

Stricken

Matthew Baker

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I hide in the bathroom, sitting on the floor next to a wicker wastebasket heaped with crumpled-up toilet paper and tampon wrappers and makeup-caked cotton swabs, until the pounding on the door becomes insistent, and then urgent, and a voice shouts a plea through the door. Scented candles flicker over on the counter, perfuming the air with a rosy fragrance. A hand tries twisting the knob, forcefully, then raps on the door again. Standing back up, I'm confronted by my reflection in the mirror over the sink. ~~My skin is disgusting. My nose is hideous. My eyebrows are grotesque.~~ I am a beautiful human being. I wash my hands.

Back out in the party all of the paintings on the walls glow neon under the black lights and people are dancing to the thumping beat of the music, ~~some gross hip-hop song about pussy.~~ Somebody's wearing a deodorant that smells ~~abominable, repulsive, nastier than any sweat ever could,~~ memorable, and certainly unique. I tentatively move toward the dancing, but the thought of trying to fake a feeling of joy suddenly seems unbearable, and just before reaching the edge of the crowd, I awkwardly veer away. I'm still carrying my drink, I realize, a plastic cup of some unidentified chardonnay ~~that tastes cheaper than box wine.~~ that was generously provided by the hosts free of charge. I wander through rooms of people chatting happily together, reclining on sofas, leaning against cupboards, standing clustered between leafy houseplants, relaxing in a whirlpool tub with underwater

lighting. People recording a video. People passing a joint. Nobody notices me. ~~I have no friends, which shouldn't surprise me. I'm not funny. I'm not smart. I have no personality. I contribute nothing to human society. I don't deserve to be loved. I don't deserve to be liked. I can't even have fun at a party.~~ Every person here is my friend. ~~Every person here is an acquaintance who pretends to be my friend out of politeness, or sheer pity. Nobody wants me to be here. I'm such an idiot. I shouldn't have come.~~ I walk out.

Frogs are croaking quietly. The wind is frigid. I drift into a park down the road, sitting alone on a boulder, hunched and shivering, sipping ~~terrible~~ wine and trying not to cry. ~~I'm such a freak.~~ I haven't even drunk enough to feel tipsy.

"You okay?" says a shadowy figure standing on the path.

"I'll stab you in the throat with a switchblade if you speak another word to me," I say, and the figure ambles away.

I manage to strip off my cardigan and my dress and tug on a baggy t-shirt before collapsing into bed and falling asleep, but there's no sense of rest upon waking the next morning, just blurry memories of nightmares and a damp patch of drool on my pillow, pressing into my face. I grimace, rolling over. Daybreak glows pale blue in the sky. Dust floats through the light by the window. I knuckle some crusted flakes of dried drool from the corners of my mouth, feeling a sense of horror remembering the party the night before. I don't know how long my brain has been like this. I wonder if maybe my brain has always been like this. Judging, criticizing, suspecting, hating. I can't remember the world ever seeming beautiful instead of ugly. Sage says that my mind is stuck in a routine, a certain method of processing information, that for some reason my mind automatically thinks in negatives—negative impressions, negative reactions, negative assumptions, negative expectations—but that with a conscious effort, my mind can be conditioned to think in positives. I can experience reality from a new perspective. To live in a beautiful

world, I just need to recognize the beauty already around me.

~~I'm failing.~~ I'm trying.

Bluebirds are chirping in the branches of the maple tree out the window. I masturbate for a while, watching some hentai, a yaoi scenario, lying in bed with my phone propped against a mound in my comforter, close to my face, and my underwear pushed down onto my thighs. Subtitles flash innuendos. Focusing on a sexual encounter between imaginary characters, releasing my body to the primal pleasures of the clit, I experience briefly the infinite bliss of nonthinking, a state of pure existence, but after a couple of orgasms the porn gradually ceases to interest me, and self-awareness returns to my body like a shadow. ~~I'm such a fucking weeb.~~ I am a beautiful human being. ~~I'm pathetic.~~ I flip my phone down and kick off my underwear and then flop over onto my back with my arms thrown out, staring up at the ceiling. I can hear one of my housemates gargling mouthwash in the bathroom down the hall. My bedroom has a faint lingering odor of cat urine and mothballs from prior tenants. ~~I live in a dump. I live in a hovel.~~ I'm lucky to have a home, somewhere safe to sleep at night, sheltered from the elements, warm enough during the winter to walk around barefoot as snow flurries out the windows, cool enough to wear a sweatshirt during the summer as heat shimmers over the road, a house furnished with all of the wonders of modernity, electricity and plumbing and supersonic internet. ~~The fridge is janky, the toilets are shoddy, and the carpeting is vile. This house should be condemned based on the color of the carpeting alone. I'd rather die in a gutter than have to spend another night here.~~ Above me there's a water stain on the ceiling, a ~~depressing brown blotch,~~ a ~~disgusting brown smear,~~ a wavy brown shape that upon further inspection is composed of so many overlapping ripples of beige and chestnut and taupe and umber with such subtly varying degrees of translucency that the composition would be impossible for a painter to replicate by hand. An abstract masterpiece created by the secret movements of

water dripping through hidden spaces. I like remembering that sometimes ceilings are also floors and that sometimes floors are also ceilings and that every wall in every house conceals a hidden space containing wooden beams and fluffy insulation and squirrel nests and wandering ants and maybe gold bars stashed there a century ago by a former owner. That nature will always be the greatest artist. The water stain is actually maybe the best feature of the bedroom.

One of my housemates peeks in through my door.

“You leave dishes in the sink again?” Zadie says.

“Can you knock before barging in here?” I say.

“Oh, totally, sorry,” Zadie says.

~~Motherfucker.~~

“I’m barely even awake yet,” I say, dragging my hands over my face.

“Sorry, just have to, like, make some breakfast,” Zadie says, smiling apologetically.

I wash the dishes, standing barefoot at the sink in the kitchen. ~~I fucking hate washing dishes. Zadie has never liked me. She’s always harassing me about dirty dishes, always, and only me. She actually seems to enjoy persecuting me. She’s heartless. She’s sadistic.~~ Zadie offers to cook me some eggs and bacon, and just then my other housemates wander into the kitchen, yawning and scratching and cracking a joke about zombies, Nisha in a torn hoodie, Chloe in some silk pajamas, and suddenly we’re all eating breakfast together, sitting out on the stoop with eggs and bacon and grapefruit juice and mismatched mugs of coffee as the sunrise bursts orange in the sky. Puffy clouds float over the neighborhood. Goldfinches flit twittering through the yard. ~~The grapefruit juice is too pulpy.~~ The grapefruit juice is pleasantly tart. ~~I fucking hate when there’s pulp.~~ The coffee tastes almost chocolaty and the yolks of the eggs are like buttery gushes of cream in my mouth and the crisp savory meat of the bacon is marbled with strips of fat so rich that the lard seems to

melt on my tongue. My housemates hardly ever eat breakfast all together like this. Zadie cracks up at the punchline to a story, laughing so hard she's crying, collapsing into me, resting her head on my shoulder and squeezing my arm with her hand for support. Just then a dog comes scurrying down the sidewalk, a puppy with blond fur and dark eyes and a bright pink tongue hanging out, wearing a collar but no leash. Noticing me and my housemates sitting over on the steps, the dog yips and hesitates and then bounds across the yard, and my housemates exclaim in delight, coaxing the dog over with squeals and coos and then reaching down to pet the puppy, to scratch the puppy behind the ears. Zadie grins happily, letting the dog lick her fingers. ~~That dog probably just ate feces off the sidewalk, or licked a festering puddle of rot leaking from a bag of garbage, or attempted to chew the brittle putrid corpse of a chipmunk that had been crushed by the tire of a car.~~

"That's so disgusting," I say, pulling my feet up onto the stoop with my arms around my legs.

~~That dog probably has fleas.~~

"I don't want that mutt anywhere near me," I say.

The owner of the puppy finally appears, strolling down the road with a coiled-up leash in hand, ~~yet another asshole in this town who's too entitled to keep his dog on a leash as required by local ordinance. The law should be punishable by imprisonment. Motherfuckers like him deserve to be arrested, to get stungunned and handcuffed and tossed into the back of a van with a bag over his head. He should have to beg a judge for mercy, should have to cry with remorse before ever seeing daylight again. His haircut looks fucking stupid. Gelled hair slicked straight back. Glancing over, he smiles at me and my housemates as if he's performing some wonderful service for the community by allowing his dog to run wild. I hope a hawk swoops down talons out and rips his puppy straight from this world into the afterlife. I want to watch him fall to his knees and weep in despair as a hawk~~

~~tears into the belly of his dog in the sky. Afterward, after spurts of blood and chunks of intestine and gristly lumps of flesh have rained down onto the pavement around him, after the hawk has finally eaten to satisfaction and released the limp carcass and flapped away and what remains of his puppy has hit the pavement just in front of him with a wet slap, I'd like to walk across the yard, kneel down close beside him, wrap an arm around him, comfortingly, and then whisper in his ear, "Maybe you'd have been able to save your dog if you'd had your dog on a leash, huh?"~~

Maybe he volunteered to walk the dog as a favor for a sick friend or an elderly neighbor and honestly just couldn't figure out how the leash worked.

After the puppy has scampered away, hurrying off down the road after the stranger with the leash, my housemates rise from the stoop, carrying empty mugs and plates and cups back through the door. I'm suddenly gripped by a crushing sense of regret. I'd been desperate to spend more time with my housemates, been secretly longing to hang out together more often, and an opportunity finally arrived, and ~~I ruined everything, fucking idiot, sitting here scowling because of some grapefruit pulp and a stray dog, because of having to wash some dirty dishes that should've been washed the night before.~~ I'll have other chances. ~~Fuck.~~ I'm going to have other chances to spend time with my housemates. ~~I'm such a monster.~~ I am a beautiful human being. ~~I'm such a bitch.~~ I am a beautiful human being. ~~I don't deserve housemates this amazing.~~ My mouth is quivering, I realize. My body is hunched with shame.

I'm still brooding about the incident standing under a drizzle of water in the shower, and putting on eyeliner at the mirror in my bedroom, and getting dressed in a rush, and then walking to work, hurrying down the sidewalk in jeans and boots and a black turtle-neck, wearing a tan wool coat against the chill of the breeze. The sky has suddenly darkened with clouds. Michigan springs. Across from the taqueria there's a sandwich wrapper

spattered with what looks like mayonnaise lying in the gutter, ~~dropped there by some asshole too lazy to walk the wrapper over to the trash container that's mere steps away.~~ maybe dropped there on accident after slipping from a tote or a purse. I almost trip over the curb crossing the road. Sage says not to block out objective facts, that an awareness of objective facts is healthy, but that how you respond to an objective fact is a choice, and if you're going to attach a value to an objective fact, or make a subjective interpretation, then there's always a way to think of a positive. She was wearing this cute romper, sitting against a rusted barrel in the desert, that time she talked about objectivity. Back when her hair was still dyed ombre. I wish we could be friends. ~~I'm so fucking lame.~~ I am a beautiful human being. ~~I deserve to get dragged through the streets and pelted with moldy tomatoes. The town should build a public urinal that's just a bust of my head.~~ I'm almost to work. I wasn't paying attention getting dressed. I've never washed these jeans before, an attempt to preserve the color, but by now the denim is so washed-out from thunderstorms and snowmelt and spilled glasses of water that the rich black dye has faded down the front of the legs, and my skin pokes through rips in the knees, and the black leather of my boots is all scuffed at the toes, and bleach spots are flecked across one of the cuffs of my turtle-neck. ~~My outfit looks fucking raggedy.~~ My outfit is perfectly fine. ~~Motherfucker. I'm such an idiot. I should've worn something different.~~ Shaking keys out of a coat pocket, I flip the deadbolt and twist the lock in the door and then slip into the flower shop.

The coolers of flora glowing at the back of the shop suddenly seem to dim as the pendants hanging over the counter flare with light. I clock in. Draping my coat over the table in the storeroom, I'm confronted by the reflection of my face glimmering in the acrylic seat on the stool. ~~My chin looks fat and saggy, like a sac of blubber drooping from my face.~~ I am a beautiful human being. I work through the morning checklist, lugging out crates of inventory, counting through the cash reserve in the drawer, switching on the neon sign in

the windows, and then standing at the counter, arranging flowers into bouquets to fulfill new orders, carefully examining each configuration from different angles, attempting to create a sense of harmony without symmetry, a natural splendor. The constant humming sound the humidifier makes is ~~extremely irritating to listen to~~. usually quiet enough to ignore. I'm lucky to have a job here, to get to work in the presence of so many vibrant plants, in the lush fusion of scents bursting forth from fresh poppies and orchids and tulips and roses. Clusters of bundled daisies. Lilies glistening with dew. ~~I'm probably developing a permanent respiratory condition from constantly having to breathe in all of this pollen.~~ Mom labored for years to save enough money to cover my college tuition. I have a university diploma and get paid minimum wage to wrap flowers in tissue paper. ~~I'm an embarrassment. I'm a failure.~~ I've learned a lot of amazing facts from this job, like that honey bracelet grows on cliffs, or that marigolds are edible and taste almost citrusy but buttercups are poisonous enough to blister the tongue. ~~I'm so pathetic.~~ Ikebana is a noble art form, treasured as a powerful medium for the expression of spiritual truths, profound emotions. ~~This isn't ikebana, and these arrangements are garbage in comparison. Any idiot who can operate a pair of scissors could do this shit.~~ I dropped some gyps on the floor. Squatting for the sprig, I can feel my jeans straining against my thighs. ~~I'm worthless. I have no talents. I have no purpose. I don't deserve to live on this planet.~~ The bell hanging over the door jangles as my problem customer enters the shop.

“Good morning, how are you, what a pleasure to see your wonderful face,” Roberto says.

He lumbers toward the counter in a wool fedora, stocky and bearded, here for the weekly pickup of flowers for the vase by the register at the antique store he owns by the river. He's ~~despicably cheap~~, amusingly cheap, often tries to negotiate a discount based on supposed defects in the flowers, once attempted to barter for flowers with coupons for a

local car wash. He looks like ~~the type of person who'd probably smoke a cigarette butt from a motel ashtray just for the free hit of stale nicotine~~ surprisingly distinguished in the fedora. I think he's actually mentioned before that he's not a smoker. I bring out the bouquet for him. He makes me put in some extra poms.

"It's a tragic mistake for this place not to have a customer loyalty program," Roberto says.

"Does the antique store have a customer loyalty program?" I say.

"Absolutely not," Roberto says.

I tentatively attempt to make some casual chitchat with him, but he only responds with grunts and nods, ~~probably because he dreads this brief period of each week when he's forced to interact with me, the incompetent weirdo at the flower shop.~~ maybe distracted by affairs back at the antique store, or suddenly remembering a dream from the night before. After him there's a rush of business, requiring me to focus on routine tasks, just reacting to requests and commands as the bell over the door rings with every entrance and departure. I fumble a glass vase full of water and have to quick mop up the counter with rags and then throw away a sopping wad of blank tags destroyed by the spill while handling an order over the phone. I forgot to restock the gardening seeds. I misplaced the jar of rubber bands. ~~I don't deserve to work here. I'm not even capable of doing tasks this simple without completely fucking up.~~ I'm trying. I messed up a custom order of daffodils for an anniversary and have to remake the bouquet on the spot as a baby cries in a carrier over on the counter. I press the tip of my tongue into the crooked nook of space behind my snaggletooth, concentrating. ~~Fuck. I'm such an idiot. I'm useless. I ruin everything.~~ I wanted so desperately to be good at this. ~~I should've known that would never happen.~~ I'm just handing over the receipt when my boss arrives, striding into the shop with an authoritative air, which alarms me. Today was supposed to be her day off.

“What’s up?” Hilary says.

“Uh, somebody called about the delivery for next week, saying that there isn’t going to be any eucalyptus, but that there are ferns available as a replacement,” I say.

“What’d you say?” Hilary says.

“That you’d probably rather have some extra myrtle but he should call back to be sure,” I say.

“Okay, so, that’s actually the exact opposite of what you should’ve told him,” Hilary says, laughing, pressing her hand to her forehead with her eyes shut.

~~I’m so dumb.~~ I’m still learning. ~~This is why she hates me.~~ She doesn’t hate me. ~~She hates me.~~ She has a brusque personality. ~~I shouldn’t have worn the turtleneck.~~ The expression she’s making terrifies me.

“Are you hungry?”

“Um,” I say.

“I’m buying you lunch.”

Hilary hangs a sign in the door cheerily advising customers the staff will return soon, and then she leads me across the street and down an alley that emerges onto a vast asphalt lot shimmering with parked cars. She’s dressed in a tight scarlet skirt with a blouse and a blazer and patent-leather pumps, carrying a stylish clutch, with a dash of burgundy lipstick that makes her face look strikingly pretty, and her hair arranged into an elegant golden bun. ~~I look homely in comparison.~~ She’s heading toward a strip mall across the lot, chattering pleasantly about the weather. ~~Strip malls are the greatest atrocity in the history of architecture. America should be charged with crimes against humanity for creating such a blight.~~ I follow her into a bustling restaurant, some trendy pasta chain, ordering at the counter and then sitting across from her in a booth with pleather cushioning. ~~The fluorescent lighting is distressingly bright overhead, obliterating every shadow in the restau-~~

~~rant, all sense of contour and depth, and the pattern on the carpeting is a nightmarish perversion of geometry, and the strips of wall framing the windows are painted an unsightly shade of green, and the sugary pop song blaring over the speakers is sickening. Utterly vapid lyrics yapped by some corporate product in a shrill pitch. I hope that a grease fire burns this monstrosity to the ground. I'm in a well-lit space with a comfortable temperature and plush seating, being fed succulent shrimp caught in a faraway ocean and sweet butter and aged cheese produced from the milk of cows raised on distant farms and garlic cultivated in secluded fields and wheat harvested in remote plains and the oil squeezed from ripe olives grown in orchards far overseas, transported to this location by the choreographed movements of magnificent fleets of airplanes and freight trains and container ships and semis and then transformed by the trained cooks in the kitchen into a dish of steaming scampi, all for the purpose of nourishing my body. I'd rather die of starvation than have to eat here. I should be grateful. Hilary has never treated me to lunch before. She's going to fire me. She's not going to fire me. She's definitely going to fire me. She has plenty of legitimate reasons. She brought me here because she didn't want me to make a scene in front of customers. My palms suddenly feel sweaty. My heart is pounding. Fuck.~~

“So,” Hilary says.

I try to raise some noodles to my mouth but my hands are trembling so much that the noodles fall off the fork.

“The shop is entering a transitional period, and we need to talk about your job,” Hilary says.

I might vomit.

“I want to promote you to manager,” Hilary says.

I stare at her in confusion.

“But you’re the manager,” I say.

Hilary is launching a new company. She’s still going to own the flower shop, so she’ll still technically be the boss, but she won’t have time anymore to manage the flower shop personally. I’d have a salary instead of being paid hourly. I’d have a retirement fund. I’d have actual health insurance. I’d even have business cards. ~~She can’t be serious. She’s making a terrible mistake.~~

“You should promote somebody else,” I say.

“You’re absolutely the best person for the job,” Hilary says.

“I suck at the bouquets,” I say.

“You’re an artist,” Hilary says.

“I’m so awkward with customers,” I say, burying my face in my hands.

I feel her grip me by the shoulder.

“Em, you’re responsible, and you’re organized, and you’re knowledgeable. Nobody works harder than you. And you’re great with customers. I’ve had multiple customers mention you by name, telling me how helpful you are,” Hilary says.

I glance up, looking at her in astonishment.

“You’re serious?” I say.

She nods. The flush of pride bursting through me is so overpowering that tears are suddenly shimmering in my eyes. I’m a valuable employee. I have worth. I have to swallow a lump in my throat.

“Okay, I’ll be manager,” I say.

Hilary cheers. I blink back the blur of the tears, feeling a smile break out across my face, and then stuff noodles in my mouth in a daze as she talks about the details of the new position. This is so awesome. I can’t wait to tell somebody. ~~Nobody will care. It’s pathetic that for a moment this actually seemed exciting to me. Like anybody would ever be impressed~~

by this. It's not like somebody's hiring me to be president of some fancy multinational. I'm not going to be doing cancer research. I'm not going to be doing constitutional law. I'm going to be manager of a flower shop, that's all. A deadend job for me to grow old and wither away in, trimming the stems off flowers. What a loser. Fucking pitiful. I'll always be a failure. Mom will always be ashamed of me.

Hilary gives me the rest of the afternoon off to celebrate the promotion, as if that was anything to celebrate. Back out on the street a rainstorm has blown in from the lake. The rain is so gloomy. The sound of the rain drizzling is beautiful, a steady pattering of water on awnings and leaves and bike racks and pavement and the roofs of cars, and in the chill my breath becomes visible, bursts of steam in the air, and my cheeks are tingling, and although the clouds in the sky are dark, in among all of the gray the clouds contain marvelous ripples of color, violets and indigos and lavenders. I drift down the sidewalk with my head tipped back, feeling the touch of the rain on my nose and my brow and my lips. I'm almost to the intersection when a dog suddenly runs up to me, barking and panting and obstructing the path ahead of me, startling me, and then abruptly slinking forward with a bent head, brushing up against my jeans with damp matted fur.

"The fuck is the matter with you?" I shout, gesturing at the owner, who's standing across the street holding a rolled-up leash, and then shove past the dog with my hands stuffed in the pockets of my coat, carrying on down the sidewalk as the dog yaps at me. My heart is pounding. ~~Cocksucking bitchass motherfucker.~~ There's wet fur on my jeans. ~~I hope she gets botulism from a bent can of stew.~~ A metallic gum wrapper is lying by a fire hydrant. Paper is sogging on a laundromat hanger abandoned in the gutter. ~~I hate this fucking city.~~ This is a beautiful city with a charming main street and quaint lampposts. Robins are warbling in the branches of the leafy oak trees soaring above the brick sidewalk. Colorful umbrellas bob through the rain. Standing down at the traffic light there's some preppy college

kid wearing a flashy mountaineering parka, as if he might have to scale a frozen peak somewhere between here and whatever liquor store he's headed to. as if he's ever climbed a fucking mountain. as if he's even capable of summiting a moderately steep hill. Maybe the parka once belonged to his grandfather, an accomplished mountaineer, and now that his grandfather is dead he wears the parka everywhere, just to feel close to his grandfather again, somehow. He looks fucking ridiculous. His grandfather probably didn't even like him. Fucking poser. The electrician sitting in the truck across the street looks like the type of person who probably tortures cats for fun. is probably a kind and wonderful person with some super cute hobby, like stamp collecting. Sage was sitting on a rickety wooden dock, occasionally grinning with fondness at butterflies fluttering past, gently blowing away mosquitoes with puffs of air, somewhere out under the hanging moss in a swamp, that first time she talked about exaggerations. This had been a struggle for her personally, she said, but if you want to learn to love the world, then you have to refrain from making negative exaggerations. No cynicism. No persecution. Be honest about your experiences. I can't remember exactly how she phrased the metaphor about the hurricane. I daydream about meeting her, telling her how much she means to me, showing her the treehouse in my backyard, my collection of bird feathers gathered on weekends as a child. Relaxing with her in the steaming turquoise waters of a mountainside onsen, laughing together over some joke. I'm so fucking lame. I am a beautiful human being. I'll always be the person who walked into algebra class with a splatter of guano on my shoulder, too dumb to notice until the teacher told me. Every person on this planet has been in embarrassing situations. There's smoothie leaking from a takeout cup in the gutter.

I slip into the coffee shop, easing the door shut behind me. The coolers of beverages glowing at the back of the shop seem radiant in the dim light of the bulbs hanging over the bar. Customers wearing pleather backpacks are browsing the pastries. My promoter is

thumbing through receipts behind the counter.

“Em, you look fabulous, good afternoon, how wonderful to be graced with your presence,” Fatima says.

She zips on a nylon windbreaker, slender and dainty, apparently clocking out for the day soon. She’s ~~cringingly superstitious~~, intriguingly superstitious, often references horoscope predictions at the coffee shop in a reverent tone, once declared the coffee shop to be located at auspicious coordinates geographically. She looks like ~~the type of person who’d probably consult a psychic before committing to switching to a new brand of toothpaste~~ surprisingly hip in the windbreaker. I glance at the exhibit of sculptures on the shelves over by the couches, wondering how much money she might have for me for the weekly payout, but only a single sculpture has sold. ~~Fuck. I’m such an idiot. I’m useless.~~ She hands me the cash without commentary and then wraps on a scarf. I tentatively attempt to make some casual chitchat with her, but she only responds with smiles and grunts, ~~probably because she loathes this brief period of each week when she’s forced to interact with me, the incompetent misfit responsible for the sculptures.~~ maybe preoccupied by some recent drama at the coffee shop, or remembering an incident from the night before. ~~I should’ve never told her about the project. She probably regrets ever inviting me to exhibit. I don’t deserve to show here. I’m not even capable of making work this simple without completely fucking up. I’m trying. I’m worthless. I have no ability. I have no skills. I don’t deserve to live on this planet. I ruin everything.~~

“Today whatever you want is on the house,” Fatima says.

“Are you serious?” I say.

“Grab some supper here if you’re feeling hungry,” Fatima says.

The bell hanging over the door jingles as she exits the shop. Standing at the counter, I’m confronted by the reflection of my face glimmering in the chrome on the espresso ma-

chine. My jaw looks gargantuan and pointy, a disproportioned lump of bone protruding from my face. I am a beautiful human being. I order some supper and then sit at a marble table by the windows, stuffing chili into my mouth in a daze as the bell over the door rings with every entrance and departure. The shrill whirring sound the grinder makes is extremely aggravating to listen to, only a rare disturbance. I'm lucky to have a gig here, to get to exhibit work in a venue with this much traffic. I started out making the sculptures solely for pleasure, each an arrangement of seeds on a foundation of soil, carefully enclosed in a glass vessel. Pine cones on sandy loam. Maple samaras on chalky gravel. The myriad manifestations of texture on dried beech burrs and elm husks and cottonwood fluff and birch pods. The concept is obviously derivative of karesansui, and is utter trash in comparison. Although inspired by karesansui, the sculptures are a unique form of expression, profoundly personal in design. Any idiot with a garden spade could make this shit. A dead-end hobby, for me to grow old and wither away while pointlessly sticking seeds into boxes. Mom labored for years to save enough money to pay my college tuition. I earn minimum wage and spend a substantial portion of that income on supplies for sculptures. I'm a disappointment. I'm a failure. I've learned a lot of interesting facts from this project, like that acorns can float clear across a river after falling, or that grape pips are edible and taste intensely bitter but cherry pits are poisonous enough to dizzy the head. I'm so pathetic. Chewing some cornbread, I take a handful of hickory nuts out of my coat, looking down at the jumble of shells, skimming a fingertip over the faint bumps. I still can't decide what type of soil would be best for pairing. I press the tip of my tongue into the crooked nook of space behind my snaggletooth, concentrating. I'm probably developing a permanent spine condition from constantly sitting hunched over prospective materials. I wanted so desperately to be good at this. I should've known that would never happen. I'm just slipping the seeds back into a pocket when a new customer arrives, bustling into the shop in a

brisk manner. As the barista hands him a latte, murmuring to him, he turns to stare at me, raising his eyebrows, which alarms me. My palms suddenly feel sweaty. He strides directly over to me, gazing down at me intently.

“You’re the artist?”

“Um,” I say.

“I’m so astonished to meet you.”

He offers me a handshake before sitting. He’s wearing a dapper navy suit with a pocket square and a dress shirt and a fuchsia bow tie, carrying a chic leather portfolio, with a pair of horn-rimmed eyeglasses that make his face appear strikingly refined, and the silver strands of his hair trimmed in a neat crewcut. ~~I look shabby in comparison. He’s probably disgusted by how clammy my hand was.~~

“What do you call those creations of yours?” Vincent says.

“Uh, sculptures,” I say.

“I think actually that is not the appropriate term to use here,” Vincent says, laughing, tilting his head with his fingers splayed across his brow.

“Oh, yeah, probably,” I say.

~~I’m so dumb.~~ I’m still learning. ~~He already hates me.~~ There’s no indication he hates me. ~~He hates me.~~ The expression he’s making terrifies me. ~~Fuck.~~

“I acquired one of the pieces earlier this month,” Vincent says.

~~He probably wants a refund.~~

“I’ve had the piece on display at the office,” Vincent says.

I reach for the spoon to take a bite of chili as a way to occupy my mouth but then realize the bowl is empty and there’s a spoon in my hands for no reason.

“Would you be willing to sign the piece for me?” Vincent says.

I stare at him in bewilderment.

“You want me to sign the sculpture?” I say.

Vincent is a collector of fine art. Over the past month the sculpture that he bought has become his most treasured belonging. He’s been asking about me at the coffee shop, hoping to meet me. He’s my biggest fan. He’d love if the sculpture could be signed somehow. ~~He can’t be serious. He’s made a terrible mistake.~~

“It’s just a weird hobby,” I say, covering my face with my hands.

“I’d be truly honored,” Vincent says.

“I suck at the sculptures,” I say.

“I’d be grateful to you for all of eternity,” Vincent says.

“I have literally no training,” I say.

He’s clasping his hands together in a gesture of begging, faintly pouting.

“Okay, I can sign,” I say.

Vincent calls out a pleasant farewell to the staff at the door, and then he leads me down the street and through an alley that emerges onto a gigantic concrete lot shimmering with parked cars. ~~I shouldn’t have worn the turtleneck.~~ He has a bubbly personality. He’s heading toward an office complex across the lot, chattering cheerfully about the weather. ~~Office complexes are an architectural scourge. America should be subjected to international sanctions for designing such depraved environments for human occupancy.~~ I follow him into a busy firm, some ritzy investment enterprise, avoiding eye contact as he waves at the receptionist and then applauds an intern for stapling some papers. ~~The walls in the waiting area are painted a disturbing shade of red, and the fluorescent lighting is upsettingly bright overhead, obliterating every shadow in the office, all sense of contour and gradation, and the melodramatic rock song blaring over the stereo is utterly nauseating, and the pattern on the carpeting is an affliction of nightmarish geometry. A horrifying mess of pixelated forms pasted together by some corporate drone. I hope that a gas leak blows this mon-~~

~~strosity to the sky.~~ Future archeologists will fantasize about walking among such cubicles. ~~I'd rather die of asphyxiation than have to breathe this air.~~ I'm in a well-lit space with a comfortable temperature and abundant seating, strolling past workstations where expert financiers are diligently murmuring into headsets, orchestrating the movements of sensational caches of wealth, granting funding to courageous entrepreneurs establishing new ventures on faraway islands and across distant valleys and in lush verdant forests overseas, all for the purpose of producing new riches, faithfully nurturing the economy that sustains my body. Vincent occupies a luxurious suite lined by windows at the back of the firm. The sculpture is displayed prominently, the lone object on a shelf directly behind the desk. An arrangement of sassafras stones on a vibrant powdery clay. I didn't expect to feel this emotional at the sight of the sculpture.

"I've never seen one on display like this before," I say.

The rush of accomplishment shimmering through me is so overpowering that a lump suddenly forms in my throat. I have to blink back the tears in my eyes. I'm a valued creator. I have worth.

"You shape the dirt so attractively on the glass, and you place the seeds in such fascinating configurations, and you somehow always manage to select the perfect color of dirt to both complement and contrast against the shade of the seeds you've chosen as subjects of contemplation. I've already received compliments from so many clients. Yesterday nearly an hour in here was spent discussing the meaning of the piece. The various implications of the absence of water imposed by the container," Vincent says.

I glance over, looking at him in shock.

"You have a rare talent," Vincent says.

Vincent hands me a marker. I swallow the lump down, feeling a smile break out across my face, and then twist off the cap as he carefully lifts the sculpture from the shelf. This is

so amazing. I can't wait to tell somebody. Crouching to sign the bottom of the vessel, I can feel my jeans straining against my thighs. ~~Like anybody would ever be excited by this. It's not like somebody's awarded me a prize at an international exhibition. I haven't been discovered by some famous critic. I haven't been discovered by some prestigious curator. I've been discovered by a local collector, that's all. It's pitiful that for a moment this actually seemed impressive to me. Fucking pathetic. What a loser. Nobody will care. Mom will always be disappointed by me. I'll always be a failure.~~

Vincent takes a selfie with me to commemorate the signing, ~~as if that was something to commemorate.~~ Back out on the street a fogbank has drifted in from the lake. ~~Fog is so gloomy.~~ The look of the fog rolling is beautiful, a haze of mist swirling through bike racks and benches and signs and leaves and the alleys between buildings, and in the wind my hair becomes animate, wisps fluttering in the air, and the rims of my ears are tingling, and although the clouds in the sky are gray, the edges of the clouds are brightening now with spectacular ripples of color, oranges and yellows and corals. I roam down the sidewalk with my arms stretched out, feeling the touch of the fog on my palms and my fingers and my wrists. Wiper fluid is leaking from a carton abandoned in the gutter. A ripped condom wrapper is lying on a storm drain. ~~I hate this fucking city.~~ This is a beautiful city with quaint lampposts and a charming main street. Cardinals are whistling in the branches of the leafy oak trees soaring above the brick sidewalk. Glowing headlights float through the fog. Standing down at the intersection there's some hippie college kid wearing a camouflage hunting jacket, ~~as if she might have the opportunity to bag an elk on the way back from the convenience store. as if she's ever been on a fucking hunt. as if she's even capable of distinguishing a shotgun from a rifle.~~ Maybe she borrowed the jacket from her brother, because her brother was moving somewhere, temporarily, and she wanted to wear the jacket while her brother was gone, just to feel closer. ~~Her brother probably isn't a hunter~~

~~either. She looks fucking preposterous. Fucking imposter.~~ The medic sitting in the ambulance across the street ~~looks like the type of person who probably wipes snot onto library books.~~ is probably a thoughtful and wonderful person with some super endearing quirk, like loving pickles. ~~I'll always be the person who got caught cheating during a trigonometry quiz, dumb enough to think that the teacher wouldn't spot me peeking at my notes.~~ Every person on this planet has made some regrettable decisions. There's lipstick smeared across a to-go lid in the gutter. I'm just approaching the traffic light when a dog suddenly trots up to me, huffing and snorting and blocking the path ahead of me, and then abruptly rearing back on hind legs, pawing against my jeans with clawed muddy feet, staggering me.

“Are you seriously just that fucking lazy?” I shout, kicking the dog back with my hands stuffed in the pockets of my coat, glaring at the owner, who's standing up the block holding a rolled-up leash, and then carry on down the sidewalk with the dog whimpering after me. ~~Shiteating dickhead motherfucker.~~ There's mud streaked down my jeans. ~~I hope he gets bitten in the neck by a brown recluse.~~ Sage was sitting against a wooden fence spotted with lichen, out somewhere in the rustling grass in a meadow, smiling with contentment at fireflies flickering past, blowing away gnats with puffs of air, that time she first talked about fantasies. This had been such an obstacle for her, she said, but if you want to learn to love the world, then you need to be honest about your experiences. Refrain from inventing negative fantasies. No fatalism. No hostility. I daydream about being introduced to her, showing her the hideout in my attic, my band posters collected at shows as a teenager, telling her how much she's given to me. Chatting with her, sipping from cups of steaming emerald tea on the balcony of some countryside ryokan. ~~I'm so fucking lame.~~ I am a beautiful human being. I can remember exactly how she enunciated the analogy about the glacier. My body shook in recognition.

The ice cream stand is shaped like an ice cream cone and has pink picnic tables with bright cyan umbrellas overlooking the sparkling water in the bay. My date isn't here yet. ~~He probably won't even show.~~ I'm early. I check the app for any new messages from him, but the only new messages are from bots and creeps. I slip my phone back into a pocket. The fog has suddenly vanished in the warming air, and the sky is blazing gold as the sun sinks toward the lake, and the breeze carries the tart fragrant scent of the cedar trees swaying across the street. I'm so nervous that my stomach feels clenched up like a muscle. I'm biting my thumbnail, I realize. I stuff my hands into the pockets of my coat. I'm standing close enough to the ice cream stand to see my reflection shimmering in one of the windows as bicyclists blur past on the path behind me. I haven't been on a date in months. ~~My hair looks greasy.~~ I am a beautiful human being. ~~My face looks bloated.~~ I am a beautiful human being. ~~I wish my nose was normal. I wish my nose was any other nose.~~ I look away from the glass, trying not to think, and then glance back over again. Wrinkles have recently formed in the skin on my face. Faint ridges in the skin on my forehead, and rayed creases in the skin at the corners of my eyes, and curved furrows in the skin above the corners of my lips, arcing along the border between my cheeks and my mouth. I don't remember exactly when the wrinkles first appeared, but ~~the wrinkles are repulsive, the wrinkles are frightening, the wrinkles are truly horrible,~~ maybe the wrinkles could be considered attractive. Even alluring. I like wearing gemstones and precious metals, the diamonds pinned to my earlobes, the platinum ring in my septum, the platinum stud in my labret, the bands of gold on my fingers, rare materials of special properties pried from glittering rocks in shadowy caverns deep in the earth, and my wrists are tattooed with black triangles of ink. I've always loved the feeling of wearing ink, that legendary elixir that transformed human civilization, granting a physical form to millennia of human thinking, the material substance of love letters and ransom notes and treasure maps and poetry and the

coded messages of revolutionaries, of the weathered logbooks of ship captains, and the journals of prisoners, and the memoirs of refugees, and the leather-bound prophecies of mystics, of religious scrolls and astronomical codices and travelogue incunabula and the conspiracy theories on tattered leaflets stapled to telephone poles on the street, of the far-reaching laws of monarchs and dictators and representatives, of newspaper headlines declaring earth-shattering events, and the vibrant illustrations in atlases, and the vivid entries in encyclopedias, and artistic manifestos, and philosophical treatises, and psychological compendiums, and the most coveted recipes, of mathematical proofs and chemistry equations and biological theories and geological discoveries, of the forbidden magic in grimoires, of the fanciful creatures in bestiaries, of fairy tales and swashbucklers and erotic novels, and sheet music, and dance choreography, and stage plays, and the diagrams for innovative architecture, and the designs for groundbreaking inventions, and the secret diaries of emperors and farmers and merchants and bankers and sooty-cheeked freighthoppers and broad-shouldered factory workers and circus performers and nightclub entertainers and socialites and tycoons and cabbies and detectives and mail carriers and homemakers and teachers and nurses and bedridden bird-watchers and star-crossed soldiers and fur trappers and polar explorers and windswept bedouin and lamplit geisha and cologned mafiosi and grizzled lighthouse keepers with bushy eyebrows dripping salty sea spray onto the paper between strokes of the pen. A drop of ink contains tremendous power, the potential to become knowledge incarnate, memory incarnate, imagination incarnate, and glancing down to see that ink on my wrists does make me feel empowered with a certain vibrance. But all of those materials, diamond and platinum and gold, even ink, seem like modest ornaments compared to time. Time is the supreme force in the universe, reigning over the complex mechanics of every interaction in physics, from the ice burning in comets to the volcanoes erupting on asteroids to the solar winds swirling through fluo-

rescent nebulas in the farthest reaches of interstellar space. There's no force in the universe as powerful or breathtaking or mysterious, and wrinkles are the mark of time on a body. Wearable chronos. The ultimate jewelry, becoming increasingly eyecatching with every orbit around the sun. The wrinkles on my face suddenly look sexy to me. Majestic. Behind the glass, a hand dips a ladle into a pot of hot fudge, and then my date suddenly appears beside me.

"Hey," Kyle says, waving to me with a friendly grin.

"Oh, um, hi," I say.

"You want to get some ice cream?" Kyle says.

I stand in line with him. He's wearing jean cutoffs and a threadbare sweatshirt that's ripped along the seam of the collar, exposing the shadowed dip of a clavicle and a pale shock of skin, with the sleeves pushed up onto his forearms. Canvas sneakers duct-taped at the toes. ~~If he was actually interested in me then he would have worn better clothes.~~ Maybe he's such an inherently honest person that the idea of dressing up for a date would never occur to him. Maybe this outfit is an authentic representation of how he typically dresses. He's younger than me, still in college, with a flushed tan face, gripping the skateboard that he arrived on by the axle. His face ~~doesn't look as handsome in person.~~ is handsome. Dark brown eyes and a snub nose and wide plump lips in a proportionally pleasing arrangement, with a jawline that makes me feel a heat in my cheeks. ~~In profile his face looks weirdly flat.~~ His buzzcut ~~makes his forehead appear freakishly large.~~ would probably feel satisfying to rub. He's ~~shorter than expected, which is disappointing.~~ taller than me, which is attractive. He has a spatter of moles on the side of his neck, which ~~bothers me.~~ ~~repulses me.~~ is a constellation of pigment unique to his body. I could be the one to name that constellation, tracing the shape with my fingertip. ~~I wish his name was different.~~ His name is perfectly normal. ~~I'd be embarrassed to have to introduce him to other people.~~ His

name is perfectly fine. ~~My name is just as bland. Uninspiring. As commonplace as a paperclip. As everyday as a napkin.~~ My name is profoundly special, a title bestowed upon me at birth by my mother, cradling me to her chest as she uttered the melodic sequence of syllables over my head. ~~He's probably appalled by how boring my name is.~~ He's talking to me.

"What?" I say.

"I was just asking if you want to walk down to the beach later," Kyle says.

"Oh, uh, definitely," I say.

Salted caramel for me, chocolate hazelnut for him. I stroll with him down the boardwalk as seagulls drift through the sky, crying out with ~~annoying shrieks~~, adorable squawks, and sunlight glitters on the sailboats anchored at the marinas. In a flash of silver a fish leaps from the surface of the water, ~~probably attempting to escape all of the pollution in the bay, a habitat contaminated by gasoline and diesel and runoff fertilizer and industrial chemicals and plastic wrappers tossed overboard by passing boaters.~~ just having some fun. The ice cream is ~~too sweet. artificially sugary.~~ pleasantly cold on my tongue. I haven't had ice cream since last autumn, that day at the mall with my mom. Kyle drops the skateboard onto the boardwalk and hops aboard, coasting next to me for a while, chattering about the weather as the wheels rattle over the slats. When he asks, I admit to having never been on a skateboard before, and he steps down and convinces me to get on. The skateboard trembles under the soles of my boots. I like the feel of his palm on my back, steadying me while simultaneously propelling me down the boardwalk. ~~I'm probably going to crash.~~ I try to focus on not falling. He wants to have kids someday. I can't believe he just volunteered the information like that, with such cheerful confidence. He dreams of carrying kids around on his shoulders, of helping kids with math homework, of teaching kids to cook pancakes, nursing kids through the flu. Little bambini, he says. Italian apparently,

by ancestry. He actually seems interested in me, asking all of these questions about my childhood, my political inclinations, my religious beliefs, my tattoos, my opinion about violence in video games, my experience in college. ~~The sex will probably be disappointing.~~ The sex might be incredible. ~~He probably has a weird smell when he's sweaty, like an expired package of bologna that's been sitting out in the sun. He probably has a flabby stomach. He probably has a limp ass.~~ Based on how fit that he seems, on the defined musculature in his calves and his thighs, on the pronounced veins in his wrists and his hands, he probably actually has tight abs and firm buttocks that would be extremely pleasurable to touch and squeeze. Walking beside me, he parts his lips, tilting his head for a better angle, and licks a soft wet groove into the ice cream melting in the cone in his fist. I briefly imagine his tongue moving like that over my neck, across my nipples, around my hipbones, between my legs, and then suddenly sway on the skateboard, almost losing my balance. ~~I'm not talking enough.~~ I probably seem ~~so creepy~~ so mysterious to him. I probably seem ~~so old~~ so sophisticated to him. He's telling me a story about some documentary he recently saw, a movie about graffiti. Feeling self-conscious about being so quiet, I blurt out something about recently rewatching my favorite anime, and when he actually seems curious about the show, I'm overcome by the urge to plunge into a detailed synopsis, eagerly explaining the layout of the world, and the tragic origins of each of the core characters, and the complicated dynamics of the rivalries, and the beguiling motivations of the villains, and then rambling on about my favorite arc from the series, getting goosebumps down the back of my neck describing the sudden betrayal at the final battle. My voice is literally quivering, I realize. I trail off mid-sentence. ~~I'm so fucking lame. I shouldn't have told him all of that. I shouldn't have told him any of that.~~ He's laughing seeing how emotional the memory of the battle makes me. ~~I don't seem mysterious to him. I don't seem sophisticated to him. I'm a glorified cashier and an amateur sculptor who's pathetically~~

~~obsessed with shojo anime. A creepy old shinnichi who's probably visibly desperate for attention. He's a coder, already earns astounding sums of money on the weekends by making websites freelance. Fuck. I'm so pitiful in comparison. I am a beautiful human being. I shouldn't have worn the turtleneck.~~

"You want to sit?" Kyle says.

I step down onto the boardwalk, and he stomps the skateboard, flipping the skateboard up, and catches the skateboard by the axle, and then he hikes off down the beach past the scattered cinders and ashes from recent bonfires. Beachgrass ripples in the dunes. I sit with him on a hulking piece of driftwood, the gnarled sunbleached trunk of some ancient tree brought to this shore by the cryptic currents of the lake. Out by the lighthouse, anglers are casting from the pier. An orange kite flies far above the beach and farther down the beach a violet kite soars as the sunset burns pink in the sky, tinting the clouds, and waves crash ashore and then rush back to the shallows. Carrying hightops, loafers, sandals, a family hunts for petoskeys barefoot in the foaming surf. Kyle chews a last bite of cone, licking some ice cream from his fingers, and then swallows. I stare at my boots in the sand, trying to imagine what a relationship with him would be like. He seems so easygoing. ~~He'd probably cheat on me.~~ He might be profoundly loyal. ~~He'd probably mostly ignore me.~~ He might be exceptionally attentive. ~~He probably smokes too much weed and gets mean when he's drunk.~~ He might smoke just enough weed, get affectionately sentimental when he's drunk. ~~Mom would probably hate him, would despise the skateboarding and the buzzcut and the tattered clothing, the rambling monologues peppered with slang. Mom will probably never even meet him. He's probably not even interested in dating me, just fucking me once for novelty. After seeing me in the flesh, he's probably not even interested in fucking me. He's probably only going through with the date to be nice, or to avoid the awkwardness of bailing on me.~~

“I love the sunsets here,” Kyle says.

~~This sunset is mediocre at best. Anticlimactic. A monochromatic ooze of pink light dulled by the depressing haze of clouds in the sky. I’m ruining the moment. He’d be miserable being in a relationship with me. Being around me would make him miserable. I’m already making him miserable. I ruin everything. I don’t deserve to be loved. I don’t deserve to be liked. I don’t deserve to be sitting here with him. He deserves somebody who’s as optimistic and caring and fun as he is.~~

“I’m really glad you decided to meet up with me,” Kyle says.

“I actually need to go,” I say.

“Oh, okay, gotcha,” Kyle says.

I rise from the driftwood, gripped by a sense of distress.

“I don’t have any plans tomorrow night, if you want to meet up again,” Kyle says.

“I’d only disappoint you,” I say.

“I’ve never had a crush like this before, to be honest,” Kyle says.

“I don’t deserve that,” I say helplessly, glancing away from him with my hands stuffed in the pockets of my coat.

There’s an aluminum beer tab in the sand and a plastic soda cap farther down the beach and a tattered magazine fluttering in a clump of beachgrass back by the dunes and some fluorescent litter bobbing in the boulders over by the pier and a shopping bag blowing around and a crumpled water bottle that keeps washing onto the sand and then back out into the lake with every wave and ~~fuck every person who’s ever left trash on this beach. I’d rather die than have to live in a world with all of this garbage.~~

“Why does there have to be so much trash everywhere?” I murmur, staring at the beach in despair.

“I’ve honestly never really noticed all the trash before,” Kyle says, glancing around the

beach.

~~Fuck.~~

“You’re right though, the beach experience would be better without the trash,” Kyle says.

~~Fuck.~~

“Let’s try again. Meet me here tomorrow, same time. Tomorrow, when you get here, I promise, there won’t be a single piece of trash in sight,” Kyle says.

“But there’s trash in the dunes, and in the water, and in the cracks between the rocks on the sides of the pier, and up and down the beach for miles in either direction,” I say.

“Yeah,” Kyle says.

“Nobody can pick up that much trash,” I say.

“I can,” Kyle says.

“Picking up all that trash would take hours,” I say.

He stares at the beach with a serious expression.

“Tomorrow, when you get here, the beach will be perfect,” Kyle says.

He actually likes me. ~~He deserves so much better.~~

“Okay, tomorrow,” I say, otherwise too overwhelmed to speak.

Kyle nods and salutes me in farewell, and then he turns away, squatting to retrieve a plastic bottle from the sand. I hike back to the boardwalk without glancing back at him. ~~Fuck. I’m such a freak.~~ I am a beautiful human being. The temperature is plunging. I drift into town, feeling vaguely hopeless. ~~That date was a disaster. But that shouldn’t surprise me. I’m an empty person. I’m a void personality. Dating me would be like being in a relationship with a cardboard box. A decaying cardboard box that’s so rotted with mildew and mold and putrefied mouse droppings that prolonged exposure would be harmful.~~ Mom texted me, a while ago now. I feel a crushing wave of shame. I’m going to have to tell her

eventually. I stand in the street, wavering. The lampposts switch on. I get on a bus.

I swipe my pass, lurching as the bus swings away from the curb, and then shuffle down the aisle and sit slouched in a seat at the back with my hands stuffed in the pockets of my coat and my head slumped against the window. I'm hungry. I don't deserve to eat. I deserve to suffer. I deserve to starve. Somebody's wearing a perfume that reeks of synthetic chemicals, like what a mango might smell like in a nightmare about a tropical hellscape where the palm trees drip blood. The twilight tonight is the richest shade of violet, and the spruce trees in the woods along the highway are becoming silhouettes in the darkness, but the view is ruined by the billboards looming over the road, steel monstrosities featuring crudely designed advertisements with hackneyed slogans displayed in wretched fonts, illuminated by painfully bright floodlights that drown out all the stars, and topped with savage metal spikes to prevent birds from roosting. I hope whoever profits from those billboards dies in agony, burned alive in a house fire, a charred corpse with brittle fingers reaching in vain toward the safe heaped with money. I want to call in bomb threats to every business advertised. Looking away from the window is futile. The view in the bus is just as abysmal. Vile advertisements glare down from the gutters along the sides of the ceiling, and the upholstery on the seats is abhorrent, and the floor is wrecked by muddy shoeprints, and every passenger on the bus is dressed in utterly repugnant clothing. Fake leopard print, obnoxious paisley and tartan and argyle patterns, and gaudy hoodies and crewnecks and tees that flaunt the names and logos of multinational corporations. Human billboards, cursed to walk the planet believing that being branded by a corporate overlord is empowering rather than exploitative. Eyesores in every direction. My reflection is becoming clearer in the window as dusk falls. I'm biting my thumbnail, I realize. I need a distraction. I take out my phone, scrolling through random posts on an app. Everybody looks so beautiful and I'm so ugly in comparison. I can't remember ever feeling despair

this absolute before. Sage just posted a new video. Her first in weeks. I click play, and her face appears on the screen, talking, but even though her mouth is moving, nothing reaches me. Tonight her words just seem like meaningless noises. I was so amazed that time she mentioned that she'd hated having to speak in front of other people when she was a kid, because she'd been ashamed of her lisp, because she'd been embarrassed by her accent, because she'd been convinced that the pitch of her voice was annoying. I was so stunned. To me the sound of her voice had always been the most enchanting music. A military brat who got dragged to a different region of the country every couple of years. I used to wish there was a military base nearby just so that there'd be a chance that someday she might get moved here. I hoped maybe she'd move here for college, but she went on that hitchhiking trip instead, and now she's still just traveling the globe, seeking enlightenment. ~~I'll never be as strong as she is.~~ She's so incredible. ~~I'll never be as brave as she is.~~ Ever since randomly chancing onto one of her videos, that chilly spring night as a freshman, lying on the rug in my bedroom as hail pounded the roof. I've thought of her as a role model for so many years. If not a sensei, then definitely a senpai. A heroic figure worthy of respect, admiration. The first video she ever posted was just a minute straight of her crying in the darkness. She's been so vulnerable, shared every detail of her life over the course of her journey. Her most humiliating fears. Her most mortifying insecurities. Every setback, and every triumph. I wanted so desperately to be worthy of being her follower, but ~~that's never going to happen.~~ even as she's flourished over the years, I've just kept on struggling. ~~She'd only be disappointed if she ever met me. I'm not worthy of the things she's shared with me. I've made no progress. I've made no improvements. I've learned nothing. I'm such a weakling. I'm such a coward. I'll never be like her. I'm a failure. The psychological scum festering on the surface of a toxic pond. A poisoned mind. A poisonous mind. A burden on all of human society. I'll always be the person who got lost on the field trip to the art~~

museum, eventually getting led back onto the school bus in tears. I'll always be the person who was too spineless to audition for drama club. I'll always be the person who got cut from the soccer team after choking. I'll always be the person who was distracted during driver's training, panicked and cried out and missed the brake and hit the deer in the road and afterward waiting for a tow truck had to stand over the body as the deer bled out on the side of the highway, shrieking and grunting and twitching horribly. I'll always be the person who almost flunked out of college, too overwhelmed by the pressure of exams to study. Nailbitten freak staring helplessly at textbooks in the library. A hack florist. A sham sculptor. Too boring to carry a conversation. Too superficial. A moody dumb bitch with a grotesque hideous face and a fat chin and a pointy jaw and a repulsively shaped body, perfectly complemented by a petty, craven, vindictive, hateful psychology. I'll always be the person who glares at strangers, who hurls curses at telemarketers and jackhammers and dogwalkers and hovering flies. Who freaked out after misplacing a receipt for a present, sitting hunched on the floor in the lobby of a hotel with my hands in my hair, trembling. Who freaked out after confusing the date of a festival, sitting slumped against a bale of hay with my hands pressed to my face, screaming out of frustration. Who ruins what should have been special moments. There's no hope for me. There's no hope. I'm the ugliest thing in this town. I'm the ugliest thing on the planet. I deserve to be executed by firing squad, a corpse dumped in the river. Fuck, I'm spiraling. Pour some gasoline over my head and strike a match. I'll always be the person who spat at a pharmacist. A mound of trash wearing some diamond earrings. Just stop thinking. A pile of garbage dressed in a snazzy coat. I'll always be the person who slapped a babysitter. Drop a sack over my head and flip the switch. Just stop thinking. I'm never going to be happy. I'll always be the person crying at the back of the bus. Lip quivering pathetically. There's a disgusting puddle of dried soda that keeps sticking to the soles of my boots, this revolting smacking sensation,

~~and the bus jolts horrifically every time that the tires bump over a pothole, and a foul noxious stench is contaminating the air, the fetid fumes of diesel exhaust seeping in whenever the bus grinds to a halt at a stoplight, brakes screeching at a spine-tingling pitch, and other passengers are cackling madly, while out in the dusk on the street in decaying strip malls discolored posters promote stomach-churning hairstyles in the windows of a salon and dilapidated signs peddle blood-curdling furniture in the windows of a boutique and a monstrously deformed inflatable mascot convulses above the gruesome vehicles at a dealership and a menacing sinister light flickers across the desolate cubicles in the windows of the deserted office complex looming beyond a cracking ruined sidewalk disfigured by dog scat and weeds and oil stains and skid marks and grimy shopping bags that were once briefly used to hold hideous merchandise before being cast aside. I want to live in a beautiful world. I live in a beautiful world. I fail to recognize the beauty. keep trying fail to recognize the beauty. keep trying fail to recognize the beauty. keep trying will always fail to recognize the beauty. I've been fighting this battle for so many years and I'm still losing. I don't know if winning the battle is even possible. I can reject the negative thoughts when the negative thoughts come but can't prevent the negative thoughts from ever coming. I want to taste the delicious flavors of the food in my mouth instead of chewing meals without tasting, distracted by the frenzy of negative thoughts in my mind. I want to hear the chimes tinkling on porches instead of walking past without hearing. I want to smell the smoke wafting from chimneys instead of walking past without smelling. I want to see the steam rising from manholes, the spiderwebs glistening beneath mailboxes, instead of walking past without seeing. I want to discover the beauty of a pimple, of moldy shoes hanging from a power line, of a shredded tarp fluttering from barbed wire, vomit splattered across a sidewalk, a car alarm blaring nearby. The joy of a bee sting. Of searching for lost keys. Sweeping a floor. All of my life, I could have enjoyed washing dishes. The sensa-~~

tion of squeezing a wet sponge, of foamy suds gushing between my fingers. All of those hours spent standing at sinks, hating life instead of savoring the experience of that unique moment. ~~What a waste.~~ I am still learning. ~~I'll always be the person who feels miserable in crowds.~~ I am still developing. ~~I'll always be the person who feels terrified of chatter.~~ I am still growing. ~~I'll always be the person who hides in the bathroom at parties.~~ I am a beautiful human being, a miraculous creature with the astonishing power to perceive light sound scent flavor texture gravity temperature, to move through the world and freely interact with reality, to explore and to discover and to experiment and to reason, to remember the past, to imagine the future, a singular beloved person with a unique vibrant personality who contains so many hidden gifts, so many secret wonders. ~~I don't deserve to exist.~~

Once, on a day when she was sick, so ill that she could barely stand, I threw a tantrum because my mom had heated a can of tomato soup for supper instead of cooking a home-made meal. I wasn't even that young. I was almost a teenager. I was so angry and spiteful that although she'd initially insisted she was too tired to prepare anything else for me, eventually she grimaced and sighed and then shuffled back to the stove in her pajamas. Weakened by whatever virus she had, and exhausted from working overtime at the post office the night before, she stood hunched over the stove, grilling me a cheese sandwich, gripping the side of the stove for balance as she flipped the slices of bread, squinting at the pain of some ache in her head or her throat, until she suddenly became dizzy, and she swayed and grunted and dropped the spatula with a clatter and then turned away from the stove and sank down onto the linoleum with her back to the oven, blinking at the kitchen around her without seeing, too disoriented to understand where she was.

~~I'm such a monster.~~

Carrying an heirloom crock that she'd trusted me to walk over to the counter, I tripped

and fumbled the pottery, shattering the pottery on the floor.

~~I'm such a fuckup.~~

She spent months saving up enough money to bring me to an amusement park, only for me to be too scared to board any of the rides.

~~I'm an embarrassment.~~

She spent months saving up enough money to get me a piano, only for me to be too timid to grasp even the most basic of chords.

~~I'm a disappointment.~~

She could have had a daughter who was an architect, a doctor, a lawyer, a mayor.

~~I don't deserve to exist.~~

I'm crying out on the porch as she switches on the light in the entryway, opening the door.

"I'm so sorry," I say.

"What's wrong?" Mom says.

"You deserved a better daughter," I say, choking the words out between sobs.

She hesitates and frowns and then she steps across the porch and raises her arms and wraps me in a tight embrace.

"Hush," she says, stroking the back of my head. My body is limp against her, shaking with every sob. After a moment she murmurs, "You're the only daughter I've ever wanted."

She waits until the crying has finished, and then she releases me, stepping back with the damp imprint of my face in the shoulder of her t-shirt, and she thumbs some tears from my cheeks, and then she brings me into the house and holds a tissue to my nose and tells me to blow and plucks another tissue from the box to dab some mucus from my nostrils, dropping the tissues into the wastebasket, and then she has me sit in a chair in the kitchen, where she promptly sets to work mixing a bowl of batter over at the counter. A pleasant

shudder passes through my body, aftershocks of the crying. I breathe in, looking around. This house will always smell exactly the same, like pinewood and lemons. She has a new photo of me magneted to the fridge, from that day she took me apple-picking at the orchard last autumn. She's chattering about the neighbors now, some kind deed. Her herbs are thriving. I'm salivating suddenly. The scent of the batter cooking in the waffle iron. She still has that apron she got from me for that birthday like a decade ago. Spattered with sauce stains, smudged with grease marks, a safety pin holding the strap together, and still that's the apron she wears. Her socks are mismatched, a periwinkle with a magenta. Tucking some hair behind her ears, she bends to slip a tray of marshmallows into the oven. Tears are shimmering in my eyes again, but this time tears of joy.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Mom says.

"You're just so beautiful," I say.

She laughs, raising a wrist to wipe some sweat away, whisking cocoa into a pot of steaming milk.

"I didn't even shower today," Mom says.

Her wrinkles are even better than mine.

She serves me a plate of waffles dolloped with whipped cream and drizzled with maple syrup and a mug of hot cocoa bobbing with toasted marshmallows, and then she hangs the apron from the hook on the wall and sits down across from me with her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands, watching me eat. My tongue curls in reflex at the taste of the cocoa, tingling with pleasure. The waffles are gloriously crisp, the exterior a satisfying crunch between my teeth, and yet fluffy, almost even gooey, on the interior. A burst of rich and savory flavors. She wants to know about my day. Hesitantly, I tell her about getting to eat breakfast with my housemates. She looks so happy, hearing about my housemates wanting to spend time with me. I tentatively tell her about getting promoted to manager of

the flower shop, and she exclaims in surprise, clapping her hands together. I tell her about getting begged to sign a sculpture for a fan, and she literally gasps in awe, widening her eyes. She wants all of the details, cheering when she hears about the new salary, marveling when she hears about the commemorative selfie. She's even excited about my date. I tell her everything, about how much younger he is, about the skateboarding and the buzzcut and the duct-taped toes on his sneakers, and she still looks excited, leaning back in her chair, laughing and shaking her head in amazement.

"Em, this is all so wonderful," Mom says.

She's glowing.

"I'm so proud of you," Mom says, reaching over to give me a squeeze on the wrist.

I chew a bite of waffle, too overwhelmed to respond. Once the plate is empty aside from some streaks of syrup and the mug just some dregs of cocoa at the bottom, she leads me into the living room, sinking onto the couch and then patting her legs, letting me sprawl out across the couch with my head in her lap, lying there on the cushions in the soft amber glow of the lamps. She strokes my forehead for a while. Her sweatpants smell faintly of detergent. Crickets are chirping out in the yard. The swing on the porch creaks occasionally. The breeze drifting in through the screens in the windows is the perfect temperature. She's still stroking my forehead. I love this. This is the most peaceful feeling in the world. The headlights of a passing car shimmer across all of the glass in the living room.

"What a day you've had," Mom murmurs.

She's looking drowsy, gazing off toward the windows.

"I guess it's almost bedtime," I say.

She still has that photo of me from graduation day on the mantle.

"You want to sleep here tonight?" Mom says.

"I should go," I say.

“You sure?” Mom says.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Do you want a ride back?” Mom says.

“I’ll be fine,” I say.

I rise from her lap.

“Thanks for letting me just barge in here,” I say, glancing at her.

“No matter whatever else happens, this will always be your home,” Mom says.

She says goodnight to me at the door, hugging me and giving me a kiss on the forehead, and then the door clicks shut behind me. I tuck my hands into the pockets of my coat, walking toward the road. I feel so calm. The scent of the pine trees is breathtakingly sweet. The fragrance of the grass. The aroma of the dirt. The moon is dazzling. What a beautiful planet. An owl is hooting somewhere nearby. ~~She’s probably so glad to be rid of me. Relieved to see me finally walk out the door, so she doesn’t have to pretend anymore. I’m worthless, pitiful, pathetic, and always will be. Failure incarnate. I am not a beautiful human being. I’m trash. I’m garbage. A walking heap of waste in some cheap eyeliner. There’s no hope for me. I deserve to be burned alive. I deserve to be beaten. I deserve to be stoned. Crowds should cheer while I die. I hope that a car hits me on the way home.~~

About The Author

Matthew Baker is the author of the graphic novel *The Sentence*, the story collections *Why Visit America* and *Hybrid Creatures*, and the children's novel *Key Of X*. Digital experiments include the temporal fiction "Ephemeral," the interlinked novel *Untold*, the randomized novel *Verses*, and the intentionally posthumous *Afterthought*.

Acknowledgements

“Stricken” originally appeared in *Willow Springs* in 2024.

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