

# Holiday Meat

≈ Winner of the 2015 Quarterly West Novella Contest ≈

# Holiday Meat

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*Quarterly West*

For all the meat still breathing out there,  
but also all the meat that is dead especially  
the pieces I knew personally.

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**Holiday Meat**

As the years grew into his flesh Paul's mind became incapable of promotion. Beneath the ordinary levels of job security, life molded itself into a total projection of rot and somewhere between the hum of the copy machine and an interoffice email filled with illiterate kitten humor rested an evaporated plastic replica of a yellow candy-coated piece of chocolate that stood as a metaphor of Paul's entire life. The sags in the middle of his body reminded the world he sat in a chair every day. Around the time when marriages usually turn into one continuous yawn, Paul went home one night after work and learned his marriage had decided to no longer accept him as an object. Paul was too tired to update his resume.

Paintings of birch trees hung on the wall of his office. A few years ago, Paul gave up trying to remember if his office had a window. The gnomes crouching in the birch trees liked to chuckle as they tugged their pee-pees. Sometimes the gnomes were dressed as pigeons and the birch trees were dressed as lampposts.

In a city filled with millions of employees and billions of dollars, Paul wanted to be a member of the fray even though he was only capable of being a twig chewed on by the herd.

Inside Paul's house Paul found a child and tried to talk to it, but this spectacle of communication was empty. When Paul was young he was told multiple times spectacle was the opposite of dialogue. Therefore Paul limited the amount of time he was a spectacle in his child's life.

Every day for lunch Paul was awarded one half hour. He liked to eat cupcakes, which reminded him of artificial breast implants boiling in the nuclear aftermath of a post-apocalyptic movie about humanity's decision to continue existing even after every social construct defining human existence had been destroyed.

Paul's wife used to be a kind of stereotype. She did things like make delicate lunches, but her marital condition eventually bore a hole in this stereotype, which allowed her the freedom to explore life without a stereotype. The delicate lunches were replaced with white bread and mayonnaise. These lunches existed inside brown paper bags. Paul usually added mustard and fed the crumbs to a hamster he kept in the bottom drawer of his desk. Her name was Harriet. He bought her from a man in a lambskin suit. After he gave Paul the hamster, the man in the lambskin suit went to the nearest store to buy a red balloon. When Paul was bored he would open his desk drawer and rub his hamster. One day, Harriet was not in Paul's desk. Paul got very little work done. Empty cupcake wrappers surrounded his chair. Red spots filled the part of his face where the teardrops leaked. After lunch Paul told his boss a family member had died of cancer so he could leave work early. A few days after Harriet disappeared, a coworker emailed Paul an article about how the human body wasn't constructed to sit in an office eight hours a day.

Paul's work skills diminished. He lost the ability to arrange numbers on a computer screen. Productivity was often interrupted by his own sighs. Sometimes Paul forgot to click buttons and his computer got tired of not being touched and fell asleep. When the sad boredom got to be too much, Paul went in the supply closet to lie down. He no longer bothered to make excuses for his lack of output.

A few days after Paul was supposed to eat birthday cake he found a black pawn in bed, which made him think of sex, but his wife was reading so he didn't ask to use her sex. Instead Paul waited until she fell asleep with the reading lamp on so he could reach over her and turn her light off.

Sometimes Paul opened his mouths and toads fell out because the human brain used to be the size of Oklahoma.

When Paul was a sophomore in high school he ate lunch outside at the same picnic table every day. One afternoon he found a small object on the picnic table. He thought it was a baby arm. He brought this small object inside to the nurse and said, "I think this baby arm fell off a baby." The nurse gave Paul a hearing test. She told Paul to raise his eyebrows when he heard a beep. Paul put on a pair of headphones and looked at the baby arm resting on the nurse's desk. The baby arm beeped. Paul didn't know how to raise his eyebrows. A bell began to ring. The nurse gave Paul a popsicle and told him to suck on it. A lot of students came into the nurse's office and complained about the massive food babies developing in their stomachs. When Paul finished the popsicle the nurse used the wooden popsicle stick to check Paul's head for lice. She found nine ladybugs.

One year everyone noticed Paul. Four years passed. Not much was achieved so Paul turned on his television and looked at a representation behind the screen become constructed and then deconstructed. Paul's viewing was both a practice in the creation of understanding and also a technique for consuming things he would never understand.

Yesterday, Paul thought about looking in a refrigerator, but instead he looked at the back of his hand and saw it had an insect bite. He tried to scratch the back of his hand, but was not able to because his other hand was holding three blueberries. Paul was waiting for someone to say beep so he could release the blueberries. A few minutes passed. Paul used a tooth to scratch the insect bite on his hand.

At the start of Paul's junior year of high school the idea of lunch transformed into something called "grandfather oil." The picnic tables behind the school were torn down and replaced by a housing development. The diminishing adolescence made Paul nauseous. When he got to the nurse's office he found the nurse had turned into a large potted office plant. Large fragments of Paul's suburban environment had begun to eat everything real and functioning within Paul's life. He thought about going to the principal's office, but he was afraid the principal would be naked. Paul once had a dream about the principal where the principal said, "I am an umbrella of many pleasures that are attempting to become my infinite failure to die." Paul tried not to become a product of the waste around him, but could not help being a waste product because the entire human race was born from a piece of plastic too old to get melted.

Strangely, his pimples became a source of pleasure. They told Paul to eat more and how to develop better infections. When Paul asked them what he should do with his life they told him he should begin to develop more sexual desires. Paul went to a hardware store and looked at hoses.

At graduation Paul wore a gown and put gel in his hair. Some people won awards. Paul stood up and clapped. The next day Paul began working in an office. His goal of being normal was fully realized. He wore a shirt. It was illegal not to tuck the shirt in so Paul tucked in his shirt. Everything that used to make him proud grew fatter and began to smell less and less like success.

A noise developed at the back of Paul's teeth. He went to the doctor and asked what it was. The doctor looked in Paul's mouth and said, "The provisional hum of loneliness."

Paul gave up on his late teenage years and became regular. Three days later, Paul only felt three to five seconds older. He still had a lot of objects from back when he was the person he used to be. Paul wasn't sure what to do with these objects so he put them in a cardboard box labeled, "garden tools." After the transformation Paul pressed a button, but quickly realized it wasn't a button. It was his coworker's face. Paul wasn't sure what to do so he asked a different coworker a question about an email sent out by Nancy. The coworker nodded. Paul was disappointed. He regretted his decision to learn how to use email. People in the office began talking about a television show. Paul looked at his shoes, shrugged, and walked down the hallway until he had to pee in a urinal.

Once before work, Paul bought a pumpkin cream cheese muffin and went in a public restroom where he put sixty-five percent of the pumpkin cream cheese muffin in his mouth and swallowed. When he left the public restroom he was still holding thirty-five percent of his muffin. Near a tray of pastries, Paul saw one of his coworkers buying a raspberry tart. Paul asked his coworker if she wanted to trade her raspberry tart for the rest of his pumpkin cream cheese muffin. The coworker made an excuse about feeling nauseous and moved to a location unreachable by Paul. He was not sure what to feel so he looked at what was left of his muffin and decided to fatten up.

One afternoon someone returned to their cubicle and sat in a chair. This person looked at their computer screen and thought of laundry. Information was processed through the screen. Much later, walking alone in the woods, Paul bent down and picked up a branch. The wood on this branch had failed. It was no longer part of an important project. A system of growth had decided to discipline the branch by removing it. The branch did not quite understand. It would be many years before it understood.

People looked at people, but no one really noticed how often people choose ambivalence instead of taking advantage of the freedom to choose something more authentic.

At work on Monday Paul wore a denim shirt and striped pants. Many people pointed at Paul with their whisper finger and said, "I think Paul lost his normal pieces." Paul sat in his new clothes and ate leftover turkey and cranberry sauce for lunch. Someone asked Paul why he smelled like mothballs. He said, "This food is very old." After lunch Paul hung a drawing of a pair of dress shoes on his cubicle wall. He told people he had sex with a similar pair of dress shoes. In the drawing, the dress shoes still had a price tag attached to them. Paul said, "I am going to return them."

A boy talked to something. They were in a house. The boy said, "This house is okay." Part of the house had collapsed. Paul touched something and thought, "food baby." Something got scared. It ran into the woods and beeped. Paul could no longer see anything, but the beeps continued. He said, "I'm sorry I made you feel self-conscious about your food spot. One day I would like to impregnate it with something that isn't food." Paul waited. The beeps died. Soon the food babies died. They were not replaced with Paul's babies.

At his mother's house Paul looked in the basement for the box of "garden tools." He could not find it. Later, some lady wrapped plastic around a bowl of cranberry sauce and said, "I mailed most of your boxes to a third-world nation." Paul went into the living room and fell asleep on something next to the couch. When he woke up the box of "garden tools" was sitting on the couch. Paul began to cry. His mother came into the living room and said, "I found it in the shed. I guess I didn't mail it to a third-world nation. I think I only mailed your old hockey jerseys."

All the stomachs Paul wanted to touch remained empty. Paul was barely allowed to touch anything. He sat alone and touched his own stomach. When he got tired of touching his stomach he touched his hair. Sometimes he wondered if his hair was made of ladybugs. He waited. Nothing crawled out of his hair. There were no ladybugs. All Paul could think to do was eat. He would probably eat too much very soon. Two years passed. Paul found another job in a smaller building. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to accomplish at this job so he tried growing a beard. The growth was only noticeable under specific kinds of fluorescent lighting. Paul continued trying. The beard continued to be a failure. Paul tried so hard to grow a beard some of his coworkers got scared. Paul practiced shaving by trimming the bristles off an electric toothbrush in the bathroom.

There was one year when everyone in Paul's family still existed. Sometimes a person's life can reach a point where the sum of their accomplishments feels less valuable than the smallest positive decimal to ever exist in the history of the world and the temptation to press the abortion button on your mother before she was your mother is stronger than eating the label off whatever brain illness you feel like telling yourself you have acquired.

Paul decided to climb on the coffee table in the television room and give a speech. He began, "Our hearts are full of the broken pieces from the human shell we will never become. Soon, we will all be nothing more than a vague memory gently draining from the hole in our faces where everyone looked when we leaked about everything we planned to accomplish, but never would."

At the end of his life, Paul said, "Paul's world is our world. The meat of thought is served, but not entirely eaten. Old people die so the new people can try to think better than everyone to ever exist before them, but the new people end up only sexing a few meat thoughts before getting involved in situations of underemployment where the desire to want more than what anyone could possibly have is the only desire. It is in these failures our world rests. It is in these failures where Paul's happiness exists."

The old man held his hand in front of his face. Whispers escaped his throat, but did not pass through the palm of the old man's hand. Somewhere beneath the surface of a shrunken chest, a pulse reminisced about an earlier period of undamaged capillary wells of lung flesh. In one of the crevices of the palm it was written, "The skinman is delicate. I am the skinman. Please don't take my skin. I will no longer be a man. I am a man who's afraid. There is not very much left in the palm of my hand."

An old man sat deep inside his own eyeballs and looked at Paul. The old thing continued to look at the thing not as old. A piece of resistance cannot be separated from a piece of domination. The two pieces form an ambiguous link and despite these connections complex doubts are produced. Within these doubts rests a belief in the systems' own establishment of power. Paul looked at the television and saw a thing that used to be fat beating up a thing that was still fat. The old thing looked at the holiday meat in front of him and could not remember what holiday they were celebrating. He was still sitting in the chair he had sat in the last time he ate holiday meat. Either he was being served holiday meat every day or the years were moving much quicker than he remembered. When he was a child he once told the daughter of someone else's mother he wished he could eat holiday meat every morning for breakfast instead of cereal, but now his mouth had grown so old it could no longer taste the difference between holiday meat and a dirty napkin full of crumbs. His breath sighed because its only ability was to sigh. There was nothing else left

inside his mouth. Another person who was a product of his old skin called him something tender, like “gramp tooth.” This other person tried to wrap the old thing’s face in a blanket. The breath left inside the old thing began to cough. Various plausible hypotheses of what would happen next began to vanish and all the old mouth could do was make a noise that sounded like, “All of mankind is a blob of understanding which escapes anything I have ever experienced and therefore I have no comment. My silence or inability to talk about the world around me is a wisdom buried deep in my lack of useful information.”

“Paul,” said Paul as he looked in a mirror at himself. It was either the day he would eat holiday meat or it was the day after the day he would eat holiday meat and he would eat the cold, leftover holiday meat out of a plastic container in the refrigerator. Paul was confused and thought, “There is always cold, leftover holiday meat in plastic containers waiting to be eaten.” The eyeball inside of Paul looking at the face inside the mirror could not figure out what Paul looked like to the rest of the world. Paul felt himself glow at an angle he was not quite able to glow at in real life. He made a face in the mirror which did not exist anywhere else in the world and then this face in the mirror, looking at Paul’s eyeball, slowly opened its mouth and said, “Paul.”

Many years before today a child and his cousins made sad creations with their faces at a holiday gathering as they waited for a bird to let them eat it. A prayer was scheduled but forgotten. The old man still had legs and could sit in a chair. Paul sat in a chair because he had legs. Everyone in the house had legs. At some point everyone who has ever sat in a chair will forget how to sit in a chair, and they will fall out of their chair, and yogurt will leak out of their mouths if they had yogurt in their mouths when they forgot how to sit.

An old man sat in his old meat and said, "I was confused by the invention of holiday meat. My mother bought many rolls of it and used these rolls to reupholster our couch. I spent the majority of my lonely afternoons in high school trying to sex this holiday couch."

Something almost made of holiday meat, but no longer capable of movement said, "I am not just another skinman. I am the skinman." In the hallway Paul watched one of his cousins stub his toe. Another cousin reached across the table and nibbled at the turkey stuffing. This cousin began to suffer from a peanut allergy. Someone had put nuts in the turkey stuffing. Paul watched. He was reminded of dead farm meat. A wrinkled knuckle reached into the place where the peanut went. The skinman cured the allergy. A mother or some aunts were still in the kitchen using an electric carving knife. The skinman sat down and said, "If you are dying of a peanut allergy then I will take your peanuts and let them sink deep into my intestinal flesh. You will not die because you are a child of another human and this other human was probably nice." The skinman winked. Paul looked at himself to see if he could taste any peanuts inside Paul. He was not sure.

It was almost a year after something insignificant happened. Paul went home. An old man rolled his toes in the carpet until the carpet fell apart. And toes bled on the bare patches in the flooring. Paul's indifferent shrugs kept his apathetic beard company as he watched the old man bleed. Younger children crawled out of Paul's aunts. His aunts no longer paid attention to him. The younger children asked what happened to Paul's sad mouth. He rubbed his beard and some of the younger children hid under the table, or in the pantry. A few tried to climb into the cupboards, but someone was always in the kitchen, sometimes holding the electric carving knife.

Paul looked at his own eyeballs in the mirror again and he tried to press his eye against the reflection. He wanted to climb through his eyeball into the reflection. The back of his head felt like children were laughing at him. It reminded him of the shape of an old man standing before a classroom trying to teach the children how to make owl sounds. The old man wore two sweaters underneath a third. All the sweaters were loose. If “plumple” were a real word then you could have described the sweaters as “plumple.” A man in the back of the room wore only one sweater. Paul told the skinman not to talk about the skinman. The skinman climbed out of one of the old man’s ears and began making owl sounds. The owl sounds were thick and plumple. All of the children laughed. The old man left at 1:12 p.m. At 1:21 p.m. he returned with a bag of pillows and ate them. A younger version of the old man found himself within the plumpage. Paul got nauseous. This was why he was afraid of the skinman and also why threw up two pillows worth of crabmeat on the deck of a WWII submarine inside his teacher’s history textbook. The pillows deflated and all that

was left of the skinman was the wilting of a robe filled with the un-re-imagination of a life. Laughter touched Paul’s skin in the shape of sharp whispers and ear flicks.

An old man pointed at the patches on Paul's face and mouthed something along the lines of, "Soiled Blankets." Paul sighed and when he finished sighing he sighed again.

An old man once spoke and this was the thing he spoke, "I remember growing up on a patch of white dirt." Paul was standing on something brown. He stepped into the hallway. The porch was white. Paul closed a red door. The yard consisted of thirty-five years of weekly grass clippings and eight failed attempts to grow tomatoes in an eight-by-twelve-foot patch of dirt on the side of the house with the most sunlight. An uncle, during an election year, drove a couple stakes into the shade under some elms and played horseshoes. A leaky hose hung out a second-story window. Paul saw an uncle on the roof spitting on the backyard. His bottom lip was large and impregnated with tobacco.

Paul sat at the table in silence and waited for one of the younger children to come up and tug on him. He was thinking about licking the butter dish when a small girl he didn't recognize tugged on his sweater and said, "My brother Donny crawled into the oven." Paul did not remember anyone in his family named "Donny." He felt his beard smile as his shoulders began to shrug. The girl ran away. Paul thought about spending the following day in the suburbs scavenging candy corn and paper lanterns from the dumpsters behind convenience stores. When the large holiday meat object was served Paul heard a small girl cry and whisper, "Donny?"

The old man turned on the VCR. A large man touched something he wasn't supposed to touch. The Miami Dolphins cooked a bird and ate it. Everyone yelled at the large man and asked him why he tried touching something he wasn't supposed to touch. The Dallas Cowboys watched the Miami Dolphins celebrate and slap hands.

Paul thought of the smell of a long weekend. Inside these thoughts lingered an old man digging his toes into the moldy carpet and stained grout. Paul felt stale bathwater behind his ears. Weak arms and apple pie crumbs clogged the drain. Paul remembered one of his uncles dragging an old refrigerator into the piss room because he was tired of existing in more than one room. Paul attached a hose to the bathroom sink. It connected to the icemaker in the kitchen. Someone in a dining room tapped silver on glass. The world rose for a speech. Paul either moved to a Latin American country, or maybe yesterday he stood in the living room watching someone toy with the carpet until their toes bled.

For the last two weeks Paul watched the old man eat chocolate candies from a dish on the table beside his recliner. At the bottom of the dish, under the candies, a bald eagle with golden wings ate trout wrapped in a flag made from all the dead war soldiers. This eagle has never flown. The gold was slightly fake. A cousin was licking all the candies in the dish. When he was done he made owl sounds.

Yesterday, it was a holiday. A wooden bowl of chocolate had been placed next to the smell of a man whose skin was slowly rotting on the inside. There was even a holiday on the day after the holiday we celebrated yesterday. Last year, there were more holidays than the year before last year and this year there will be more holidays than last year. As long as there is holiday meat there will always be holidays.

The skinman would no longer share his skin. An old man whispered into his palms. Paul watched some toes work the carpet until the toes fell off themselves. Everyone was tired of this carpet repetition. The skinman rotted through remains of the guy sitting in the recliner. Someone called the carpet store for estimates on a new floor. The store was either out of business or closed for the holiday.

Later, at some point—after today, probably one-hundred years from now, after people stopped celebrating holidays in the old man's honor, after the family returned to something permissibly "normal," after the carpet was replaced, after the plastic dish of chocolates was emptied and lost, after the purchase and consumption of dozens of turkeys, after Paul found a bag of the old man's sweaters, after telephones no longer existed, but before the world ended—everyone died.

On Thursday Paul fell asleep on a couch. The old man was next to Paul dozing in front of the television. Paul heard an electric carving knife. The couch was empty. Paul sat in a chair because he still knew how to sit in a chair. No one bothered to invite the old man to the table. A clay reindeer was on television. It talked to clay objects suffering from depression.

Everyone began singing “happy birthday.” Paul was bored and went outside to rake leaves. Someone brought him a piece of cake, but they forgot to bring a fork. Paul had to use his fingers. The old man was either dead or he was digesting baby formula with his intestinal flesh. On the last day of his life, the old man ate three slices of his own celebration. The mothers and aunts made everyone else eat pumpkin pie. The old man slipped little pieces of cake to the youngest grandchildren. The oldest of the youngest grandchildren was eating a candy cane under the dining room table. Paul licked his fingers and put a leaf in a trash bag. Three hours later Paul finished putting leaves in the plastic trash bags. He went inside. In the back of the refrigerator Paul found a baby shoe. He sucked on the shoelace while his aunts cleared the table.

In seventeen years Paul will no longer feel like Paul. He will be the skinman of something he no longer is. When he fully becomes the skinman, he will rise from the table, hold out the limb of a large bird, and speak. When he is done speaking, he will pick up a butter dish and eat the entire stick of butter off the dish.

The old man was silent. On the day of the old man's funeral a trout was prepared. Trout was not a holiday meat. For the first time in a long time Paul did not eat holiday meat. Paul ate some trout and said, "A skin king lived within the stains of impurity. We whisper his name as we attempt to expand our flesh. But our hearts break at the idea of a robe of broken pieces no longer existing except in the vague memories draining from everything we ever told ourselves about the greatest man we ever knew."

Throughout the entire history of Paul there have been many clear choices. For a long time Paul believed knowing exactly who he was might lead to happiness. As a result, Paul suffered daily under the growing tension to be something that would make him happy. After failing to do anything that made him happy, Paul focused primarily on being a person and no longer worrying about happiness.

The history of pleasure has become a system that doesn't quite map out a clear idea of how people should live their lives. The pleasures of Paul's life were objects whose amorphous boundaries were not willing to allow him the space to exist in a complete and unregulated mobility.

All the petty conflicts in his brain were waiting for Paul's submission to his own decision to be himself, but more often than not Paul did not accept being Paul especially the more he tried to be what he thought he was.

Paul said, “Paul sometimes feels like he is made of plastic foam and lives in a jar.”

Once, someone commented on the size of Paul. For the rest of Paul’s mid-teenage years he only ate breadcrumbs and turkey skin. An aunt called him a hen. Paul got upset and said, “No.” Then a piece of Paul’s stomach thought of Italian food. Paul sighed and walked outside. He shut the red door of the house. He opened a silver door. Paul sat in his automobile. He felt a hand rub lotion into the back of his neck. He looked in the rearview mirror and touched the steering wheel. Paul removed his hands from the steering wheel. Some lotions remained on the steering wheel. Paul looked in the glove box of the car for a napkin. Fragments of lotion existed everywhere Paul touched. There was a napkin, only one. It was yellow. Paul could not wipe up all the lotion. Splinters of lotion grease remained. Paul laid the napkin on the dashboard and waited for it to dry. An entire summer passed. When Paul picked up the napkin it was no longer wet. He tried to smooth the napkin flat and pieces of the napkin fell apart. Paul found a ballpoint pen. He owned a dozen ballpoint pens. He used a ballpoint on the yellow pieces that hadn’t fallen

apart and tried to draw a picture of a smiley face. It looked like an unhappy owl whose eyes were not the same size or shape.

Paul looked at a button. He touched a button. The button did not move. No one saw Paul press the button. Paul was alone. He was wearing a blue shirt. Twelve geese flew over some trees. The button was dirty. Paul looked at his finger. It was dirty too. He could not decide which was dirty first. He tried to wipe his finger on his shirt, but he could not decide if he had lost his shirt or if his finger was not big enough. Paul began making a list of his abnormalities. The twelve geese turned into one long slow deep fragment of noise the size of his thumb and asked to look at Paul's "pee." Paul was embarrassed and said, "No." The twelve fragments howled and said, "Pee stands for pathology." Paul sucked on his finger until it was a clean button. He was no longer paying attention to his shirt or lack of shirt. A small piece of Paul became fragmented the longer he existed. Paul pressed the clean button. He listened for a beep, but only heard a ringing.

Before Paul ever really knew what an owl was he found himself thinking about where the idea of an owl would exist in his brain. Paul could feel his thoughts worrying about what his thoughts thought. This indifference to himself eventually overwhelmed him and the result was anxiousness about the space where owls were supposed to exist in his brain. To overcome this anxiousness, Paul decided to define the idea of what an owl was so society would not have to define it for him.

Paul sighed and waited for his brain to simplify into one single thought.

Paul sat in his cubicle. He felt a hand rub lotion into the back of his neck. He looked at his computer screen. He touched some buttons. He lifted his hands. Lotion was smeared in all the places it wasn't supposed to get smeared. Paul looked in his desk drawers for some napkins. Fragments of lotion covered the desk handles. There was only one napkin. It was yellow. Paul could not wipe up all the lotions with only one napkin. He laid the napkin next to an air vent in the floor. It would take three months for the lotion to dry, but Paul could not wait because if he left the napkin on the floor overnight the janitor would throw it out. So after lunch Paul picked up the napkin even though it was still wet. He tried to write a letter on the napkin with a ballpoint pen. Paul owned at least three dozen ballpoint pens. The tissue paper was weak and damp from the lotion. It tore under the pressure of the pen. Paul was unable to write a letter to Nancy.

Paul touched an owl. The owl did not move. No one else was in the woods. Paul was alone. Paul looked at the owl. He could not remember where he learned about owls. He was not sure if what he touched was an actual owl. He did not know what he was touching. Paul stopped touching things in the woods. He tried to wipe his hands on his blue shirt, but he was not wearing his blue shirt.

The guy who forgot how old he was turned thirty. On Monday he went to work. On Tuesday he went to work again. On Wednesday he sat in an office chair for sixteen hours. Paul's office chair was inside a large building near the freeway. The office was on the top floor. The building was seven-hundred-feet tall. Once the building turned into a giant man. The man's face was sixty-five-feet wide. The giant man had only one eye. His lips were near the eleventh floor. The giant man was an advertisement for a movie about a guy with only one eye.

Something a little more than a farm animal but not quite its own planet said, "I am thinking." Two years passed. Paul decided he was twenty-five. Things had not been the same since his hair stopped being fresh. Paul went to a supermarket to look for a jar of employment, but he could not find anything except clearance racks of old holiday meat. A shelf of twelve soda bottles reminded him of the faint odor of urine even though they were berry flavored. An old man with at least one eyebrow wheeled a cart full of eggs. Paul mistook the eggs for things that weren't eggs. A voice spoke of coupons. Paul didn't have any coupons. He blushed. He was embarrassed he didn't care more about money. Something begged for trout. Paul noticed some of his family members had gathered at the checkout. None of them were wearing pants. Their bathrobes and underwear were no longer white. Paul tried to ignore them, but as he looked at the wet meat he could smell the shape of his family's stains getting closer.

After a rainstorm, a few years before Paul got fat, he saw a man he thought was the giant man with one eye, but the man was normal and had two eyes and was less than six feet tall. Paul thought about wearing an eye patch to work on Friday, but on Thursday Nancy sent out an email to everyone saying casual Friday had been canceled and would remain so indefinitely. The email ended with Nancy telling everyone in the office to present their bodies in a “professional manner.”

Paul touched a button. It did not work. He touched it again. Paul felt very confident. He looked at some holiday meat until it turned into six ladybugs. Doubt crept over a tree. Paul felt a little nauseous. He waited for the wrinkle. His mother began yelling at the ladybugs. They regressed back into a pile of leftover holiday meat.

Modern society had not quite advanced as much as Paul imagined it would, but he was no longer paying attention to the areas of modern society that perplexed him. Instead, he looked at the blue shirt he was wearing. It had ripped a little. He was not quite sure where these tears had come from. Paul did not care because he had another blue shirt. He forgot about the holes and tried to think more about the topic of modernity, but could not quite remember where in civilization modernity existed. It was not possible for him to imagine everything he did not quite know yet. He could only think of the space in his brain he had created for owls. He decided to tell a female about the space he had created in his brain for owls so he pressed some buttons. His ear listened to something ring. A voice spoke and told Paul to speak after he heard a beep. Paul waited for the beep. He heard a beep. He was not sure what to say. He tried to think of something, but all he could think to say was, "Hello Nancy, I am thinking of things I don't understand and everything I don't know reminds me of you. Even the bad stuff." Paul waited three to five seconds

before he spoke. He worried there would be a second beep. He said, "Hi Nancy." He paused for another three seconds. His throat began to make embarrassing noises. Paul said, "Aughargh," and then hung up. He wanted to kiss himself.

Paul opened a can with his pocketknife. The back of his car was filled with air and cushions. Paul found something not quite air or a cushion. It was a partially empty styrofoam container. Paul dumped the can in the styrofoam container. He wrote, "meatball" on the styrofoam container.

Only one blue shirt existed in the world. Paul felt a little nauseous. A year passed. An uncle asked Paul what he was doing with his life. Paul pointed at his plate of food and then arranged it in an effort to answer his uncle's question. Six years passed. In the spring Paul rested his head on a pillow and hoped maybe Nancy would send him an individual email at work instead of cc'ing the whole office.

A boy talked to a girl. He brought the girl to a neighborhood with houses. She said, "This is a nice house." The house had a red door. The boy said, "That house is okay, but it does not float." She laughed. He touched her stomach. She got nervous and asked the boy what he was doing. The boy thought of an owl and did not remove his hand. A silver door opened. The girl ran into the woods behind a house and made owl noises. The boy bent over and tied his shoe. He could no longer see the girl. The owl noises continued. He walked into the woods casually. Paul spoke to the owl sounds. He said, "I like your belly. One day it will grow old with me after I impregnate it. I would like to be the grandfather of your grandchildren." Paul waited. The woods died. Owls became extinct. The stomachs of teenage sex did not broaden. They did not fill themselves with Paul.

Paul took off his blue shirt and began to rub himself on it. The shirt grew bigger. It was three times the size of the inside of Paul's automobile. Paul heard a noise. It was familiar. It was a beep. He thought of two red shirts he'd recently bought. Paul looked at the shirt he was rubbing himself on. The holes in the shirt changed color and multiplied.

A coworker asked Paul why he had yogurt behind his right ear. Paul stood up. He used an elevator. His silver automobile was where he left it. The backseat was still filled with air and cushions. Paul lay on the hood of his car and ignored everything in the world except the memory of Nancy once complementing his blue shirt three years ago.

Paul spent the next three years sitting at his office desk with a nineteen percent erection as he thought, “Nancy wants to giggle on me. Nancy wants to giggle on me. Nancy wants me to giggle in her hair. Nancy wants me to literally giggle until I owl. Nancy wants me to owl on her giggle. Nancy wants me to climb in her giggle and smile. Nancy wants me to crawl up her giggle before it is giggle and be an owl in the pre-intestinal stages of where her giggles are born. Nancy wants me to play with her food when I am inside of her looking for her giggle. Birds can’t digest food. I am an owl. And owls are birds. Nancy doesn’t want me to choke on me. Nancy wants my owl years to come up her giggle so far she can un-eat my feathers. With Nancy it really isn’t about the giggles. Nancy just wants to be Nancy with me even though I might not be the strong and confident presence she seeks in companionship.”

Paul went in the bathroom. He splashed a little water on his right upper thigh. He waited three minutes. He splashed more water on his pants. Paul thought very hard about the memories of his other blue shirt. He remembered wearing the other blue shirt to work on a Monday and telling a coworker he had sauce in one of his pockets but did not show the coworker the sauce. The coworker doubted Paul because the previous week Paul had said, "I did sex last weekend" when it was obvious to everyone Paul had spent the weekend not doing sex.

Paul drove to a barn. When he went inside the barn he saw clearance racks full of holiday meat. He heard a voice tell him about coupons. Someone handed him a can and a package of crackers. Paul opened the package of crackers and ate them. He coughed. The barn went out of business. Paul sat in his car eating crackers. Crumbs stuck to the steering wheel. He licked the steering wheel. He thought it would taste like crackers and yogurt. The residue from the lotion tasted like a lima bean that doesn't taste like a lima bean. Paul drove home.

After work Paul sat in his car for a long time and looked at the large advertisement of the one-eyed giant. At nine p.m. he started his car and left the parking lot. It was Friday. Then it was Monday. Then it was Tuesday. Then it was Wednesday. Four more days passed. It was a long weekend. Paul got out his automobile. He closed a silver door. He opened a red door. Someone was in the living room eating chocolate candies. Paul gave the old man some styrofoam.

The white tablecloth and the lighting made Paul nervous so he ate a lot of garlic bread. His breath was no longer a positive contribution to the conversation. Later, when he went to kiss something, the thing Paul tried to kiss told Paul to stop trying.

Paul looked at himself and mumbled, “You give me an infinite erection.” Paul looked at himself again and saw he only had a six percent erection. He was not sure how he had gotten naked. Or where he was. He did understand why he was mumbling. Someone had stuffed his own underwear in his mouth. Paul removed the underwear from his mouth and traced them.

On the day before another day, Paul’s eye began to hurt. He looked at it in the mirror. His eyeball continued to hurt. Paul walked back to work. When he got to the top floor of his office building he saw a coworker. The coworker asked why Paul’s leg was damp. Paul looked at his leg and said, “The sauce is leaking.” The coworker didn’t understand. Paul said, “Sorry, it was a joke.” The coworker pretended to laugh. When he stopped pretending to laugh he said, “What’s orange and blue and lives in Cuba?” Paul did not know. He looked at Nancy to see if she saw him talking to the coworker. Nancy was organizing lunch receipts or something. He had an urge to jump-kick the receipts out of her hand with some type of roundhouse combination and then ask her if she was prepared for his attempt to prove his undying love to her. Paul didn’t do anything. He shrugged. The coworker told Paul what was orange and blue and lived in Cuba and then began laughing again.

Paul was tired of only getting emails from Nancy about leftover donuts in the conference room. Before he could do anything though, seven children entered the office to sell homemade bake goods. Paul gave one of them a dollar, ripped off his shirt, and jump-kicked the frailest child with a roundhouse combination. As the child struggled to stand back up, Paul decided to take Wednesday off.

On Monday Paul asked out a co-worker who was not Nancy. He picked her up at seven p.m. and drove to the suburbs. She asked where they were going. He reached across the seat and touched her stomach and told her to be quiet. Paul stopped his car in front of a house and said, "Please run into the woods behind the house and make owl sounds." Paul opened the trunk of the car and took out a dress stuffed with old robes, apple pie crumbs, candy dishes, old stained carpet, and a sweater. Paul dropped the pile on the sidewalk and then looked at the pile. When he climbed back in the car, the passenger seat was empty.

The side of the large office building changed. A giant three-layer taco replaced the giant one-eyed man. The taco was eighty-nine-feet wide. The side of the large office building would continue to change. The three-layer taco would be replaced by some other advertisement. Paul could not remember if anything else in his life had ever happened. All he seemed to remember was a giant taco and a giant one-eyed man. Somewhere deep within these two things Paul found himself talking to the new haircut attached to his face. The haircut then detached itself from Paul's face and sat down behind a desk. The desk was bald. The haircut told the desk to tell Paul he didn't need to continue participating with the large office building. Paul thanked the new haircut and left the corporate structure.

Paul opened a silver door. He sat in his automobile. He drove eighty mph through the suburbs. An important person stopped him. Paul listened to questions about intoxication. The silver door opened. Paul walked in a straight line. Paul recited the alphabet backwards. Paul touched his own nose. Paul looked at a finger move from one side to the other. He listened to a man speak.

Stomachs continued to not fill themselves with Paul. They barely let Paul touch them. Paul sat alone in a room, touched his own stomach, made owl noises, waited for the house to float, asked a tattoo artist how much for a belly owl, listened to the money whispers, and walked home touching the simple and empty warm fabric of his own skin. It was still vacant.

Paul woke up and smelled someone who reminded him of Harriet. He smelled a boob. Then he smelled an armpit. They did not smell like plastic. He smelled his own armpit. It smelled like plastic buried under a layer of warm pavement. Something in Paul's bed rolled over. There was a drawing on her back. Paul could not remember where this drawing had come from. He did not remember ever knowing anyone with a drawing on their back. Below the drawing was a caption. It said, "Sorry I was lonely last night. You don't mean anything to me." Paul stopped looking at the drawing. He was hungry. He found a bowl of old cereal on a stool next to the bed. He ate some of it before he realized it was too old and soggy. Paul put the old cereal back on the stool and crawled under the covers. He woke up later. No one else was in the bed except Paul. When Paul finally got out of bed he noticed his bureau was lying face down on its drawers. All his clothes were trapped inside. Paul realized he would probably never stand the bureau back up. If he ever decided to change his clothes he would just buy new ones.

Paul once read that people with glass eyes were less likely to die in their sleep. Every night Paul pretended he had a glass eye before he went to sleep. When Paul was asleep he thought of lists. Paul liked to dream in the shape of lists. Most nights Paul's lists were mundane and boring. The guilt of not changing his clothes often filled his dreams with lists of laundry chores. In the spring and fall his lists were heavy with tasks of yard work. Paul liked to go to bed hungry because he dreamt of grocery lists. Sometimes his lists are full of regret and other times his lists didn't have any logic. Once, at the dentist, Paul asked for help with his dreams, but the dentist said he couldn't help.

A person called and asked Paul if he was doing anything special for his birthday. Paul said he hadn't done anything special in a long time. The person said, "Aren't you excited?" Paul said he was excited and then apologized for lying about being excited. The person said, "Oh." Paul tried to think of something to say, but couldn't so he said, "Yeah." No one spoke for a few minutes. The person said, "I wish I had more to talk about." Paul told her it was okay.

The next morning Paul found a lettuce head floating in the bathtub. It had a candle stuck in its forehead and on the wall it said, “This is what your head would look like if you were made of lettuce.”

Being unemployed was not that bad. Paul spent most of his time drawing on his chest with markers. These were his favorite things to draw: Owl hens, baby pacifiers, a box of twelve-week-old fried chicken, a squirrel holding an acorn, a hen in a box full of free kittens, eleven envelopes sealed in wax in the pouch of a dawn-colored horse, thousands of plastic pink hens in suburban front lawns, two blue hens in the mouth of a baby deer, a squirrel-shaped hen inside of a clear-shelled egg, fat politicians with teeth the shape of neon pink acorn skin, a blond-haired pigeon wearing an avocado green leather jacket, and a blurry indistinguishable animal saying, “when the hens are gone and nothing is left—that is zen.”

On the day after something happened, Paul lay in bed and thought of all the armpits he wished he had touched when he was in high school. He thought about Ellen Morris's armpits the most even though she came from a rich family and her armpits probably smelled like money. Paul also thought about Katie Jayne Grayson's armpits because she had a shaved head, but didn't shave her armpits which Paul thought was very sexy.

Eventually Paul found something to do with his life so he had to clean all the dead milk out of his hair. On his first day of work the copy machine was replaced by a cardboard box filled with three newborn plastic bird shapes. The office air conditioning seeped into his fingernails. Every day, when he got home from work, Paul noticed a new area of his body that had begun to hurt. His house plant had grown into a teenager so it barely spoke. Sometimes the door handle to the basement would fall off and Paul would yell at it until his hair ached and he needed to lie down. He usually had trouble falling asleep because every time he lay down he could hear something laughing. Paul would think of Harriet. It was late fall. On the bus to work Paul began to notice a man in the front of the bus with a notepad who only made notes whenever someone laughed. Most of the children on the bus didn't have arms that extended beyond their elbows. Sometimes one of the children would try to throw their lunch at the bus driver, but the lunch would weakly drop onto the floor a few feet in front of them. Most of the children without elbows

only ate yellow cake. Once some of the yellow cake landed near Paul's foot so he bent down and fingered it and then put the finger in his mouth. All the children on the bus laughed. Paul felt embarrassed. The children told Paul the yellow frosting was actually urine. The man in the front of the bus scribbled into his notepad.

Someone left a baby arm and some salsa in the break room. There was note next to the salsa that said, "When the desert finishes sinking you will wonder why you did not sink. Everyone will mistake your reasons as faith." Paul did not understand the note. He left it on the table and looked for a plastic spoon to eat his yogurt. The next day no one was at work. Everyone had called in sick. The baby arm was no longer in the break room. Paul put the jar of salsa on the linoleum and waited for it to sink, but it didn't so he left the break room. At lunchtime, Paul went across the street and bought a loaf of bread and some meats. When he got back to the office everyone had decided to not be sick anymore.

Paul's face looked at Paul's hands. The left hand asked the right hand, "So, were you born like this?" The right hand shrugged. "Well," said the left, "Either you were or you weren't." The right hand coughed and made movements like it was going to speak.

On television, something was eating candies in Paul's living room. Paul's wife ran in from the kitchen and said, "I don't have much candy left." A younger version of Paul walked into the living room on television and drew a picture of an older, naked Paul on the living room wall. The thing eating candies continued eating candies. Paul changed the channel.

On the new channel Paul's right hand was speaking. Paul did not understand. There were subtitles, "I guess I was born like this," the subtitles said, "I don't know. I don't remember much from my birth. It has become cloudy in my mind. I think health class in seventh grade confused a lot of my memories. My birth wasn't like any of the videos they showed us."

There is a space somewhere in the human body that believes it is impossible not to be more than one object. These thoughts exist in the idea we are a different person every time we accomplish something new. For a year, Paul pretended he was a chickadee and lived on a bed of balsam firs inside a mailbox. He fed on loose correspondence and his nostalgia for the ability to laugh out loud. Near the end of his mailbox days, Paul felt himself turning to wood and wondered if he hadn't given up on human life. When Paul finished his chickadee thoughts he removed himself from the mailbox and built another larger mailbox next to it so he could spend the following year deconstructing what it had meant to be a chickadee on a bed of balsam fir inside a mailbox. He called this second year of life inside a mailbox, "the illogical emptiness of corresponding with yourself." One night, near the expected end of his stay in the second mailbox, Paul heard a loon cry near a small body of land in the middle of a lake. He tried to open his eyelids, but the space between his eyelids and his eyeballs felt like it had been filled

with glue. Paul tried to remove his own eyeballs so he could look at himself, but he couldn't so he climbed out of the mailbox.

Everything in the world laughs silently except the human object.

Sometimes Paul feels like a boy with no legs floating in a canoe at the edge of a lake waiting for a man hired to be his father to climb into the canoe and paddle it to the center of the lake where the two of them can point at large shapes in the water. When the man hired to be his father arrived, Paul asked this man if he ever felt like his legs had fallen off. The man hired to be his father got in the canoe and paddled. He said, "I once had four arms so I cut two of them off and spent my pre-adolescent years waiting for my legs to grow in." Paul felt the space where his legs wouldn't exist if he cut off his own legs. At the center of the lake there were large lumps the size of mashed potatoes if mashed potatoes could be made from grinding up a dozen old school busses. The man hired to be Paul's father said the large lumps were unloaded into the middle of the lake from spaceships. Paul didn't believe this. He remembered reading in a newspaper the lumped masses were shipped in on large cargo trucks. One of the large shapes rose to the surface and smiled at Paul. The man hired to be his father laughed and pulled out a sheet of paper to document his own laughter,

but in the process he dropped the canoe paddle in the lake. Paul watched the paddle sink into the lake's linoleum surface. The man hired to be his father shrugged at Paul and said, "I guess we'll have to walk home." Paul nodded. He looked at the whales in the lake. They had normal expressions on their faces, but Paul couldn't help imagining they understood what human laughter was and were reproducing it inside their bodies somewhere below the surface.

Paul's chin hurt. He went in the bathroom and looked in the mirror. There were tiny black Xs on his chin in the mirror. Paul moved his face. The stitches did not move. They had been transferred to the mirror. Paul's face was no longer stitched. He looked at the mirror a long time and tried to apologize for giving it stitches. The mirror ignored Paul. The stitches began duplicating and crawling across the mirror.

The mother of the man hired to be Paul's father asked the doctor about the naked drawings on the living room wall. He pulled off his glasses and said, "Most boys his age have a tendency to become very curious about celebrity genitalia." A hushed sound of embarrassed weeping filled the area surrounding the doctor.

Later, Paul found stitch marks on the living room couch. These stitches smelled like old flesh. Paul felt a little confused so he went out to his grandfather's shed to admire his grandfather's tools.

When Paul was still a child he wished his father was a particle scientist. His father said, "I am your mother and I am a librarian." Paul was confused because he had been told his mother died in labor. The doctor forgot to close all her delivery code with end tags. And his mother came up as an error message when Paul tried to log onto her server. Living without a mother can lead to a very lonely childhood. Most days at school he was teased about his mother being a broken link. He was slipped notes in class with URLs to dead webpages that no longer worked. Sometimes the other children would run around him yelling, "404 error" over and over. Most afternoons Paul sat alone in his room researching "link rot" in medical books he stole from his mother's library. He was scared he would succumb to the same disease as his mother. He became paranoid he was going to get pregnant and die. A month before he graduated high school, Paul received a letter saying his father had died when a submarine carrying tiny governmental particles sunk in the middle of a lake. At the end of the note it said the submarine had been recovered and that

Paul's father had been found in the submarine's bathroom with a shower curtain wrapped around his neck.

Paul sat in a closet and tried to make up funny words. He kept saying the word "plumple" over and over. Sometimes he touched his phone and said, "plumple." He waited to see if the phone laughed at him. The phone didn't say anything. On the Friday before the annual town festival, he called the town registry, but it wasn't home and the answering machine said it cost forty-two dollars to register a new word. Paul only had three dollars. He stayed in the closet for a long time and continued to say "plumple" over and over again.

Before the special weekend, Paul decided to buy some fake money made out of bamboo leaves and guacamole ink. He had never bought fake money before because he was afraid he would eat it. Paul called someone who sold fake money. There was no answer. Paul listened to an answering machine. It said, "Hi, I'm not home right now. I've gone to Tim's house to watch a movie." Paul called someone else, but their fake money was made out of paper and indigo cheese. Paul did not like the thought of carrying around blue money printed on cheese. For the next couple of months Paul watched television, but then he got bored of television so he called the person who made fake money out of bamboo leaves and guacamole ink. He got the answering machine again. It said, "I'm still at Tim's house. We're watching another movie." Paul decided to find out where Tim lived and go stand outside his window or something. He thought maybe he could watch someone watch a movie and then when the movie was over he would knock on the front door and buy some fake money. When Paul got to Tim's house he looked through the living room window and

realized movies weren't being watched. Tim took off someone's shirt and then he began playing a drum. Tim played the drum for two hours. The guy without a shirt just lay on the floor and listened. Then a girl walked into the living room, holding a bowl of popcorn. She put it down and began playing the piano. The television was on. No one was paying attention to it. Paul ignored the people in the living room and looked at the television. Paul got bored. He had seen television images too many times already. He started breathing really fast on the window. It fogged up. Paul drew a penis on the fogged glass and then went home. Someone called later. Paul put the phone to his ear and thought of taking off his shirt. He heard someone playing the drum. Paul hung up the phone and went outside. There was an envelope on the steps. On the envelope it said, "I'm sorry. We found your window penis." Inside the envelope was a pile of rotting, damp fake money made out of bamboo leaves and guacamole ink. He put the envelope in his breast pocket.

Paul once fell asleep naked in a sand pit. In the morning, he woke up in the lamb barn. There was a plastic bag from a convenience store next to him. The lambs did not like the shape of the bag. Paul left the lamb barn and walked into town. He found a convenience store. The girl at the counter tried her best to ignore Paul, but he was naked everywhere so she was forced to look at some of his naked parts. She looked mostly at his naked shoulder. As she looked at his naked body she tried to pretend she was an empty table so Paul wouldn't notice her looking at him. Paul waited for her to call the assistant manager, but she took a Polaroid of him and hung it on the wall next to some other Polaroids of naked boys. She told Paul to leave the convenience store and said he wasn't allowed to come back. Paul left the convenience store and went out to the parking lot. He lay down in one of the empty parking spaces. An hour later, the girl who worked the counter left the convenience store. Paul said hello to her. She ignored him. As she walked across the parking lot to her car Paul yelled, "If you were pregnant

or a single mother you would date me. We would date exclusively and we would do at least four hours of lawn care together every night."

Paul stopped talking at work because he didn't want to seem uneducated and lose his job. The office motto was, "hallways filled with pictures of beautiful people." Whenever Paul walked down the hallway he felt more productive. The thought of a beautiful person made Paul work harder. Once they lined the hallways with pictures of an asexual looking navel button and for three hours Paul's production levels were maxed out.

A month after Christmas, the office manager gave Paul a piece of paper with a picture of an empty beach on it. Paul looked at the beach for a long time. The office manager handed Paul another picture. It was the same beach, but there was now an empty bench in the middle of it. Paul said he understood what the office manager was trying to tell him. Paul gathered his things and waved goodbye to some people. Before he left, Paul stopped in the break room and found a brown bag with the secretary's name on it. There was a small dog inside the bag. Paul put the bag in his jacket and ran out of the office building. On the sidewalk he tripped and fell. He felt the bag crush beneath himself. When he opened the bag it was full of dead grapes.

Paul began temping at a new office. The company motto at this new office was different. The new office believed in, “hallways filled with pictures of decent looking people, naked, but with their faces blacked out.” Paul’s job at the new office was to sit in a bathtub all day and eat cereal. When he went home at night he tried to practice, but the woman hired to be his mother wouldn’t let him take baths. Paul tried to eat cereal in the shower, but the shower water made the cereal warm and soggy. She didn’t understand Paul needed to practice eating cereal in a bathtub for his job.

On his third day of work, the office adopted a new company motto consisting of, “hallways filled with pictures of naked people standing on top of washing machines.” Paul was excited about work, but his lack of practice soon developed a smell of incompetence. He kept dropping flakes into the tub and got behind schedule. On his fourth day of work he was given a picture of an empty beach and a second picture of someone at the beach shrugging for the camera. That night Paul took his dinner into the bathroom and locked the door. As he filled the tub he heard the woman paid to be his mother take deep breaths as if she was going to scream, but she never did. Paul fell asleep in the bathtub at three a.m. In the morning he found a cheese doodle curled up and asleep outside the bathroom door. There were leftovers on the stove. Paul ate them with his wrinkled fingers. He looked at a picture of himself on the refrigerator and felt deeply depressed. He realized one day he was pretty sure he would masturbate to the pictures in his own autobiography.

When Paul was a child he asked the woman hired to be his mother if he could eat duck. She told him he didn't want duck. She said, "Listen to Mommy because Mommy is paid a lot of money to know what is best for you." Years later, Paul was eating a noodle. The woman hired to be his mother asked him if the noodle tasted like a noodle. Paul said, "Sure." She said, "Once, when you were very little I found a dead mannequin in your brother's room." Paul nodded even though he had never been aware he had a brother. His hired mother continued, "There was a suicide note stapled to the mannequin's forehead. It was in your brother's handwriting. It said, "I have turned into a mannequin and killed myself." It didn't take long to figure out your brother had not turned into a mannequin and wasn't dead. We soon figured out he was living in the attic. After a long talk with the man hired to be my husband it was decided we would allow your brother to continue pretending he was dead. We wanted to respect his decision. He still lives in the attic, but doesn't quite know we know he's up there. He survives off the food

we set out in rat traps. Yesterday, I brought up two rat traps. One had a turkey sandwich and other had a bowl of chicken soup. Your brother was hiding behind our old foosball table. It's important you never talk to him. None of us can talk to him because if we do he might get embarrassed and kill himself."

Two days before the smallest leaf on the only oak tree in his grandparents' yard fell off the tree, Paul found a toad in a garden and squeezed it until there was seepage. When Paul's hands were finished getting damp, he dropped the toad and went in the shed, but forgot there was no sink and only axes so instead of washing his hands he chopped them off. To help them grow back he rubbed toothpaste on the ends of his stumps. The shed was not amused by any of this and fell on its face. Paul had to wait for his grandfather to get home and lift the shed off its face.

When Paul was seventeen he went to a supermarket and met someone who liked to put gummy worms in her ears. Paul thought, "Later, when we're alone I want to kiss the same piece of candy she is kissing." At ten o'clock someone began turning off all the lights in the parking lot. Instead of kissing the girl with gummy worms in her ears, Paul began gathering up shopping carts and throwing them down a hill at the edge of the parking lot. She began crying and said, "My lips are numb." The cops came so Paul had to leave. When he stopped running he looked at his watch. It was ten minutes until midnight. Paul was alone. He tried to follow his boot prints back to the supermarket, but it started to rain and most of the snow said, "Immortality is recording a pop song that gets played on the radio for a week."

In health class, the teacher told Paul to get into bed with the dish soap. He told the teacher he had never slept with dish soap. She said it didn't matter. Paul spilled a little dish soap on the simulation pillow, which was actually his textbook. The teacher said, "That little careless mistake is the difference between death and pleasure." Then the teacher called up the next presenter and asked them to practice safe sex with a dust pan.

Paul felt bad not crying at his grandfather's funeral. The mother of the man hired to be his father was crying. People kept walking up to a stone in the ground and touching it. Some would already be crying when they touched the stone. Some would start crying after they touched the stone. Almost everyone was wearing a tear drop instead of a face. Paul pretended to stare at something that wasn't there and hoped people would think he was wearing an invisible tear drop.

Someone called the night before the funeral to say, "Sorry." Paul lied and said his grandfather had killed himself with a shower curtain because he didn't know how to say the word "cancer."

After everyone touched the stone in the ground, people went to a house and ate cheese. All sorts of relatives and cousins from far away showed up. Paul didn't recognize any of them. Later, when the house was almost empty, the man hired to be Paul's father came over and put his hand on Paul's shoulder. There were tears in his eyes and he was silent for a long time. Then when the tears were dry he said, "I'm sorry I'm not your dad." Paul shrugged and didn't say anything.

### **Acknowledgements**

I wrote and edited the majority of this book when I still ate meat and everything attached to meat. I am no longer a meat toucher. It feels a little weird for this book to get published after I stopped putting meat inside my face. I guess I'm sort of thankful for everything that died in order for me to write this book because it would not have been the book it is without meat, but it's also very sad how much meat I used to eat. For most of my life I ate way too much meat. The majority of us eat too much meat. A lot of money is spent to make sure we eat too much meat. Everyone please stop listening to the money telling you to eat meat. The human body does not need to eat meat. According to science, you're more likely to die if you eat meat. And Earth is also more likely to die because of meat. It's all very messed up. It makes my brain hurt. I wish there was something more I could say. Or I wish I could hold your hand and whisper non-meat thoughts in your ear until you stopped eating meat, but there are a lot of hands and ears in the world and only one of my mouths can whisper.



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