

SUBTLE SCULPTING: THE PRESSURE POINTS OF THE  
OMNISCIENT NARRATOR  
AN ACADEMIC AND CREATIVE EXAMINATION

by

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## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

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The aim of this thesis is to engage with scholarly criticism of the omniscient narrator to provide new understandings about its distinct manifestation and function in literature. In order to reach new conclusions, this thesis will discuss the omniscient narrator both theoretically and practically by examining short stories of literary significance that employ the omniscient narrator. Through such exercises, this thesis argues that the omniscience should be thought of as the most limitless end of the spectrum of point of view. Furthermore, the omniscient narrator is best thought of as an autonomous entity rather than a purely objective provider of knowledge, vested with its own powers and thus its own opinions separate from author. The omniscient narrator's opinions can be discovered by examining the way it pushes the reader towards a particular truth of the story through such means as psychic distance and closeness, perspective jumping, and information giving/withholding. Finally, this thesis engages directly with the aforementioned academic discussion of the omniscient narrator through an original short story, demonstrating its unique advantages as a tool for the writer.

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## Overview

The study of omniscience in fiction, and indeed the study of point of view in general, is a study in the way a reader is receptive to information. For a writer, to select a point of view is to select the way in which they believe the reader will not only receive the story best in a technical sense, but also the lens through which the reader will most readily come to understand the truth that the author is trying to highlight: whether that be from directly out of a character's mouth, from a disembodied voice hovering throughout the story, or from a voice somewhere in between. Beginning with the advent of the novel, the reader at large was comfortable receiving the story from an authoritative narrator who made sweeping statements about characters and plot, and therefore the omniscient narrator reigned supreme. However, with the move towards modernism, the reader at large began to question the validity of such a sweeping narrator, thus a more limited perspective, one that delved into the psyche of the character(s), was viewed to be the most reliable, the most readily digested, and the omniscient narrator fell out of fashion. Now, with the current transition into postmodernism and its inherent desire for deconstruction, questions of authenticity and authority surrounding point of view become the focal point. In this light, no particular point of view can be said to have more authority than any other, given the varying degree of subjectivity found in all forms of point of view. It is in this current postmodern atmosphere, in which point of view is important not for its objectivity and authority but rather for the ways in which it is pushing the reader towards new understandings, that a conversation about the omniscient point of view and the omniscient narrator is not only relevant but wholly necessary. With this in mind, the

purpose of this thesis is not simply to prove that the omniscient narrator exists in fiction, but to illustrate that it is a dynamic tool in the writer's belt with its own unique advantages distinct from the other points of view.

### **Point of View and Omniscience**

Conventionally, point of view is broken into four categories: first person, third person limited, third person series, and third person omniscience. The convenience of such sectioning, especially for the first three of the four, seems only logical. First person is the direct perspective of a character, denoted by the use of the subject "I"; third person limited is restricted to the perspective of a single character, though mediated by a narrator, denoted by the use of the subject "He/She"; third person serial is an extension of the third person limited with the narrator able to access more than one character throughout the course of a story, though with each shift in character, the narrator's language changes to fit the character that it is following. Omniscience, on the other hand, is not as easily pinpointed. It is found somewhere on the outer rims of third person serial—when information is given to the reader that doesn't seem to come from a particular character, or when the narrator transitions from character to character without a change in language, giving the sense that the whole story is told by an outside entity. Because the omniscient narrator does not manifest itself with objective and easily identifiable elements beyond the aforementioned two the way that first and third person narratives do, it has even been argued that the omniscient narrator is a myth. This argument is built upon the idea that true omniscience—complete knowledge, and objectivity—has not and cannot manifest itself in fiction and therefore the calling a narrator omniscient is not only unhelpful but incorrect.

While there is some validity to this argument on its own, in highlighting the problems with the term “omniscience” we come closer to a redefinition of the omniscient narrator that captures the way it actually manifests, and therefore how it functions in a story. By acknowledging a narrator’s omniscient qualities and allowing it to be in control of the choice to reveal this knowledge while also allowing the omniscient narrator subjectivity, a new definition of the omniscient narrator comes to light, identifiable both by appearance and function. The hallmarks of an omniscient narrator, therefore, can be pinpointed by its sense of character rather than its sense of objectivity.

The omniscient narrator’s subjectivity, its opinions and ultimately its character, manifest in fiction in two distinct ways. First, the voice of the omniscient narrator is consistent in tone and diction, regardless of which character it is psychically close to at any point in the story. This is evidence that the omniscient narrator is a separate entity that is not shaped and limited by character the way that a strictly third person narrator is, which often manifests as free-indirect-discourse. Therefore, the omniscient narrator has a voice unto itself, identifiably unique in any given text. Secondly, if the omniscient narrator is still allowed its omniscient qualities without being required to divulge all of its knowledge from the outset of story, or even by its conclusion, then the effect of the omniscient narrator on its story becomes evident. By being in control of the entire presentation of the story, the omniscient narrator is able to control the way that the reader perceives the events of the story. It is through these selections that the character of the omniscient narrator, its biases and opinions, become apparent. On the large scale of the story, the omniscient narrator uses psychic distance and psychic closeness,

information giving and withholding, and perspective jumping to sculpt the reader's understand of the character(s) and push the reader towards the thematic truth of the story.

### **The Problems with Omniscience**

To begin understanding the omniscient narrator as an separate entity and an active force in fiction, it is important first to look at the problems surrounding the concept of an omniscient narrator that have led many scholars to dismiss the term altogether. In his article "The Myth of the Omniscient Narrator", John Morreall thoroughly deconstructs the idea of the omniscient narrator by highlighting what he believes to be the problematic expectations that the term "omniscience" brings with it. Morreall begins his article with the very bold claim that the omniscient narrator is a highly subjective term that, at its heart, it is merely a theoretical one used by scholars to describe the mechanics of a story on a case by case basis rather than a unifying, unique description of the type of narration. The main issue that Morreall illustrates is the implications of word "omniscient", and rightly so. Morreall points out the inherently religious connotation that the word "omniscient" has—as it is used primarily to describe the knowledge, power, and unbiased objectivity of God—and therefore is used as an analogous term to describe the characteristics of a narrator who has access to knowledge about the story beyond that of the characters. From this definition, Morreall argues that a truly omniscient narrator is impossible in fiction because there is no way to divulge all of the information that an omniscient narrator supposedly has access to, nor can it be done in a completely objective way. Morreall argues against the idea that an omniscient narrator can be considered omniscient even though it does not divulge all



of the information it has access to as evidence of its lack of objectivity, which a truly omniscient narrator must have, and dismisses the argument as an excuse for the apparent limits in knowledge of a supposedly omniscient narrator. From this Morreall posits that the omniscient narrator does not exist, but is rather a term used to describe the way information is given in a story.

### **Omniscience Reexamined and Redefined**

Morreall is right to raise these issues about the term “omniscience,” as in many ways it is an incorrect word given the expectations that come from its religious connotations, in particular, the notions of objectivity and total revelation of truth. It goes without saying, as Morreall explains, that this is not only counterintuitive to the way that fiction is constructed, but almost impossible to achieve, regardless of literary aesthetics. Examples of fiction that intentionally pushing the limits of narration to come close to Morreall’s description of the true omniscient narrator are few and far between. One such work is Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves*, a work with an incredibly detached narrator who reports in a stream-of-consciousness way exactly what each of its six character is internally feeling to the point of achieving objectivity, though within the limits of the subjectivity of the characters. However, this narrator is limited by the internal dialogue of each of its characters, and therefore cannot claim omniscient knowledge according to Morreall’s strict definition. What, then, is to be done with moments of omniscience as they do manifest in fiction, moments of information that could come only from an external source, given to the reader in a voice that remains consistent throughout the story? Where Morreall falls short is in his argument for the myth of the omniscient narrator is not his acknowledgement that true, religiously

defined omniscience cannot be replicated in literature. Morreall falls short in his all-or-nothing approach to an omniscient narrator; if an omniscient narrator does not fit the religious definition, than it cannot exist. However, by reexamining the way that omniscience manifests in literature beyond the bounds of religious terminology, the omniscient narrator becomes apparent as an active sculpting force in any given story.

Robert Boswell engages with this idea of reexamining and redefining omniscience by looking at how it appears in literature in his essay “On Omniscience.” Boswell sees the omniscient narrator in the classic sense, “one that may burrow into any available head or hear, articulate things no one in the story could know, access the past or future, make blanket statements about the nature of existence, interpret events, tell the reader how to process the story, judge actions or even condemn them” (Boswell, 65). Most importantly, Boswell continues his definition by including a qualifier that speaks to Morreall’s concerns and brings the concept of omniscience into the aesthetic of fiction. Boswell states: “fiction writers are not deities . . . also, the omniscient point of view is subject to the restrictions according to the needs and demands of the story . . . even if the writer were genuinely omniscient, she would have to select what to include and what to omit, whose thoughts to examine and whose to ignore; thus every omniscient point of view necessarily must be selective” (Boswell, 65). As Boswell highlights, fiction, while it aims at pointing at a truth, is inherently a construct. The same way a sculptor must make choices—what clay to remove, what to clay to keep, what clay to move from one part of the sculpture to the other part, and how to manipulate the clay to create the final product—and, in the same way that, just because the viewer cannot see all of the entire block of clay that the sculpture came from does

not mean that the artist was not aware of the entire block of clay and the sculpture at the same time. So too does construction and manipulation not negate the omniscience of an omniscient narrator. Rather, the omniscient narrator, vested with all of the power of manipulation, can be the ultimate tool of the story to push the reader towards the thematic truth of the story. One of the restrictions that Boswell does not give the omniscient narrator, as a counter to Morreall's definition, is that of objectivity: "an omniscient voice must be opinionated, even if it is reluctant to express the opinions openly; to be omniscient and tell a story and yet have no opinions about the characters, the place, and the circumstances is to be coy" (Boswell, 76). The omniscient narrator must have opinions, and from these opinions a general sense of a personality, even if it is not readily obvious to the reader on first glance, the same way that the author must have opinions about the story that is being told (though their opinions might not necessarily line up with those of the omniscient narrator). Simply the act of story-telling, the act of choosing a story to tell, gives insight into the opinions of the author, for choosing to tell a particular story with particular themes involves engaging with one's preferences. Likewise, for the omniscient narrator, insight into the opinions of the omniscient narrator can be found in way that the story is told give the reader, and therefore the way that this narrator pushes the reader, subtly or otherwise, towards a particular understanding.

However, in stating that it is not helpful to think of an omniscient narrator as a God-like entity but as a character in the story, it is also important that one does not make the mistake of equating an omniscient narrator to a voice-over type human character. Jonathan Culler is a scholar who argues for this distinction in his article

“Omniscience”. Of a similar mind as Morreall, he condemns of the term omniscience for its religious connotations. However, he sees this issue to be one of terminology rather than with the function of the omniscient narrator. Much like Boswell, Culler sees an omniscient narrator as having a distinct personality that is revealed through its choices in sculpting the story, rather than its choices undercutting its omniscience: “Omniscient narrators differ greatly from one another, not in knowledge, but in their readiness to share their unlimited knowledge with the reader . . . You can’t have selective omniscience, only selective communicativeness” (Culler, 24). Where Culler takes a step beyond both Morreall and Boswell is in his understanding of the implied binary between human and divine that seems to stunt our understanding of the omniscient narrator: “then why are there only two options left . . . ordinary human limitations or else omniscience? Why nothing in between? I think this is because Sternberg, like other theorists, assumes narrators to be persons and has only two possible models: mortal persons and a divine person” (Culler, 25). By allowing the omniscient narrator to hang somewhere between our expectations of human mechanics and divine power, we come closer to an understanding of the omniscient narrator as it manifests in literature: as an outside entity that is unlimited in the possibilities of its observation, but also allowed for its subjectivity to come through in the way it reports these observations and thus shapes the story. Culler goes on to describe four ways in which the omniscient narrator is most often manifests, and while these trends he observes can certainly be supported with evidence, in order to understand the unique capabilities of omniscience as a tool for the writer, it is more helpful to think of the omniscient narrator is defined by its limitlessness in its ability to convey a story.

Therefore, rather than cutting omniscience into four types, or point of view in general into cut and dry categories, point of view should be thought of as a spectrum from the most limited (first person) to the most unlimited (omniscience).

### **Author and Omniscient Narrator—Who is in Control?**

To understand the function of this limitlessness it is first important to define the absolute authority and power of the author versus the absolute authority and power of the omniscient narrator, only then can one begin to look in the right places for the omniscient narrator's pressure points and its personality. Thinking in terms of a movie set, the author's power and authority is similar to the story writer, the set designer, and the actors themselves. The author has complete control over the physicality of the story: whether it is night or day, on a farm or in a forest, told over a thousand years or just one hour, and, perhaps most importantly, is puppet master of the characters, dictating what they say, how they move, what they do, with whom they interact, their life story, etc. The omniscient narrator has no control over any of this—no control over the events, circumstances, or characters of the story that it is telling. Rather, the omniscient narrator is like the camera lens, the lighting director, and the musical overlay of the movie set. It may not have control over the events of the story, but it can color the viewer's perception of the events in the movie by lighting the set to highlight certain elements, creating a mood through musical choices, and zoom in or zoom out to point the reader's attention towards a specific mental and emotional understanding of the movie. To relate this back to fiction: in the large-scale construction of a short story, the omniscient narrator colors the reader's perception of the story through psychic distance and psychic closeness, through giving and withholding information, and through perspective shifts.

## Definitions

Before demonstrating the omniscient narrator's capabilities through close examination of stories that use an omniscient narrator, it is first important to unpack a few terms that will be used throughout this paper:

**Psychic Distance/Closeness:** where in space the narrator is holding the reader in regards to the character. The best way to think of psychic distance/closeness is similar to a camera lens—whether the camera is zoomed in on a character, so close even that they can see through their eyes and hear their thoughts, or zoomed out so far back that they are simply a dot in a satellite image, and anywhere in between. Psychic distance or closeness is achieved in a story through sentence structure, content, and diction. An example of different gradients of psychic distance to psychic closeness can be seen as described by John Gardner in *The Art of Fiction* in the rewriting of the first sentence of a story, each rewriting bringing the reader closer to the main character:

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul.

**Perspective Shifting:** when the narrative shifts from following one character to another. This can be done subtly, lasting for a fleeting moment in a single sentence, or can be a dramatic shift, dividing the focus of the story onto two or more characters. In third person limited stories, this shift is more often than not dramatic or at least quite obvious, as the diction, word choice, and sentence structure changes from the narrator

matching the voice of one character to matching the voice of another character (also known as free indirect discourse). An omniscient narrator does not engage in free indirect discourse in the same way that a third person limited narrator does in that its diction, word choice, and sentence structure do not change as it shifts from one character to another. Rather, perspective shifts are often signaled by a subject change within a sentence from one character to another. A simple example of perspective shifting without diction can be seen in the sentences below:

Lucy stood alone by the punch table, slowly sloshing the ladle around in the red liquid. From the other end of the dancefloor, Bob watched Lucy and wondered why she hadn't spoken to him all night.

**Implied Reader:** the reader that the author and/or omniscient narrator has in mind when writing a story. The distinction between the reader of the story (which can be any person at any time picking up the work and reading it) and the implied reader is especially important when discussing the omniscient narrator, as the omniscient narrator's techniques all have to do with manipulation. As will be seen in the stories examined below, the omniscient narrator makes craft choices at specific moments in a story with the intent of playing with a reader's thoughts, perceptions, and emotions. However, the omniscient narrator (and the author) are not in control of the experience of every reader that will ever read the story, therefore the choices are made with an imagined, or implied, reader in mind. Therefore, the effect that an omniscient narrator's choices have on the implied reader is not a description of an overarching readers experience but rather an expected and hoped-for experience.

## Psychic Distance

Psychic distance—emotional, intellectual, and “physical” distance—is a tool in the omniscient narrator’s belt that can be aptly used to sculpt the implied reader’s understand of characters in a story. An example of this can be seen in the beginning of Jack London’s “To Build A Fire”, in which the omniscient narrator establishes an entirely unique psychic distance with the purpose of both separating the narrator from the main character and prejudicing the implied reader against the him by not accessing his humanity in a forgiving light. This is established as early as the first sentence: “Day had broken cold and gray, exceedingly cold and gray, when the man turned aside from the main Yukon trail and climbed the high earth-bank, where a dim and little raveled trail led eastward through the fat spruce timberland” (London, 1). This opening line not only establishes the narrator’s tone, and ultimately its opinion of the events of the story and the main character, as an impersonal, no-nonsense, and more than slightly superior one, but also exposes a tension that the omniscient narrator has created through psychic distance. Choosing refer to the main character only as “the man” rather than giving him a name creates a purposeful level of distance between the narrator and the main character. This tension becomes all the more clear when the narrator is psychically close enough to access the man’s thoughts directly. Even when inside the man’s head there is a level of removedness from the man by leaving him nameless that reveals the narrator’s scorn for him and ultimately influences the way the implied reader perceives him, being unable to completely humanize him.

The use of psychic distance by an omniscient narrator to push the implied reader towards a specific conclusion can also be seen in Kate Chopin’s “Story of An Hour”.



The narrator begins the story from a removed distance similar to the narrator of “To Build a Fire”, however not with the purpose of scorning the main character: “Knowing that Mrs. Mallard was afflicted with a heart trouble, great care was taken to break to her as gently as possible the news of her husband's death” (Chopin, 1). Rather, the narrator begins in this removed way to establish the world that Mrs. Mallard lives in and, more specifically, the way that world has created preconceived notions about her and domestic women in general. This distance in the beginning establishes an important point of contrast in the story as the distance shifts and the narrator moves incredibly close to Mrs. Mallard. With this zoom-in to Mrs. Mallard, the implied reader is able to see that the notions of Mrs. Mallard being fragile because of her sex, to the point of being broken by the death of her husband, are entirely false without the narrator having to explicitly tell the reader. The distance in the beginning is also important because, as with Jack London's man, the implied reader is unable to humanize Mrs. Mallard's husband, who is believed to be dead throughout the majority of the story; the narrator chooses not to move close to Mrs. Mallard until after she has finished crying over the news of her husband's death, and in that way the narrator undercuts the supposed trauma of the husband's death for Mrs. Mallard. The implied reader is not allowed to see Mr. Mallard as a character worthy of being cried over, thus the focus is on her emotional transformation rather than emotional grief. This treatment of Mr. Mallard's death remains consistent through to the end when the psychic distance of the narrator shifts again, back to the removed point from which it began, with the revelation that Mr. Mallard is, in fact, not dead. Not only does this shift back to the removed distance make room for irony as it brings the implied reader back to the opening mental space of the

preconceived notions surrounding Mrs. Mallard as a housewife, but it also does not allow for any joy in the implied reader at Mr. Mallard's return. Rather, it further dehumanizes him almost to the point of being the unwitting antagonist of the story, given how the narrator has worked throughout the story to align the implied reader with Mrs. Mallard as a woman repressed by domesticity.

### **Psychic Closeness**

Just as important as the choice of psychic distance is to a story, so too can an omniscient narrator's use of psychic closeness (the zooming-in of the camera lens) in specific moments of the story be just as effective in push the implied reader towards the truth of the story. In "To Build A Fire", the omniscient narrator uses moments of psychic closeness to create irony and to push the implied reader towards the narrator's opinion of the man being foolish and utterly erroneous in his notions of man's superiority over nature: "He [the man] remembered the advice of the old-timer on Sulphur Creek, and smiled. The old-timer had been very serious in laying down the law that no man must travel alone in the Klondike after fifty below. Well, here he was; he had had the accident; he was alone; and he had saved himself. Those old-timers were rather womanish, some of them, he thought" (London, 7). Though the catastrophic event has not taken place yet, the narrator as worked up until this point to sculpt the implied reader's perception of the man, to highlight his brash ill-preparedness, and therefore the reader senses that these thoughts of false security will come back to haunt the man. This is heightened by the actual content of man's own thoughts, which are not under the control of the narrator, and therefore the implied reader is even more apt to be sculpted by the omniscient narrator, given that the man's thoughts in this moment that

the narrator has selected to share them line up with the portrayal of the man that the narrator is putting forth.

The effect of psychic closeness can also be seen in “Story of an Hour”, though with the purpose of bringing the implied reader closer to the character of Mrs. Mallard. As stated before, it is important to keep in mind that the narrator does not bring the reader close to Mrs. Mallard’s internal thoughts until after she has finished crying about the death of her husband, underscoring this moment, and thus prepping the reader for a bigger, more important revelation. The thematic truth that the narrator wants to push the implied reader towards lies in Mrs. Mallard’s epiphany—that she is now free to be herself without the constraints of her husband—and therefore the narrator brings the reader extremely close to her in this moment, accessing her thoughts as they come. In this way, the narrator allows the implied reader to follow through Mrs. Mallard’s train of thought pointed to this single conclusion, letting the implied reader align with Mrs. Mallard rather than being told the thematic truth of the story directly from the mouth of the narrator. The omniscient narrator intensifies this by being physically close to Mrs. Mallard, giving the reader physical descriptions of her state of being as she is having this epiphany: “The vacant stare and the look of terror that had followed it went from her eyes. They stayed keen and bright. Her pulses beat fast, and the coursing blood warmed and relaxed every inch of her body” (Chopin, 1). Just as with the internal dialogue of Jack London’s man, this moment is effective because the change in Mrs. Mallard’s physicality is beyond the control of the omniscient narrator. The narrator only has the power to show details that already exist in the story and describe them as the

narrator interprets them. Therefore, the physicality of the story is in line with the thematic truth that the narrator is pushing the implied reader towards.

### **Perspective Shifting**

Perspective shifting while keeping a consistent tone is one of the hallmarks of an omniscient narrator, and can be an invaluable tool to can push the implied reader towards the thematic truth of the story by undercutting a character's outward projection of themselves and creating irony. In "To Build a Fire", the omniscient narrator pushed the implied reader towards the conclusion that the man is foolish to challenge the power of nature by accessing the wolf-dog's thoughts at various point throughout the story: "The animal was depressed by the tremendous cold. It knew that it was no time for travelling. Its instinct told it a truer tale than was told to the man by the man's judgment" (London, 3). By choosing to access the wolf-dog's thoughts at this moment, they stand as a point of contrast to those that the man is having. Thus the narrator is setting the wolf-dog up to be a counterpoint to the man: the wolf-dog having instincts, which connect him to nature and give him a sense of respect for nature, as opposed to the man's intellect, which gives him a false sense of superiority. Likewise, the wolf-dog becomes a symbol of the natural world, an animal in harmony with its natural settings in a way that the man, also an animal, is not. All this work pushes the implied reader towards the opinions of the narrator in regards to the man by creating irony: though the man believes himself to be the superior being in this situation, the implied reader is able to see that it is the wolf-dog who has the advantage.

This perspective shifting to create irony can also be seen in the short story, "Three Years" by Anton Chekov, particularly in the third section in which the narrator

jumps between the heads of Yulia and Laptev after Laptev has just proposed. The narrator chooses to access each of their perspectives in succession with the purpose of contrasting them. There is a significant age difference between the two of them, and thus their opinions of what love and marriage ought to be differ dramatically. However, both characters believe themselves to be in love with the other. By shifting perspective to create this contrast, the omniscient narrator is able to undercut the profession of love that both characters express for each other by showing to the implied reader that they do not align and ultimately they are not compatible with one another; likewise the omniscient narrator uses this contrast, and the foolishness of these characters, to point at one of the thematic truths of the story, which is to comment on archaic ideals of love—how unrealistic they are and how damaging they can be to relationships. As seen before, the omniscient narrator is able to push the implied reader towards this conclusion by giving the reader access to the characters thoughts, the contents of which the omniscient narrator does not have control over; therefore the implied reader is able to come to the same opinion as the narrator without being explicitly told what to think.

### **Information—Giving and Withholding**

Another hallmark of the omniscient narrator is its access to the information of the story and its power over what information is given to the reader, at what time, and what is withheld. The effect of this tool to push the implied reader towards a specific emotional reaction or intellectual understanding cannot be underscored. In Jack London's "To Build a Fire", the omniscient narrator gives information to the reader rather than withholding it, specifically in regards to the actual temperature of the man's surroundings as opposed to what he perceives or would like to believe the temperature

actually is. By giving the reader this information, the narrator is underscoring just how out of touch the man is with his surroundings. The implied reader therefore sees the irony in his early boasts of assuredness, and his disastrous trek into the Yukon is no longer a product of naivety but all out foolishness. This is heightened by the fact that the narrator tells the reader the true temperature of the surroundings at the same time that he is introducing the wolf-dog, the wolf-dog being able to easily identify that it is far too cold to be traveling. This simple revelation given by the narrator early on helps to establish the dichotomy between the man and the wolf-dog which the omniscient narrator uses to prove its overall point: that the man's downfall is due to his inability to respect the awesome power of nature, a power that he will never be able to replicate or overcome.

In contrast, as has been touched on briefly before, the omniscient narrator in "Story of an Hour" purposefully withholds the crucial knowledge that Mr. Mallard is alive rather than dead as Mrs. Mallard believes him to be. The impact of this withholding upon the implied reader cannot be underscored enough. If the omniscient narrator had let the implied reader in on this knowledge, it would completely undercut Mrs. Mallard's epiphany, making it a moment pitiable dreaming rather than a moment of empowerment and autonomy. Moreover, it would further negate the effect of psychic closeness during the duration of Mrs. Mallard's epiphany by allowing the implied reader to see the irony of it rather than feel the emotional arc along with her. The ending would lose its devastation and seem like a foregone conclusion, and the entire story would run the risk of feeling like feminist propaganda rather than a developed story.

Thus the work of the omniscient narrator is the driving force creating the emotional arc of the story and sculpting the thematic of perception of the implied reader.

### **Subtle Sculpting**

All of these examples, while effective in pushing the implied reader, are rather obvious in the way that they employ the tools of the omniscient narrator, and therefore do not fully represent the capacity of the omniscient narrator. It would be misleading and wholly discrediting to say that, while an omniscient narrator inherently has opinions that shape the story it is telling, that this same narrator cannot be coy about its opinions or cannot use the tools of psychic distance and closeness, perspective shifting, and information giving/withholding to push the reader to the truth of the story in a subtle yet sublime way.

An example of an omniscient narrator that is truly subtle in its sculpting can be found in the short story “Fits” by Alice Munro. In this story the omniscient narrator uses the range of its abilities to tell the story of the murder-suicide of an elderly couple, the neighbor woman who finds their bodies, and the reaction of the residents of the small town of Gilmore in which the story is situated. To say that there are not multiple thematic threads throughout the construction of this story would be a discredit to the verbal finesse of Munro; however, for clarity and brevity, this thesis will focus on the particular way that the omniscient narrator handles the details around the murder-suicide and how these choices highlight the dehumanizing carnival of speculation that engulfs the town, subtly aligns the implied reader with the townspeople, and thus makes the reader look both outward at humanity’s reaction to death and inward at themselves.

In a rather counterintuitive move, the omniscient narrator begins with a full disclosure of what, for any other story, would have been the climax: “The two people, who died, were in their early sixties. They were both tall and well-built and carried a few pounds of extra weight. He was grey-haired, with a square, rather flat, face. A broad nose kept him from looking perfectly dignified and handsome” (Munroe, 36). The omniscient narrator further undercuts the potential for drama by beginning psychically distant with the proclamation of death in the first sentence. Even as it moves closer with the following sentences, the emphasis remains on the physical description of “the two people” rather than bringing the implied reader any closer to who these people are. This carries for the first scene of the story, the only scene in which the reader sees the Weebles alive—a scene that doesn’t even fill the entire first page, and ends with a shift to the perspective of Clayton, son of main characters Peg and Robert: “Clayton remarked afterwards that he knew the type” (Munroe, 36). Indeed, at the end of this scene, with the sparse information that the narrator has given, the implied reader can see the Weebles as nothing but a ‘type’, in the same way that the rest of the townspeople will come to see them as various, sensationalized types as their death becomes known. Thus the narrator lays the foundation for the implied reader to become mentally aligned with the townspeople and their morbid fascination with the death of the Weebles. From this brief scene, the narrator dismisses them altogether and thus encourages the implied reader to: the narrator takes on the voice of the town as it gives the reader a gossipy, data dump about Peg and Robert to the point that when it returns to the topic of the Weebles death they have already lost most of their humanity for the implied reader.



If the omniscient narrator appears to be forthcoming in the beginning of the story, it is perhaps only to frustrate the implied reader even more by the fact that it purposefully withholds all direct details of both the murder-suicide of the Weebles and the discovery of their bodies by Peg. In fact, throughout the entire story, the omniscient narrator never gives the reader the satisfaction of seeing Peg discover the bodies through her perspective. Rather, the only time that the reader is given some insight into that scene is through Robert's speculating from details given by a police officer: "He pictured what happened. First from the constable's report, then from Peg's" (Munroe, 41). This choice by the omniscient narrator to follow Robert's perspective is brilliant in that it is only a half satisfaction. Though Robert's imaginings go into great detail, the implied reader is purposefully made aware of the fact that they are receiving only a speculative account rather than truth. The implied reader is even further maddened by the fact that, while Robert goes into great detail to describe the lead-up to Peg discovering the bodies, he breezes over the actual moment of discovery. By utilizing both perspective selection and therefore information withholding (on the part of Robert), the omniscient narrator is heightening the implied reader's fascination with the scene of the murder-suicide of the Weebles through manipulation and frustration.

The omniscient narrator's choice to frustrate the implied reader is towards a higher purpose, therefore the omniscient narrator gives the implied reader an outlet for their frustration as the story progresses with the character of Karen, Peg's busybody coworker, who is outraged that Peg is not forthcoming about the murder-suicide: "Karen said Peg hadn't changed from what she always was. But after today she said, "I always believed Peg and me to be friend, but now I'm not so sure'" (Munroe, 45). The

genius of this moment is that, by frustrating the reader by withholding the details of the murder-suicide and the scene of discovery, the omniscient narrator has now aligned the implied reader with Karen. Perhaps not to the same overly dramatized, intrusive extent, but still, through the character of Karen the implied reader has an emotional release: just as Karen is, the implied reader is frustrated that Peg is not satisfying curiosity. Just as Karen is, the implied reader does not understand how Peg could not want to talk about the incident, does not understand how she could appear to be so undisturbed by the whole event as she does.

The introduction of the character Karen is more than just an outlet for the implied reader's frustration, but part of a series of choices by the omniscient narrator to push the implied reader into the headspace of the townspeople. Though it seems as though narratively the omniscient narrator is close to Robert throughout the story, it is Peg whom the omniscient narrator is most emotionally close to in that it chooses not to reveal the details of the murder-suicide but leave the dignity and humanity of the Weebles intact. Thus, as the omniscient narrator aligns with Peg, it in turn pushes the implied reader to align with the curiosity of Karen, Robert, and the townspeople at large. This dichotomy sets the stage for a move towards larger social commentary that a third person limited or even serial point of view could not achieve without coming across as heavy handed.

Moving from the scene with Karen, the omniscient narrator is slowly and subtly able to move from Robert's perspective into purely its own perspective, thus utilizing its freedom to make larger statements about the town's reaction to the murder-suicide: "People wanted to talk face-to-face. They had to get out and do it, in spite of the cold.

Talking on the phone was not enough . . . It was true that people valued and looked forward to the moment of breaking the news . . . Nobody wanted not to know” (Munroe, 48). Taking this statement on its own, there is no inherent judgement of the townspeople here; however, since the only specific scene involving a townspeople reacting to the murder-suicide has been Karen, this statement creates space for the implied reader to apply their own critique of the townspeople.

At the same moment that the implied reader is able to see how innocent inquiry has spiraled out into a dehumanizing spectacle in this town, so too is the implied reader realizing that they are part of this town. Throughout the story, they have been pushed towards aligning with the townspeople, both internally by human curiosity and externally by the work the omniscient narrator has done to play upon such morbid curiosity. In a moment of cognitive dissonance the implied reader is able to see how the reaction of the townspeople is grotesque degradation of the Weebles’ human dignity while at the same time being a natural reaction—and the implied reader sees this within themselves. Thus in the moment when the omniscient narrator speaks freely and directly, consciously or not, the implied reader understands that they are included in this statement:

What was it they were really looking for? Surely not much—in the way of details, description. Very few people actually want that, or will admit they do, in a greedy and straightforward way. They want it, they don’t want it. They start asking, they stop themselves. They listen and they back away. Perhaps they wanted from Peg just some kind of acknowledgement, some word or look that would send them away saying, Peg Kuiper is absolutely shattered (50).

From this point in the story, a story which has pages yet to go, the omniscient narrator has permanently unsettled the implied reader. The implied reader's curiosity about the Weebles remains, but it has been tainted somehow by the pressure of the omniscient narrator. All of this building to the final scene of the story in which the reader learns that on the way to the bedroom in which Peg discovered the bodies she had to step past Mr. Weebles' dismembered head rather than his leg, as Peg had initially told Robert. With this the reader is given the details they desired from the beginning, but in giving this specific detail about Mr. Weebles' head, the omniscient narrator is forcing the implied reader to come face to face with the physicality, the humanity of the Weebles that remains even in death. Thus the truth that the omniscient narrator is pushing the implied reader towards is one that is both internal and external; more than just a sweeping social statement, it is an honest look at life in response to death.

### **Subtle Sculpting and My Own Work**

If one of points of studying the strengths in other people's fiction and the craft of writing as a whole is to be able to apply what is learned to one's own work, then it would be remiss of me not to discuss my study of the omniscient narrator in correlation with my own work presented in the second half of this thesis. Through the process of writing my own piece, I came closer to the understanding that point of view is a spectrum of imposed limitation and lack thereof rather than separate categories. In the earliest draft, the point of view I was employing was a serial conglomerate of points of view from various elements, most likely an unconscious inspiration drawn from Virginia Woolf's novels *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. However, as I continued to write I began to recognize the early hallmarks of an omniscient narrator: a consistent

tone despite my various perspective changes. Moreover, I realized that in order to fully capture my subject matter in the way I desired to, I would need the full creative range that omniscience allowed.

My main objective in choosing such an interesting point of view was simply to allow my reader to see my subject matter—the family unit of Absalom, Isaac, Aaron, Miriam, and the Mother—as objectively as possible. The choice of using various elements to tell their story was an attempt to balance the scales; in order to tell the story of characters so focus around religion, which inherently gives mankind dominion over creation, it seem necessary to use a post-Darwinian lens, to tell their story through the voices of elements that had neither the comprehension nor the care for their religious convictions. Perhaps in the vein of Alice Munroe’s “Fits”, I wanted to take a story that had all the potential for emotional, internal drama and dilute it so that some greater truth might surface for the reader.

However, as I developed the story, I came to realize that no matter how objectively I imagined and intended the elements to be, in aligning them with particular humans and giving them distinct limitations I had begun to treat them in some ways as characters in their own rights. Moreover, I realized that beyond the observations of the various elements I had an overarching omniscient narrator that was accessing the points of view of these elements, with a distinctive voice and opinions and to ignore this would be to discount the creative power and potential of the artifice that I had constructed. With this realization, I took to heart Boswell’s statement that “an omniscient voice must be opinionated, even if it is reluctant to express the opinions openly”. In acknowledging the character of my omniscient narrator I was also wary of giving it free range in my

story given the subject matter; I absolutely did not want a narrative voice that sounded like the voice of God. Rather, I chose to employ the natural world to allow my omniscient narrator to stretch great psychic distances at moments that I felt were important, such as the rotation of the earth, the insignificant position of the earth in the cosmos, and the progression of Time itself. In conclusion, in employing the omniscient narrator in this story I hope to have my reader care about the characters and emotional arcs of the story while being aware of the inherently insignificant place their story inhabits in the larger progression of nature.

## **From Eden**

By

Emily Rachel Marie Zvier

*“And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things.  
But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination.”*

*Jeremiah 2:7*



## I.

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Absalom says this to the rough oak dining table, head bent, and to the other four pairs of elbows pressing into the table, to the hands clasped in solidarity, in mimicry. He says this to the roasted game fowl that has earned him a nasty cut on his upper arm, to the small mounds of potatoes and green beans that have gotten dirt under the children’s fingers, to the bread and soft churned butter that have calloused mother’s hands. He says this to the flickering candle light, and the light hears—which is out of the ordinary. The candle light usually only watches, hardly listens, and never speaks.

The light flickers with the exhaled breath of Absalom’s prayer, but doesn’t waiver. In his silence it stretches out through the darkness, glowing gently against every pair of eyes closed in prayer. Mother’s eyes, closed solemnly, lips slipping open just barely. Brother’s eyes, a peaceful straight line of brown lashes, lips twitching ever so slightly along with his father’s prayer. Younger brother’s eyes crinkled together, lips pursed in a downward slope of pink. Sister—but no, the candle light is closer to her than this.

The light illuminates Miriam. Even now, it fills the space behind her eyelids in a colorful array of shifting patterns, pulling her mind away from Absalom’s prayer. The light threads between her fingers, folded in prayer, and catalogues their every slight movement. The light sees her pupils twitch in erratic agitation behind eyelids millimeters from bursting open, hears the deep puffs of breath pushing through her nostrils and the grinding slip of her teeth as she readjusts her jaw. But her movement are

miniscule, lost in the overall picture of the room to all other, less observant eyes, and the seconds pass uninterrupted.

The light's twisting flame casts Absalom's face in highlight and shadow. His eyes, open just wide enough to see that his family's are closed, are deep and dark, the same color as the land they farm and hunt. His hands are rough—the light snags on every callous—folded together with a comfort that comes from years of habitual reverence. His voice is weighted with conviction—though, when it leaves his mouth to fill the room, the walls feel the hollowness of its vibrations.

“Amen,” he says.

“Amen,” the family says, and the walls send their voices echoing.

Then there is the scrape of metal fork prongs against wooden plates and bowls. Dinner begins, and the walls are covered with the sound waves from the scene unfolding.

“Tractor still broken?”—Isaac.

“It weren't the crank like you fixed last week; it's the load needle in the carburetor that done snapped, just like you thought it might.”—Absalom.

“Maybe I should have a look at it? Pa?”—Aaron.

“If I get a new part in town, you gonna replace it, Isaac? We need it to plough all that snow.”—Absalom.

“Yes sir, I think I can.”—Isaac.

“Well, alright then.”—Absalom— “Anything else I should be getting?”

“No, sir.”—Isaac.

“Pa, mother needs some vanilla extract for Isaac's cake next week.”—Miriam.

“S’ that so?”—Absalom.

“Mmm . . . but I can do without.”—Mother.

“What?”—Absalom.

“Mother said she could do without.”—Miriam—“Though I can’t possibly see how.”

“Hold your tongue.”—Absalom.

“I could use some string for my kite.”—Aaron—“I know there weren’t money for it before, or the time before.”

“The devil’s in that kite.”—Absalom—“I thought I told you to be done with that business. He who self-indulges in dead even while he lives.”

“Well, can I go with you at least?”—Aaron.

“There’s more devil in Willsonville than ten hundred of your kites—you’veven’t got the constitution for it. Not like your brother, anyhow.”—Absalom—“But I’m in need of an extra hand, if I’m to get groceries.”

There is no conversation after that, at least not for Aaron. For the walls, his voice is lost among those with deeper timber, and the way he hunkers down over his plate at the far end of the table, the candle light loses sight of him, and he disappears into the darkness.

The darkness is with Aaron. The darkness hovers beside Aaron, in his room when he is his most raw. When he is alone and fears the devil ran most rampant. The darkness is with him as he makes his kites, from Absalom’s old packing paper and a discarded glue jar filled with a measly oozing of pitch. The darkness tucks within the folds of his coat as he slips into the woods to harvest pitch from the pine trees a few

hundred yards beyond the barn, keeping him secret in the shadows, even from the illuminating glow of the moon. The darkness slips in between Aaron's nimble fingers, methodic in their twisting and wrapping, with paper and pitch and sticks. The darkness sees a cleverness in his hands that those with eyes could not.

And if the devil was in this, then it was a lesser devil, one to keep the others at bay. The ones that turned his thoughts to Sunday morning church and Ms. Sarah's nylon stockings. The way her hips swished underneath her pale blue dress—back and forth, back and forth, in smooth, wide circles—as she walked up the isle to receive communion. Her fingertips brushing his palm as she shook his hand in the sign of peace. The curve of her pale, pink lips as she said the Lord's Prayer. The darkness was in the beads of sweat that covered Aaron's forehead when he couldn't keep his mind from lingering on her at night, and because of that Aaron knew the devil lived inside of him. Rose up between his legs, and he couldn't keep it down, or pray enough to keep his hands from leaving it alone.

The darkness filled the room those night, when the devil had hold of him and he couldn't do anything but give it release. The darkness was in the grooves his fingernails left in the leather of his first communion bible that night when he beat himself black and blue between the legs with it. The darkness filled his lungs as his mouth hung open in a silent scream and sunk deep into the dark stain of cold sweat left on his sheets. Tonight, the darkness hangs on the wrinkles of Aaron's forehead, jolted in the wake of his tossing body.

“The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,” Aaron says fervently into the rough white cotton of his pillow.

The earth is with Isaac, even now, high in his bed heavy with sleep. It fills the grooves of his boots lying in the corner of his room, works its way under his fingernails, and covers the back of his neck with a fine film of dust that sticks to his skin as he sweats. Of all the family's sweat that had ever soaked this land, he gives his most willingly, and the earth relished him for it. Every day the earth feels his hands dig deep into its body, feeling him thriving in giving, hearing him praying for another opportunity to give. The earth takes everything he gives, and then some—and in that way it keeps the devil from him. Its dirt grinds deep into his pores and its weathered ground yields only to the strongest of blows, gnashing at his young muscles, sucking the energy from his body so that, when the night comes, he slips straight into the halo of dreamless sleep. Now, wrapped in a cocoon of sheets, he doesn't have time or energy to think of anything but potatoes or green beans or corn or the tractor's carburetor. No time for thinking childish thoughts—of tigers in India, of ancient ruins in the amazon, of airplanes sailing across the oceans. Or of the five minutes of television that he had seen in the backroom of the hardware store, a lost eleven year old without a father for guidance. No time for the reveling of his curious, childhood mind. It was for the best, he had decided when he turned fifteen. It was God's design. God's wrath written in the frown of his father's face when he found him in front of the television set. God's salvation written in the pride in his father's face when he ploughed his first field, first read the gospel in front of the congregation at church. The earth takes from him, strips him bare, and saves him from the devil. It keeps secret all the things it takes from him.

“The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord,” Isaac whisper softly before closing his eyes to sleep.

But it was the radio in the department store in Willsonville that glimpsed Isaac's soul in a way the earth never would. It was there that he heard the sound of an electric guitar that shook him to the core, injecting liquid metal into his veins. That trembling, soulful voice—three minutes of music that no amount of sweating and ploughing could pull from his psyche. And, if Aaron hadn't touch his shoulder coming back from the bathroom, Isaac might have crumpled up the proselytizing pamphlets they had been handing out on the corner and forsaken the god of his ancestors for one that seemed to speak back.

The light is with Miriam, glowing from the stub of her candle and the orangey ember at the end of the cigarette that she has stolen from Absalom's coat pocket. The light illuminates the depth of the night as she hides in the muck room at the back of the house, wrapped in Isaac's work shirt to keep the cigarette smell from her underclothes. All that exists in the glowing hallow of light is herself, a ballpoint pen, and a small pad of paper with almost all of the pages torn out.

The candle light colors the grooves of her knuckles as she writes, streaking the pen with lines of gold as it moves up and down across the page. The light watches the pen pause, suddenly void of inertia, and then drop on the pad with the soft, dull thud. The light slides down the bridge of her nose as she looks down at what she has written, then glows orange in the burning end of the cigarette she brings from the ashtray to her lips. She takes a drag, making the end of the cigarette glow sharply; she holds the smoke in her lungs for a moment, and then pushes the smoke out on to the page.

Miriam rips the page out, crumples it into the ashtray, pressing the end of her cigarette to the paper. The light flinches for a moment, but obliges and sets it alight. It is

a small flaming bundle—not at all like snarling hearth it had been when Absalom discovered a copy of Byron under her mattress. But still, its flame fills the mudroom with the scent of burning paper that makes her nostrils curl. The light burns bright yellow circles in her eyes as the paper crinkles in flames, and then slowly fades out until the only light is coming from the cigarette’s little ember. She pushed out the cigarette until it is gone and there is no light left.

The darkness is swift, immediately stretching to fill the whole room as if it were an ocean, sloshing against the wooden walls and drenching Miriam’s entire frame. The darkness swims in her eyes and plugs her ears with ringing silence so that she cannot hear her brother approaching until the mudroom door announces his presence with a long, slow creak.

Brother and sister both freeze as they immediately recognize an intruder in the other. For Aaron, his eyes already adjusted to the darkness, it is the figure on the stool. For Miriam, blinded temporarily by the memory of the candle’s flame, it is the unfamiliar sound—the door, footsteps, and breathing.

“Hello,”—Aaron, with a voice trying to capture the tenor of his brother, trying to swell in the room. The walls hear all of this, but cannot help him, and so his voice echoes back as a young boy’s forced bravado.

“Aaron?”—Miriam.

“Yeah,”—Aaron. “What’re you doing here?”

“Could ask you the same question.”—Miriam.

The darkness is in the hard frown of Miriam’s bottom lip, and the crinkle of Aaron’s nostrils.

“You been smoking.”—Aaron.

The walls hear silence for the longest time, and the darkness stretches in the extra room, becoming a little bit darker.

A little breath.

“Getting pitch for my kites.”—Aaron.

“Is that so?”—Miriam—“I was smoking and writing, so I suppose I beat you.”

The walls hear what the darkness confirms to be the smallest smile.

“You wouldn’t mind telling Pa that, would you?”—Aaron.

Laughter, a rarity that rattles the walls.

“C’mon, I’ll help you.”—Miriam.

The walls are left behind as the door is pushed open and the darkness of the mudroom melds with the darkness of the icy night, following them out across the snow covered ground until the clouds break and the light appears with the moon, illuminating the siblings in a silvery glow. The darkness hovers only in the shadows now and the trees begin to catch the sounds of the siblings in the gentle rattling of their leaves: the two pairs of feet crunching lightly across the snow, slipping deep into drifts accumulated by their trunks with a gentle puff. They hear the gentle murmurs back and forth around their trunks, feel the prick of a knife, and then soft scrape of smooth glass against their rough bark as they slowly bleed pitch. In the stillness of the night, the voices overflow with the same quiet verve that they possessed as children, a time when their voices rang out among the trunks as their little bodies teetered with play. A breeze floats through the leaves of the trees, the sound mixing with Miriam and Aaron’s



murmurings and masking the sound of footsteps crunching in the distance, drawing closer with every beat.

“Evening.”—Isaac. The trees recognize his voice instantly, but his voice is sharp in a way that doesn’t reverberate quite comfortably off their bark, and the earth beneath his feet grows colder.

“Isaac.”—Miriam.

“Couldn’t sleep.”—Isaac—“Though it’s no wonder what with my younger siblings in trouble.”

“And what trouble might that be?”—Miriam.

“Now, now, Miriam, there’s no need to get uppity. I ain’t one to be casting no stones, I’m just trying to help you. It’s one thing for you to be smoking—yes I can smell it on you—but to be helping Aaron into sin?”—Isaac.

“Where’s the sin in my kites? You tell me one verse that says I can’t make my kites—you find me one line and I swear I’ll stop.”—Aaron.

“Aaron,”—Isaac—“Aaron, brother, are you telling me truthful you can’t see the devil in you right now? Look at yourself, out here in the cold in the middle of the night, being deceitful, disobeying Pa—all for the making of kites, when you could be using your talents to praise God?”

“He could be doing worse things than making kites.”—Miriam.

“A sin is a sin, and a justified sin worser I think.”—Isaac—“The thoughts of the righteous are just; the counsels of the wicked are deceitful.”

“Well, thanks be to Saint Isaac.”—Miriam.

“Excuse me?”—Isaac.

“Yeah, yeah, no she’s right. You ain’t so high and mighty yourself. Preaching about sin when I know the sins you’ve got to cover up yourself.”—Aaron.

“Now, Aaron, no one is without sin and I don’t pretend to be any different.”—Isaac. The moonlight covering his face is smooth, but through the shoes and the snow, the earth feels his heart begin to pound in a heavy, jerking rhythm.

“I know all about your sin. Mr. high and mighty with a sin to curl Pa’s hair. I seen you every now and then when you working alone. I heard you whistling that devil song.”—Aaron.

“Shut your mouth.”—Isaac. His face is cast a deathly pale by the silvery glow of the moon and all the lines in his expression grow hard like granite.

“Devil song! Yessir, you whistle it like it’s a hymn. I’ve heard you whistling the devil’s hymn. Ever since we been preached at Willsonville and you listened to that radio. Whistling and tapping your feet like you’re the devil himself. There ain’t no devil in me, can’t be when it’s so big inside you.”—Aaron. The trees rustle, from the wind, and from the edge in the young boy’s voice.

“I said you shut your damn mouth.”—Isaac.

“Isaac!”—Miriam.

“Hypocrite devil! That’s what you are.”—Aaron—“You hypocrite devil! You devil!”

The moonlight covers Isaac’s body as it magnifies, shoulders rising, chest pushed out, and fist clenched, twisting on the edge of momentum as if he were about to strike the younger boy, still shrieking, still shaking. Isaac is taller than he has ever been—the tallest speck in the light of a distant moon.

But the moonlight fills Aaron's eyes with watery crescents, and Isaac deflates. The darkness catches Aaron as his body shrinks, head bent, filling the lungs that can't seem to find breath to sustain his energy. Isaac bends down into the darkness too, wraps his arms around his younger brother, and in the darkness the shaking of his arms is hidden by his brother's heaving chest.

"Aaron, oh, Aaron, Aaron, brother. It's alright now. It's going to be alright now. Don't you see you've done it? You've worked through it and pushed that devil out of you. He's gone now. It's alright, brother."—Isaac—"Come now, let's get you to your prayers and into bed."

"No, Isaac."—Miriam—"I'll take him. You'll leave him be now." Her hands wrap around Aaron's shoulders, a gentle pressure that pulls him up from the ground and into the glow of the moonlight.

"Yes—yes, a womanly, mother's touch is the right thing now."—Isaac—"I'll just be checking on the horses now, probably startled, you know. Don't wait up for me." The trees hear a steady calm in his voice, but deep in their roots they feel what the earth feels, a heartbeat racing with an excess of adrenaline.

But the earth is moving, and so is the moon; its light is beyond Isaac now and he is lost behind the shadow of the trees. The earth crunches under Isaac's feet as he moves towards the barn. But the trembling of his boots against the frosty ground is drowned out by the rustling muzzle of a foraging deer in a clearing several miles to the south east, and even farther still, the slow rumbling of sweet potato seedlings on the highlands of Papua New Guinea, crackling through the red soil. Time continues.

## II.

The earth moves; the sun rises on its spinning surface to begin another day, flooding the hills with gold. The sunlight glints on the crests of snow banks, the tips of pine needles, and the wheels of the truck following the winding road—turning, over and over, round and round, bumping across the earth surface on the way to the town below. There are three men inside—Absalom, Isaac, and Aaron—the trees catch the flavor of voices and pieces of language in the rustling of their leaves, but nothing substantial enough push the trees to strain their ears. It isn't until the wheels stand still, pressing their weight into the frozen earth, that the wide, crooked sycamore outside Smith's Tool Shed hears an unfamiliar voice.

“You're to go straight to Ackerman's along Patterson St. You're not to take the main street. You'll buy the items on the list your mother wrote. There's money to spend, and the rest you'll put on my tab.”—Absalom.

“Yessir.”—Aaron.

“Don't disappoint me, boy.”—Absalom.

The air around Aaron's body is icy and clear. It steals the heat from his cheeks, condenses with the heavy exhale of his breath, but hardly stirs in the wake of his trudging body. The snow follows him down Patterson Street, floating with the air around his shoulders, getting caught in his brown hair, rising in grubby white puffs around his boots. The earth hardly notices the crunch of his boots against its surface; its attention is turned back up the road, bearing the weight of Absalom's boots and watching the patterns of Isaac's movements, and so it doesn't feel Aaron pause in the

snow and then stop walking, though he is nowhere near the Ackerman's General Store. The snow settles in the stillness of his boots and waits.

A light has caught Aaron's eye is from another store. Shining crookedly from a badly mounted storefront bulb, the light casts Aaron's face in half shadow as he stares at the window display. From the shadowed curve of Aaron's left eyebrow, the darkness stares with him through the glass at a multitude of brightly colored cardboard sleeves, black plastic circles poking out of their topmost sides. The darkness doesn't comprehend them, but understands the soundwaves coming from the one rotating on a wooden box, causing the glass to vibrate. The glass hums with the music playing within, and Aaron's short exhales condense warm and wet against its surface. Aaron's breath joins the hum of the glass, and the glass is colored with opaque patterns.

"Aaron, hello!"—a female voice rattles against the glass.

"Well, hello Ms. Sarah."—Aaron. The glass is made cloudy with a sharp burst of breath. The darkness turns to see who had spoken, but Aaron turns too, and his face is flooded with light.

"How have you been?"—Sarah.

"Well, I, I'm quite embarrassed. I didn't know they had such a store down on Patterson. I would never . . . Had I known."—Aaron.

"Oh, I won't tell anyone."—Sarah.

"I don't want you to think less of me"—Aaron. His cheeks grow a hot red that even the bitter wind can't simmer down.

"I wouldn't think anything of it. Honest."—Sarah.

The snow settles in small piles at their feet and falls on their shoulders and heads, almost enough to cover the knit of their clothes. But their shoulders move with speech, and clumps of snow are tipped off, and fall with gravity.

“You know, Sally Everclere wants to have her daddy buy the whole lot and burn them in a big public display. She was passing through Ashford with him on a business trip and said she saw one of those rock singers on a television set swinging his hips like he was possessed by Satan himself.”—Sarah—“Isn’t that the silliest thing you ever heard?”

The snowflakes cling to her eyes lashes and slip off the curves of her cheeks, sparkling in the storefront light.

“I suppose.”—Aaron. The snowflakes slip under the collar of Aaron’s coat and melt on the flushed skin on his neck, rolling down his back in wet beads.

“She said she was scandalized. Swears she can’t even sing a hymn for fear she might sing the devil’s music instead. But she’s prone to exaggeration.”—Sarah—“They are awful loud and screechy, but they got so much life to them. What do you think of them?”

“Well, I—The devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour, First Peter says . . . and it is awful loud, like a lion.”—Aaron.

“You sound just like your father”—Sarah—“I was asking you to speak honest. He isn’t here to scold you.” The glass of the store vibrates with the sound of the music within and with the sound of her bright burst of laughter.

“I’ll pray for you, Ms. Sarah.”—Aaron.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Aaron, I didn’t mean to disrespect your father.”—Sarah—“It’s just, well I swear your Pa’s more fearful of the devil than Pastor David. Don’t you find any of it to be overblown?”

The snow is compressed under Aaron’s twisting feet, and under the weight of his feet it can almost feel the weight within Aaron himself—fear, desire, expectation, all pressing against the inside of his skull until they push out in small beads of perspiration.

“It’s a wise man who fears the devil at every turn. He protects us.”—Aaron.

“I suppose you’re right”—Sarah. Her eyes glow soft in the store front light, and Aaron’s feet shift in the snow, as if he has made some terrible mistake.

“Say, myself and a few of the other youth members are having a prayer meeting this Thursday night. Would you like to join us?”—Sarah.

“Oh, no.”—Aaron—“Not to be rude, Ms. Sarah, but I couldn’t possibly go to a prayer meeting with women. Pa wouldn’t hear of it.”

“Yes, I understand. Well, I best be going. Tell Miriam I said hello. We missed her in our knitting circle. I’ll pray for you too Aaron.”—Sarah.

“Sarah.”—Aaron—“Thanks for inviting me, anyhow.”

“Of course.”—Sarah.

Without wind, the snow collects on Aaron’s shoulders as he stands alone in the light of the store front. The snow crushes slightly as he shifts his weight from one foot to the other, and then back again. Snowflakes cling to his eyebrows, furrowing downward, then slip onto the bridge of his nose. Then the snow is unsettled altogether, falling to the ground as Aaron lifts his hands to his head, mittens pressed tight against his ears, eyes squeezes shut.

Slowed and distorted through the store's pane of glass and the Aaron's thick mittens, nevertheless the soundwaves coming from the rotating black record slip into the dark hollows of Aaron's ears. They ricochet off his eardrums, sending vibrations straight through his brain where they find memory. They find Isaac as he was that day in the Willsonville department store, startled and with a strange burning in his eyes that Aaron had never seen before, and that same song playing in the background. They find Isaac again, two weeks from that moment, the sound of him humming that song in the barn when he thought he was alone. They find Isaac's smile, an expression almost faded from Aaron's memory. Aaron slowly pulls the mittens from his ears and soundwaves come through clear.

The vibrations of the music are of little consequence to the snow, but it feels Aaron shift his weight slightly to one side and feels something more than rubber between it and the boy. The gentle crinkling of paper, a single dollar, Aaron's very own, hidden in the sole of his boot along with the hope of buying string for his kites. The snow is sent scattering at the sound of a small brass bell as Aaron pushes open the store door.

### **III.**

Time passes, night comes, and the darkness is with Aaron once more. The darkness buzzes around Aaron's restless form, brushes by his fluttering eyelashes and squishes between his toes squirming under cotton sheets. For hours it waits with him, then finally moves with him as he rises from the bed, passes through the hallway, and



creaks the wooden door of his brother's bedroom open. The walls rattled slightly with the thud of the door closing, enough to open their ears to listen.

“Isaac?”—Aaron. “Isaac? Are you awake?”

There is a rustling of fabric and skin on skin as Isaac rubs his face, callouses catching his stubble with a bristly twang.

“I suppose so.”—Isaac—“What can I do you for?”

“I want to show you something.”—Aaron.

“At this hour?”—Isaac. There is a deep exhale of breath and a dull thud of weight hitting the bed once more.

“C'mon, Isaac, please?”—Aaron.

“It better be Jesus himself.”—Isaac.

The darkness keeps pace with them as they slink through the silent house, and then flees to the shadows of the trees as the brothers stepped out into the frosty moonlight. The frozen earth crunches underneath their boots, but their weight is not captivating enough to hold its attention, so the brothers are left to the silence eyes of the moonlight until they near the edge of the field where the trees catch their voices on the wind.

“The treehouse?”—Isaac.

“C'mon, I'll show you.”—Aaron.

The wooden steps of the treehouse creak as they bend with the weight of the two boys who have grown large since the wood last supported them. It had been Absalom's hands that had cut the trees from the earth, stripped and parred them down, and hammered them into the correct form. Absalom's hands and Isaac's hands as he was

guided through the proper way to hammer while Aaron's little hands had carried a bucket of nails—in a time before Absalom had had a vision of salvation, when his laughter rang out heavy and deep among the high pitched squeals of his children. It didn't matter much anymore. Time has passed and the wood has been weathered so much that it isn't aware of much beyond the heat of the sun, the rattle of the wind, the wet of rain, and now the ice of winter and the pressure of rubber boots. It is numb to the nails, but the tree holding it up, is gouged by the same nails and feels them twist as the boys ascended. It hears the scrapping of boots, the scrabble of hands through tufts of snow, and the brush of fabric on fabric as the brothers' shoulders brushed against each other in the confining space.

The moonlight is with them too as they move through the treehouse, rising up the wooden ladder along the north side of the large hickory tree to the second level. It reflects off the tips of their fingernails, the strands of hair poking out from under their hats, and glows in the irises of their eyes. Finally, slipping through the wide wooden slats of the roof, it glints on the small silver needle of the record player that Aaron pushes across a rickety wooden table towards his brother.

“You stole this? I won't be a part of any theft.”—Isaac.

“Never,”—Aaron—“Borrowed it from Peter Hendson. Remember Pa sending me out to help their family, Peter's grandpa passing, to go through his stuff? Peter and I found it in the attic—it's a crank, see? No electricity needed. Peter thought his Pa might want to try and sell it, but I asked him to borrow it.”

“For what reason?”—Isaac.

“For—you know . . .”—Aaron.

“No, Aaron, I do not have the slightest idea.”—Isaac.

“For . . .”—Aaron—“Well, for playing church hymnals. Recorded ones. Or scripture passages. Sermons. So you don’t have to wait for Sundays to come ‘round.’”

“Is that really what you had in mind?”—Isaac.

“Yessir”—Aaron.

There is silence, broken only by the softest of patters against the wooden slates of the roof. It has begun to snow. Three flakes fall through the gaps in the roof and cling to the front of Aaron’s jacket, shaking minutely with the beating of his heart.

“C’mon Isaac. Listen to it. Just once.”—Aaron. The moonlight glints sharply on the needle as he moves it onto the black grooved disk. In this moment the only sound the trees hear is syncopated breathing, the scrape of metal on plastic, the creak of the crank handle, and a muffled popping static.

Then the darkness is crackling with sound waves as the contraption screeches out musical electricity. The leaves tremble with every chord. Even the deadened wood of treehouse rattles with the energy. The sound waves pervade the darkness, spreading out through its void until they collide with Isaac’s eardrums, which vibrate with sound until every molecule in his body quivers. As if sound itself could hold everything he had ever wanted, could scream through the night all of the secrets he kept hidden from even himself. A life in which he could ask questions instead of provide answers. A horizon that stretched as far as Tibet, the Cape of Good Hope, and the Andes. A world in which he could just, for god sakes, listen to Chuck Berry or Elvis Presley without fearing for his immortal soul. For this instant, for this single moment in time, the darkness is with

Isaac, trembling from the sound of the electric guitar captured on the record spinning round and round.

But the darkness is stretched farther than the treehouse, and the soundwaves reverberate through its entirety. A match is struck and light appears in Absalom's room in the house across the field.

"What was that?"—Absalom. The wooden walls here the rustle of sheets, calloused hands scrapping cotton, and the slight crack of old bones.

But mother is already at the bedroom window; the glass is filled with her wavering reflection staring through it across the field to the treehouse where two forms are exposed by the moonlight.

"It's nothing."—Mother—"There's nothing."

Across the field there is a final screech, and the darkness watches the shining needle scrape horizontally across the ribbed black disc as Isaac's hand knocks the knobbed lever to the side. There is silence now, and the brothers stand unmoving, their bodies cast in alternating slivers of light and shadow. In the stillness the tree can hear the pounding of each heart, churning blood and adrenaline.

"You tricked me."—Isaac.

"Isaac, I just thought, I mean, I know how much you liked it. Maybe you might want to listen to it again, just once."—Aaron.

"No, you didn't do much thinking."—Isaac. "I don't want to see this thing, or hear you talking about it again." But the moonlight is in Isaac's eyes, glowing startled and with a strange burning.

#### IV.

The morning sunlight glints in the sweat beading on the brothers' brows, in their eyelashes squinting close together from its glare, in the opaque puffs of their labored breath meeting the frozen air. The only shadows that exist are the fleeting ones created and destroyed as sheep collide and disperse in a large conglomerate, and so the darkness doesn't see Aaron become tangled in the mass of animals. But the sunlight sees him twist, the earth feels him fall, and the trees at the far edge of the field hear him exclaim loudly.

“Stupid thing!”—Aaron.

“Look alive, boy!”—Absalom.

“Knocked over by sheep, by golly, maybe I should carry you on my back. Safe from harm.”—Isaac. The trees hear his voice sharp over the pound of hooves, the bray of sheep, and the barking of the herding dog.

“I ain't no baby—you couldn't carry me if you tried”—Aaron. The trees hear the lack of oxygen in his delivery, despite the amount they are pushing out into the surrounding air.

“Has to do it himself.”—Absalom—“You should thank your brother for his kindness.”

“He's mocking me, father!”—Aaron—“It's bad enough that I ain't got no herding dog to use but only a stick, and now he's—”

“—be grateful for what you have.”—Absalom—“It ain’t mocking if there is truth being pointed to. Don’t give your brother your weakness and complain when he whips you with it. You’ve got to be stronger than that.”

Aaron says nothing after this, or, if he does, the trees cannot hear it through the commotion of the animals, Isaac’s shrill whistle, and the barking of the herding dog. Snow is sent churning and the sun catches it, sparkling and blinding. Aaron raises a hand to his brow as he struggles through the white powder, the shepherd crook in his hand rendered useless. From its great distance, the sun watches the scrabbling herd form a conglomerate ushered into the wooden pen, a single dot on a planet almost lost among the stars.

The wind rattles through the trees as the sheep begin to settle into their confinements, and the trees can hear clearly once more.

“We’ve got an injured one here, father.”—Isaac.

“Lame in the leg, she’ll have to go.”—Absalom.

“It’s only sprained I think.”—Aaron.

“What do you know of it?”—Absalom—“Isaac, so fetch my shotgun.”

“Yes sir.”—Isaac.

“Why, you don’t need to kill her, do you?”—Aaron—“She ain’t limping too bad, it could heal.”

“Are you going to do it? Abandon your chores? Waste your time to heal a sheep that’ll die in your arms?”—Absalom.

“Here, father.”—Isaac.

“Isaac, get her to lay down, tie her legs if you have to.”—Absalom—“Aaron, you’ll be doing this one.”

The snow compresses as the weight of the beast is forced upon it, thrashing, until the snow becomes matted white on white into the sheep’s wool. The snow presses into the fabric of Isaac’s pants, his knees pushed so deep into it, and from the heat of his working skin is melted into water. The sun fills the wide eye of the animal that is facing upward. The trees hear a long, low bleat.

“Father, I couldn’t!”—Aaron.

“You’ll do as you’re told. You can’t complain about not having a gun of your own if you won’t use it for its purpose.”—Absalom.

The sun catches the barrel of the gun, and it glows silvery white before being thrust against Aaron’s chest, creating a concave in the fabric of his coat. For a moment, the darkness is with Aaron in the space between the wood and metal of the gun and the fabric of the coat, then sinks lower until it finds the pocket of constant darkness between his coat and his ribcage, rising and falling rapidly with his breathing. The darkness can feel electricity in his body, shooting from his nervous system to his brain, thoughts firing rapidly, caught somewhere between obligation and morality. He has shot a gun before, and he has kill an animal before, but he has never taken a life, and somehow, staring into the frantic golden eyes of the sheep, it seems somehow closer to life than he has ever been.

“Take the shot.”—Isaac—“Don’t be shaky about it or you’ll botch it.”

Sound crackles through the air, sharp and steely, and the snow is made wet with blood.

“Good, now you’ll carry that back into the barn to Miriam. She’ll know what to do with it.”—Absalom.

The sunlight is with Miriam, filtering through every open window in the barn as she cleans out the horse stables, as it is with Aaron as he pulls the sled laden with the sheep carcass through the snow. It fills her form with light as she rises from a stoop at the sound of Aaron entering, and highlights the imprint of her footsteps on the earth as she comes over to him. The sun highlights her knuckles as she reaches out to pull the sleight with him, and as Aaron looks up at his older sister, and the sun makes the tear streaks on his cheeks shine.

“I don’t hear him, you know”—Aaron, his voice echoing all too loudly, and the wooden walls, even in their numbness, startle at the desperation, and begin to listen. “I’ve been hiding it all this time, but I’ve got to say it.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”—Miriam.

“I don’t hear God. I never have”—Aaron—“I’ve prayed and I’ve prayed and appealed and all of it, down on my knees, hands together, eyes closed, with all my might. I ain’t never heard him speak back. Not one little sign that He is listening. How am I supposed to keep this all up?”

The walls hear his voice lower until it breathless and fragmented.

“Do you hear him, Miriam? Is it just me?”—Aaron.

The sunlight glows on Miriam’s cheekbones and the ridges of her eyebrows as she looks into the face of her brother.



“Sometimes, I suppose”—Miriam—“Sometimes I’ll catch him in Psalms, especially when Connor Fedrecks reads them. But mostly I hear God in places I shouldn’t.”

“Like where?”—Aaron.

Miriam’s voice is low and even, and the walls recognize the sound of a secret.

“I heard him last summer, when that actors troop came to town. When we first got ice cream cones, remember? They were reading Shakespeare aloud and, I swear, I couldn’t tell you in particular what they were saying, or what they meant, but it was all so . . . my ice cream dripped all over my hands.”—Miriam—“I heard God in my Byron book too, and Keats, before father burned it.”

“Why didn’t you tell him?”—Aaron.

“He don’t heard God in places like that. And I suppose I shouldn’t either.”—  
Miriam.

“How do you stand it all?”—Aaron.

There is silence, save for Aaron’s still heaving breath, until footsteps crunch and the barn door creaks once more.

“Aaron, father wants us to gather firewood.”—Isaac.

## V.

The cardinals would see the important things. The earth would be ever rotating, feeling the trampling weight of a herd of zebra along the base of Mount Suswa, giving way to the barrage of a rock drill in the mines of Peru. The sun would be rising in the west, illuminating the dark green leaves of a vineyard in the Sonoma valley. And the

darkness, casually tucked in the folds of Aaron's coat, would be more preoccupied by the way its shadows are growing, longer and darker, with every passing second.

The cluster of cardinals, from high up in crooked pine tree by the edge of the frozen pond, see the two boys coming up through the snow, the older one with an ax hanging idly under his feather-less wing, the other trudging, pulling a sledge of sorts behind him. The birds watch them as they settle by a pine tree across the way; the older boy, the one with the ax passes it to the younger one with his hands full of the sledge, and starts walking around the tree. He gestures with his feather-less wing several times, as humans do, and seemed to be chirping to the younger boy, though always with his back turned. The younger boy had settled down on the sledge after having wrestled the ax down beside him, and isn't showing any signs of receiving what the older boy is communicating. He swirls his foot aimlessly through the snow and the ice at the edge of the frozen pond. There is silence. The older one makes a sound of communication. Silence. The older boy turns around, then walks over to the younger one with his foot swishing on the ice. He says something, and ruffles the younger boy's hat. The younger one swats his brother's feather-less wing away and snaps up to his full height. There is chirping from both of them, then hand gestures, voices getting louder and blurring together, squawking until it looked as though they might begin to peck each other's eyes out. Then, with a mighty burst of aggression, the younger one kicks the back side of the ax, enough to send it spinning across the icy surface of the pond.

The younger boy screeches instantly, hopping and clutching his foot, but the older boy does not appear to be receptive to his cries of distress. He squawks—aggression, though, not distress—pushes the younger one down into the snow, waving

his feather-less wings in the air, and then began to remove his winter layers. Nearly naked as a hatchling, the older one gets down on his belly and began to slide across the pond. The cardinals watch him slide on the ice, closer and closer to where the ax had come to rest, making noises the whole way, turning his head back twice to chatter at the younger boy, still clutching his foot. Then there is a succession of snapping, a large, loud crack, a sudden splash of water, a flurry of movement, all muddled together. Enough for the cardinals to startle and take flight.

## VI.

The sun is sinking low, and Absalom's boots are heavy in the snow as Time turns beside him through the frozen forest. His leather gloves twist and rip the small green needles from the tree branches as he wrenches a path for himself through the snow, around one tree and then another, making his way towards the place where the trees were tallest, around the edge of the pond, where he had sent Isaac and Aaron to cut wood. Time had passed almost two hours, and they had not come back to his house, far too long of a time to be tolerated. Absalom masters his way through the snow and ice as Time ticks along beside him, almost twenty minutes before his worn and weary eyes spots the wood-carrying sledge at the edge of the frozen pond. He calls out the names of the brothers, the names of his two sons.

Time brings in the twilight, and through frosted eyelashes Absalom can just make out the snow, ruffled up around the sledge and around the tree beside it, as if a frightened animal had bolted from the spot. He can see now, moving closer with each purposeful heave through the snow, that the sledge is empty of wood. He holds back a

curse, and calls out the names of the two brothers who have obviously failed to live up to the demands of being his sons. Even closer now, Absalom can see a place where the disturbed snow branches off from the sledge, a trail continuing off over the next snowbank, looking less animal and more human to the gritty perception of his eyes. As if one of his sons had been foolish enough to go off without the other had gone off alone. A few yards from the sledge now, and again he calls into the silent forest for his sons. Absalom's breathing is heavy, and Time passes with every inhale and exhale.

Absalom's feet plant themselves into the snow in front of the sledge and, turning in all directions, called out for his sons—a thick, rasping tone filling the hollow parts of his voice as it reaches out to the trees, to the forest, out across the frozen pond. But no one listens, and so no one responds.

Absalom's eyes couldn't see everything, they were glazed too much by age, weighed down by leathery lids, and the light was fading too fast—but from where he is now, he can just make out the cracks in the ice, the dark pool of water near the middle, and the form hanging somewhere in between ice and water.

In a sudden moment of gravity, Time converges onto his consciousness, and Absalom's body becomes too heavy for his knees.

Issac seems . . . so much smaller. The ice has set in, clutching to him, clinging to him so tightly that he seems to be shrunken. The water around his torso, hours after being so violently disturbed, has settled, and has begun to form a new sheet of ice, so thin it looks as if Isaac is stuck between the glass of a mirror. The snow around his face has been pushed away by scrambling hands, bunched up in little mound just beyond his arm's reach. One arm still stretches out, frozen against the ice beside the back of his

head. The side of his face too is frozen against the ice, leaving his mouth open, jaw stuck jutting to the side at an angle. His eyes are open too, wide, with ice crystals forming around the edges—and they are empty.

## VII.

Mother's calloused hands are gentle yet firm, buried deep in the dough of the bread, and the dough easily folds to her touch—squeezing, twisting, pushing down, and rising back up as she kneads it. The dough's aroma swirls around her kneading arms, blue sleeves pushed back to her elbows, stretching out to wrap her in a comforting scent. In a large wooden bowl, Mother pounds the dough down, then stretches it back out, folding it in on itself and repeating the process with a rhythm that comes from years of hungry mouths to feed. And, as Mother folds the dough in on itself, for a moment a pocket is created, and in there darkness curls for relief.

The darkness has scattered from the place where the trees grow tallest, the place where the ice on the pond had crack and given way. In the dark synapses of his brain, the darkness felt the fervent desire for home, for his mother and the sweet bread she was baking, and the darkness did not pause to think if Aaron's body might take him away from the call.

The darkness faded from Aaron's eyes and the things they had seen. From the hands scrabbling across the ice and snow, from the rippling waves Isaac's struggling body had made in the freezing, washing over the ice around the hole until it was slick and gleaming in the twilight. From the color of his clothes, how instantly they became dark with water and oh so heavy, billowing around him in the watery hole. The

darkness dwindled in the hazel eyes staring at Aaron across the ice, so wide and deep that they might have swallowed up the whole world in their terror. Eyes, jerking upward, then plunging down, over and over again in an icy baptism that seemed to snag the fabric of time.

The darkness abandoned its place in Aaron's body and the painful wrenching of his heart as it pushed too much blood too fast through veins too small to accommodate it all. The adrenaline carving fiery path that made his fingers rattle in his leather gloves. From his nervous system, overloaded and throwing out erratic crackling signals: to stand still and stare, and then to abandon, to run. The darkness dissipated with the pounding of Aaron's feet as he ran north through the snow and into the deepening twilight.

Alone, the darkness cradles in between the folds of dough for a moment, then Mother's hands push down and the darkness is squeezed out into the room, where it disappears in the light. But the light pays no mind to the darkness, peering as a candle flame lit at the far edge of the table over Miriam's shoulder, watching the twisting curve of her pencil, moving with the smooth assurance that Mother would keep her back to the table as always and that Absalom would not return for time still. She would burn what she was writing, the light knew this, and her words would be lost in ash. But in consuming, for a moment, the light would burn so very bright.

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