route through the back wall.

“Just a little spirited, that’s all! Don’t think he got that from his old man!” my uncle shouted. The congregation suffered a beat of silence, then erupted in laughter. A chorus member who’d bent over to pick up her tambourine suddenly found herself leaned on for support. Only my dad and I remained silent, my dad nodding as if it was the closest thing he could find to laughing along.

“Yes, yes, I suppose that’s true.” the priest laughed, wiping a tear from his eye. “But if you’ll open your hymnbooks to page...”

My dad had made eye contact with me. “No TV for a week.”

Without responding, I turned back to the grease stain in the hymnbook. Squinting at it, I realized that perhaps the stain? had grown bigger. Then again, perhaps not.

CORE SENSATION

You can only ever latch onto a few sticking points. A patio heater, glowing with the strain of holding off the night chill. A sandwich stuffed to the brim with lettuce, all other flavors smothered beneath its damp, earthen flavor. The light jazz my dad always liked, the unobtrusive melodies all blending together into one long, unending song. Of course, they've already explained why that is.

Now mind you, I'm not an expert, and this is just off the top of my head, but memories aren't like movie files you can just pull up and play at a whim. They revolve around key moments and sensations. Your mind just has to fill in a few gaps. But every time you reminisce, the details change a little bit. Maybe line up more with the voice inside your head. A certain purity is lost.

I learned all this from my dad, back when he was around. The company he worked for had originally been founded on fighting the effects of dementia, but started branching out into other areas of mental decay. Memories were his areas of expertise. He'd ask me, sometimes, to describe the color of a shirt he'd worn days ago. Or the taste of last week's dinner. Listen closely, write it down, hide it away.

But the biggest thing my dad had done for the field was what brought me to his offices that day, accompanied by a family lawyer.

"It's not much, but he insisted you have it as soon as he passed."

That was all I'd been told in advance.

I tried to hide my expression when the lawyer reached into his desk, and produced a small vial, about the size of an old-fashioned mercury thermometer.

“I tried to warn you. This gift isn’t much for first impressions. But.”

The lawyer then closed his mouth into a smile.

“You’ll need this to work it.”

He then took out what looked like a VR headset, a solid, plastic brick meant to go over my eyes. A mess of wires came from the top and ended in various suction cups and needles. A hole was in its side, shaped precisely to fit the vial that the lawyer was holding in his other hand.

The lawyer kept his smile and cocked his head, as if waiting for a reaction. Then, seeing I was still stunned, he continued to speak.

“It’s the fruits of his research. Not quite ready for commercial production, but I think this might have special personal significance for you.”

“What does it do?”

If he was surprised I’d decided to talk, he didn’t show it. His voice stayed even and calm.

“I don’t want to spoil things. Take it home. See for yourself. He’s included instructions that should help things along.”

As I drove myself home, it took all my willpower not to take the vial from my pocket, twirl it between my fingers. Something I’d noticed before I’d pocketed it was a simple label, affixed with tape. It read “PICNIC,” along with the date eighteen years ago I’d turned fourteen.

I remembered it well, in part because my dad had made such a production out of things. My mom and I had been excited to see him taking time off of work, but that excitement was tempered by seeing the sheer amount of equipment he’d taken with him. Some men ran around our backyard, snatching up blades of grass, holding strange instruments about them, nodding to themselves. My dad hadn’t chosen the best day either - my birthday was in the back end of fall,

so the trees were already dead and a serious chill had settled into the air. The sandwiches also had an overflow of lettuce, the crunch-

I shouldn't complain. It still managed to be a fine evening. I got to casually talk to my mom and dad about what I'd done in school, the local sports team... I think a movie came up? The patio heater never quite managed holding off the cold, but the memory itself is a warm one, if a bit blurry.

I finally got home and laid out both the vial and the headset in front of me. At that point, I had a suspicion of what my dad had given me. But I didn't want to jump to conclusions. Hell, the lawyer had said it wasn't much. So if I got myself incredibly excited for what turned out to be nothing, I'd have only myself to blame. Still...

I opened the instruction booklet, half-hoping to see his handwriting. Unfortunately, the manual looked completely corporate and professional.

"Well, so much for a personal message or anything," I muttered to myself as I squinted at the small typeface. The device hadn't hit the market yet, but clearly there were plans in the works if it had a manual, complete with illustrated diagrams and a Spanish version in the back half. I picked the headset off the ground and examined it closer. While the manual looked like part of a finished product, the headset had clear signs of still being in the prototype phase. Lots of visible wires ran through portions that were covered in the manual's illustrated diagrams. A few portions were labeled in what looked like magic marker. The handwriting, however, was unfamiliar.

I still sometimes thought about the notes he'd leave around the kitchen, at the garage door, or on the dining room table. Always curt and to the point. Things like,

"Hey, Tommy. Working late again tonight. Left some money for takeout on the counter."

Maybe it was more from their frequency than their warmth, but I started associating those notes and his loose handwriting with him almost as much as I did his face.

“Wait, sanitize the needles before...”

I’d stopped on a page in the manual. I was supposed to put some of the needles hanging off the wires into the back of my hands? Did Dd expect me to do this by myself? I looked at the phone hanging on my apartment wall. I’d always been a bit closer to my mom. Though she was on a week-long trip with some friends to try and get her mind off Dad’s passing. I could always just wait a week...

No. With one, deliberate motion, I picked up one of the needles hanging off the headset and slid it into the back of my hand. And immediately regretted it. My hand received a small jolt at the same time I dropped the set onto the floor.

Holding in a small scream, I gingerly retrieved the headset and looked it over for any signs of damage. Everything still appeared to be intact. The needle stayed firmly planted in the back of my hand, as well. I glanced at the instructions page. There were only two of them, one for each hand.

“Well, one should be enough...”

The rest was fairly straightforward. I strapped the headset over my eyes, along with a cup over my nose and put on what looked like a set of headphones. Sucked in a breath. And flipped the switch. Nothing happened.

I breathed out all at once, shook my head, and reached up to take the helmet off. Then I realized my mistake. The vial! I fumbled it out of my pocket, and slid it into the side of the headset.

Instantly, I was there. A video played in front of me, and there was Dad, my mom, and me, sitting at the table. The low hum of the heater played in my ears, the hand with a needle in it felt the cold, iron armrest of the chairs we'd sat in that day. My head pounded a bit, as I endured the strange sensation of feeling what I'd felt that day, while watching the events from an outside perspective. The voice I heard when I spoke didn't sound natural either - it was the voice I'd hear from a recording of myself, not what fully registered as *my* voice.

The strangeness of the sensation brought me to questioning if the sensations I was feeling were the exact same as the ones I'd felt years ago. But answers were not forthcoming. The fresher sensations had made their way into my head, and had already more or less taken the place of my older memories of them.

Suddenly frightened, despite myself, I turned the device off. Everything stopped. When I tore off the headset, all was exactly the same as I had left it.

When I tried to think back to the day of the picnic, thankfully some separation existed inside my head; one of the sensation of viewing myself outside my body, another, the more faded memory of when I had experienced it firsthand.

I looked back at the instruction booklet. It recommended regular sessions to keep the memory fresh. According to the brief summary, by keeping the anchors of the memory strong, the connective tissue that the brain filled in would stay healthier as well. I wasn't positive on how much I believed it, but, well, I wasn't the expert.

The next day at work, I had trouble focusing. I would mis-shelve a package of screws, or a can of paint, and at the end of the day, my manager gave me a lecture in a I'm-not-mad-I'm-disappointed tone of voice. But the chill air, the sandwich lettuce - a memory I had always liked but never held deeply close to my heart was bubbling to the forefront of my mind.

Why had he chosen the picnic? Maybe it was because of all the men that had been there. It was just the only one he'd had all the people and equipment set up to recreate. But that meant he knew it would've been preserved at the time. So what had he been saying in the video? I suddenly realized that I'd been so focused on the sudden sensation of the experience, I hadn't focused too much on the conversation. Renewed with a sense of purpose, I snapped out of my day-dream and confidently placed the package of staples I was holding on the shelf in front of me. Then read the label on the shelf. I picked the staples back up, and muttering, walked a few aisles over.

When I got home, I wasted no time. I threw my lunchbox onto the kitchen counter, kicked off my shoes, strode over to the headset, and pushed one of the needles into the back of my hand. This time I yelped, but thankfully didn't drop the headset. In my excitement, I'd forgotten how much it hurt the first time. Well, the sensation of touch wasn't *that* important to the recording. I left out the left needle again, and entered the recording. Again, all the sensations came flooding back, but a bit more mundane, expected this time. I disregarded them and focused on listening intently to the conversation between my family.

Fourteen-year-old me was talking intently about a movie he'd seen recently, my mom and dad smiling politely and occasionally interjecting with an "oh, really?" or a gentle quip. I clicked my tongue. Did this thing have a fast-forward?

The topic eventually changed, but the subjects remained idle chatter. Every time I thought my dad was going to start talking about his work, or his day, or his... *anything*, the topic would always come back to me. I supposed it was my birthday after all. But surely if he'd left this to me, there'd be some sort of message, right? I doubled my attention, parsing out each individual word.

And so it went for the next few days. Whenever I got home from work, I'd put on the headset (sans needles), and look through the recording for what might be hidden. Unfortunately, there was no real head-tracking or zoom function, so I suppose the video must have been taken from a single camera. The tech was very in-progress, after all. But I started writing down the things that my dad had said. Rereading them, looking for some sort of meaning, clue... something. Part of me just couldn't believe he'd give this to me completely without comment.

After about a week, I got a call from my mom. She'd gotten home, and wanted to visit and catch up. I packed the headset and sped over to her place.

I tried to explain everything that had happened, but she stopped me partway through. It was part of why she'd called me over - she'd gotten one, too. Hers came with a similar memory - a fancy dinner he'd set her up with, but one that was just between the two of them.

Then what did *hers* mean? I took out my notes, started trying to explain some of the theories I'd developed, but she gave me a sad look and took out a piece of paper.

"Sorry, but this is the best I can do. Tell Tommy sorry, too."

That was it? I sat back, stunned. The least he could do was give me something that-

"No, I get it." She said, "The gesture is sweet, but... part of me's a little pissed, too. I really don't know why. Maybe that's normal."

I said goodbye to her, and drove back to my apartment, dejected. I took a beer from my fridge and had a few swigs from it, while staring at the headset still sitting on my counter.

Taking out the instruction manual, I flipped through the pages carefully one more time, looking for some sort of message or writing I might have missed.

My elbow bumped the counter, and some of my beer spilled onto the page, immediately making a dark, growing stain.

“Shit!”

I scrambled through my counter, took out a few paper towels, and started futilely dabbing away at the stain, paper on paper. The ink had started to run, and through my panic, a small part of me took pleasure in the breakdown of factory perfection.

But frustration still ruled the day.

“Damn... Dammit!”

I slammed the manual against the counter and slumped across the surface. My eyes now level with the discarded headset, I decided upon one more try. After that, I'd pledge to stop obsessing over the details. Whether I'd keep to that or not... well, the point is, I pledged it.

As I started to pull the headset over my eyes again, I noticed the needles dangling free. Hell with it, might as well try.

Gritting my teeth through the pain, I pushed a needle into the back of one hand, then the other. I flicked on the switch.

I wish I could say that the second needle made things even more immersive, that it was the missing piece. It made somewhat of a difference. But I hardly noticed as I took in the chill again, the smells, the sound of my dad's voice. Then it happened.

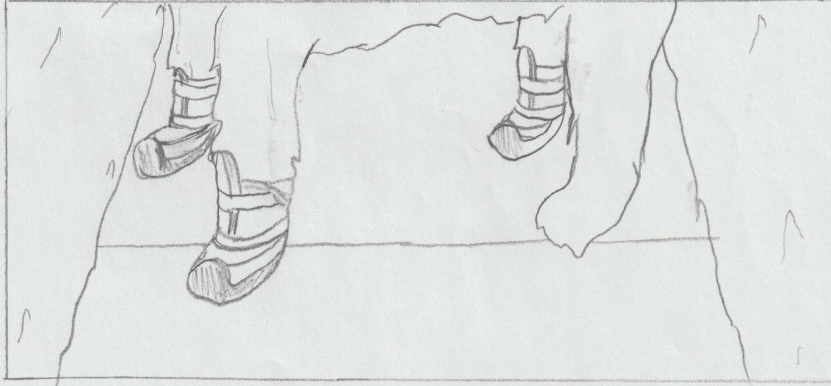
As my dad continued his talk with the family, I started to feel something in my left hand. I squinted at the video. During a lull in the conversation, my dad subtly took my hand under the table, and squeezed it. Smiled at me. Then kept talking.

I turned the switch off, put the headset on the table, sat on my floor, and broke down.

THREE BOOT DOG



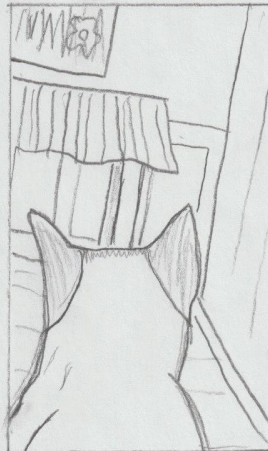
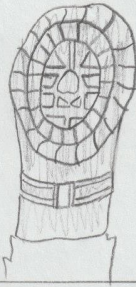
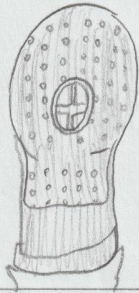
HE COULD NEVER KEEP THEM ON.



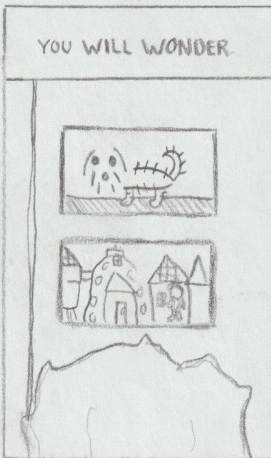
NO MATTER

WHAT WE

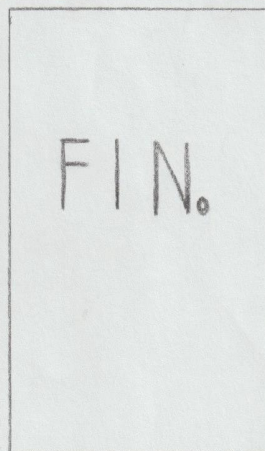
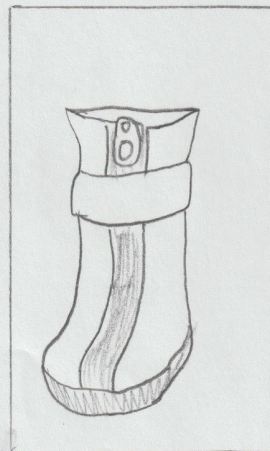
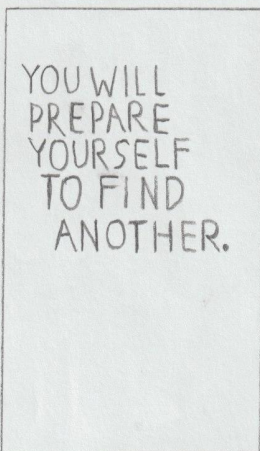
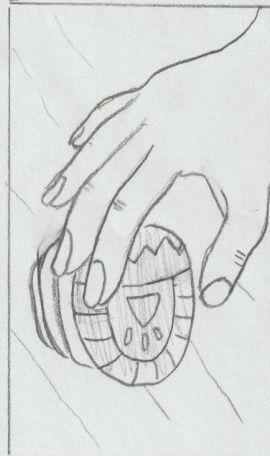
TRIED.



2



3



4

SCHOOL MEMORIES

MSA WAS A SCHOLARLY SUMMER CAMP DESIGNED TO GIVE HIGH SCHOOLERS A THREE WEEK STAY IN A COLLEGE DORM, WHILE TAKING NEAR COLLEGE LEVEL COURSES. MY MAIN CLASS WAS ON CRYPTOZOOLOGY.



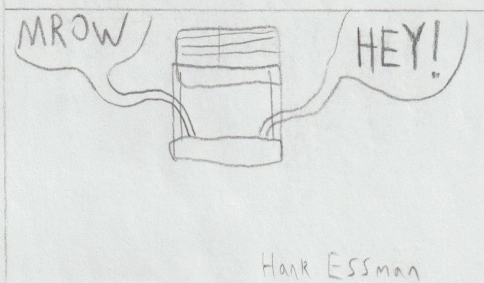
SOME OF MY FRIENDS WENT, BUT WE DIDN'T SHARE ANY CLASSES. THE ONLY ONE WE TALKED ABOUT WITH ONE ANOTHER WAS CALLED "COR" (AFTER SOME LATIN WORD), WHICH WAS BASICALLY A GROUP THERAPY SESSION EVERYONE HAD TO TAKE IN SMALL GROUPS.



AS FOR MY GROUP, ONE STUDENT TALKED ABOUT HOW HER REPUTATION AS THE CLASS CLOWN LEFT HER DEEPLY ISOLATED. AT THE TIME, I DIDN'T WANT TO HEAR IT.

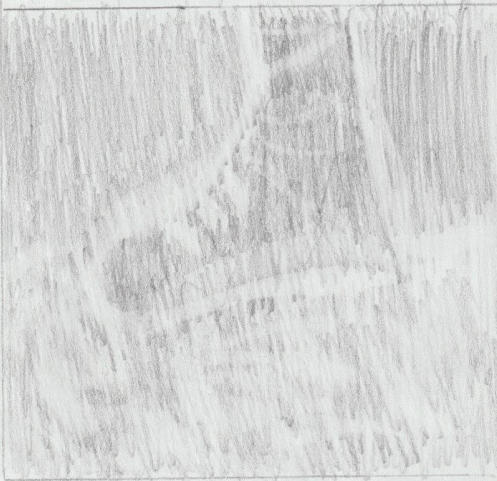


THE LAST TIME I SAW HER WAS A COINCIDENCE. A FRIEND OF MINE HAD SNUCK AN ILLEGAL GRADE LASER POINTER INTO THE CAMP, SO WE SHONE IT OUT THE WINDOW OF HIS ROOM INTO THE NIGHT, GLITTERING ON THE SIDEWALK THREE STORIES BELOW. THE STUDENT RAN OUT OF A GROUP, CUT THROUGH THE GRASS, AND BEGAN CHASING THE POINT OF LIGHT, MAKING NOISES LIKE A CAT.



Hank Essman

WE WERE NEVER THERE WHILE
IT WAS OPEN. MIDNIGHT
WOOD CHIPS, TOO OLD AND
HARD TO CRUNCH UNDER
OUR FEET, FIRMLY SHIFT



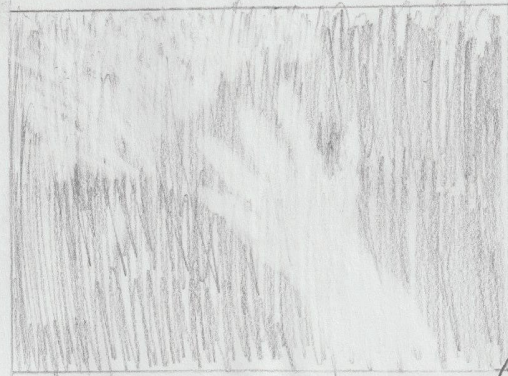
A SLIDE THAT BARELY CAME
UP TO OUR NECKS.



THE SCHOOL NEARBY, WINDOWS
DARKENED, BUILT IN HARD, BOXY
SHAPES. SLOPES, CURVES,
RESERVED FOR THE PLAYGROUND'S
FIFTEEN MINUTE RESPITE.

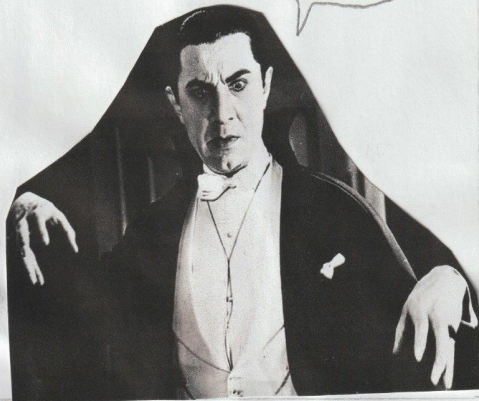


WE'D NEVER GONE TO THE
SCHOOL. WE VISITED AT NIGHT
BECAUSE IT WAS NESTLED
DIRECTLY BETWEEN OUR THREE
HOMES. YOU SAT ON A SWING,
KNEES HUNCHED PAST YOUR
BELLY BUTTON, AND THREW A
HANDFUL OF DIRT THAT
DISAPPEARED IN THE DARK.



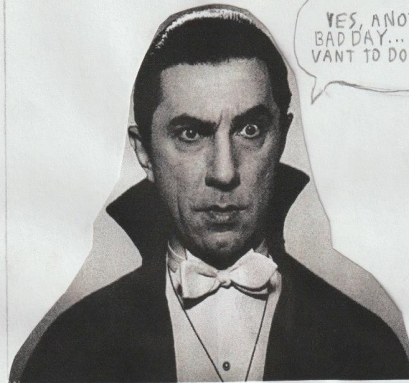
THE DAY MY GIRLFRIEND AND I
BROKE UP, I WAS TOO SAD TO
WATCH DRACULA.

BLEH!



IT WAS A SCREENING FOR A CLASS
I HAD BEEN TAKING ON VAMPIRES.
A KEY POINT THE CLASS HIT ON
WAS HOW THEY EMOTIONALLY
DRAIN THEIR VICTIMS AS WELL.
LEAVE FEELINGS OF LISTLESSNESS
AND EXHAUSTION.

YES, ANOTHER
BAD DAY... ALL I
WANT TO DO IS TALK..



I HAD A GROUP CALL WITH
MY PARENTS AND UNCLE THE
NEXT MORNING (MY UNCLE'S
A PSYCHOLOGIST). THEY
SOUNDED PRETTY CERTAIN.

OF COURSE, IT TOOK A
BLOOD TEST TO CONFIRM IT.

YEAH, IF YOU'VE
BEEN FEELING THAT
BAD FOR THAT LONG,
IT MIGHT BE SOMETHING
CLINICAL.

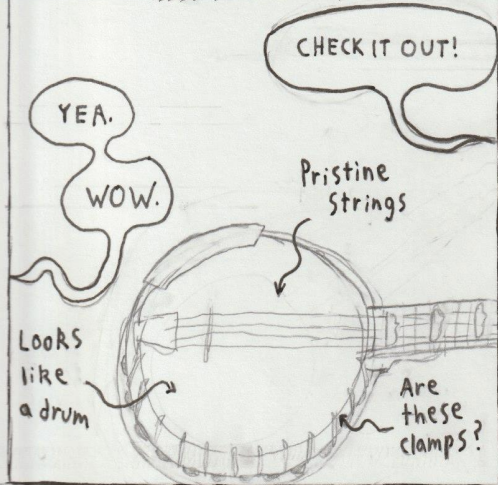


BLEH.



3

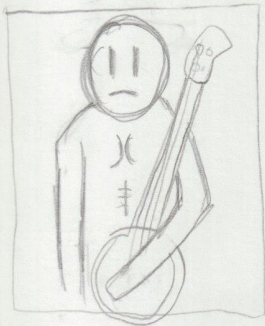
I HAVE A FRIEND WHO USED TO PLAY THE BANJO. I DONT KNOW WHY HE STARTED. JUST THAT HE TOOK SOME REALLY EXPENSIVE LESSONS, SO I GUESS HE MEANT IT.



HE TOLD ME HE ONCE HAD AN IMPROMPTU JAM SESSION WITH A MAN WHO CALLED HIMSELF "WOLF." THIS IS THE SAME FRIEND WHO BRIEFLY CONVINCED ME HE WAS COLOR BLIND IN FIRST GRADE, SO I'M NOT SURE I BELIEVE HIM.



HE WAS NAKED IN HIS SENIOR PHOTO, DECENCY ONLY KEPT BY A BANJO STRATEGICALLY PLACED IN HIS LAP. I STILL HAVE IT ON MY WALL. (AND I STILL GET QUESTIONS ABOUT IT.)



(Artist's Rendition)

PAGE 1: MISSOURI SCHOLARS
PAGE 2: MIDNIGHT PARK
PAGE 3: BLOODSUCKER
PAGE 4: CALL ME WOLF

ALL BY

Hank

Essman

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