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Just World

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Just World

by

Kayleigh Csaszar

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Master of Arts Degree at the
UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR

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2014

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Abstract

Just World is an anti-police procedural examining the complexities that minorities encounter within the police precinct. The nonlinear plot follows Abel Palmer's rape by a fellow officer. The psychological aftermath and impact of the rape is narrated through multiple and alternating first-person perspectives. Violence acts as a theme connecting the rape to the aggression enacted against officers of racial minority.

Dedication

Dedicated to my Ma. She supports me endlessly in all my endeavors. I suppose this is what a mother is obligated to do. However, she's gone above and beyond expected motherly support. I've done some stupid things.

Also dedicated to my best friend David. He let me bounce plot ideas off of him in various cafés, despite the couples who skewed their faces at our unfavorable topics.

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Seamus

What was it like Miles? The fuck you think it was like?

Brown parabolas in flux. Wave ebb and noise. Bottle nosed tipped sticky pine unsanitary. Skyline brown and white roar. Sour and neat and dry and draft. Cubes clink and drink and masticate shoulder clap slap celebrations. Miles smiles fishtails. Bone bob bubble steam lime dive.

Rosy flours and objects in space. Soda and Chinese powder with Russian roulette. Mirrored marbled eyeshines. Hit the table one more time. Chicken wing glaze dries no curry with wild rice and rum. Peanuts shackled and shelled. Too much work. Work too much.

Levy parched full of water. Under clothesline sippy newscast forecast sportscast tickertape streamline. Dark glazed eyeshines envious D.D. A.A.

Sticky ticky tacky bar. Aloha rodeo grass skirts and ten gallon hat. Clear alcohol throat burn. “Miles’s got his test tomorrow. Don’t you think—”

“Jesus Christ Seamus, just enjoy the party.” Enjoy the party. Pardon D. D. Imparted words. Wisdom melts ice seven down.

Dizzy dilly dally chitchat. A year? Two? Shots of scotch. Beefy waitress lows away. Ben elevators. Elevates her. Big Mac. Giddy down. Just enjoying that body. Bawdy. Ring round the tumbler lip. Clish clash A’s eyeshine and cold shoulder hidden in a non-moth bitten sweater. Bony shoulder.

Don’t worry A. You’re still bombastic. Bombs over wires. Telegraph that ass is tappable. T-A-P stop A-B—

Double sided scotch chicken wishbone. Eyeshine walleye wallflower. Cut it with flour. Was it like that Miles? Did you smell Oceania? Clean the sink? Bleached skin a peeling. Why don't you get on the table and dance Sugartits? Why don't you get under the table and blow me?

Muddy tile spaghetti western streaks. Reverse dash and dine. Meat slap and bones float. A just depart. He stays to enjoy the party.

Ben

The foyer walls and arches skew my view of her kitchen and living room. Only the stairs remain fully visible. Stairs in mid-renovation. I wonder how she traverses them without encountering physical injury. They appear precarious with slanted boards and missing spindles, and if she shifts her weight in the wrong direction, she may end up in the basement. They certainly aren't going to support me.

She halts in the kitchen archway, plaid pajama clad and her hair twisted into some messy updo.

And she stares at me, like she did in the bar.

“Don't you knock?”

I'm not good at reading the majority of people, I know she's different. I browse through the pile of mail thrown onto a distressed end table beside me. The microwave beeps in the kitchen but continues to cook. “Don't you lock your door?”

“What do you want?”

“You left the party early—”

“So did you.”

I left because of her. I annoy her and she barely tolerates me. With slanted eyebrows and the quickest bite of her lip, I understood her discomfort. “Why did—”

“Why did you hit that guy, Ben?” Polish chips off her nails as she curls her toes. Her body rocks cheatingly. My fingers leaf through three different types of bills.

Rain water trails from my coat across her hardwood floor. The microwave beeps again, and the stench of burning kernels infiltrates the foyer. But the way she looked at me in the bar—needed me. I won't leave her. "Why did you?"

"Do you even care?" So close now, I see unrestricted where makeup remains in the creases under her eyes. Knots jumbled in hair falling from her updo. Her lips are absolutely flawless.

"No."

Abel

He won't stop texting me. My phone blares every two hours and I ignore it and the eight messages he left me before I turned off my ringer. Then my phone buzzes until it falls behind my dresser. And the I miss yous and I love yous and do you want to see a movie tonights that roil the popcorn kernels in my stomach. And the pregnancy test stuck to the side of my pedestal sink.

I brush my teeth and stare at two blue lines and then spit and look across the hall at a blue room. And I have no fucking clue what I'm supposed to do, because I'm not doing it. I'm not marrying him and he'll find a way. He's not smart, but he's conniving, he's found his way into this house too many times after I've said no.

I can't tell him—ever—or maybe after the kid is in university, but—no. I'm not doing this. I never planned on doing this and just because—and maybe it would just be easier if—I mean the fucking light in the blue room doesn't even work.

A lullaby of phone vibrations sitting in a clump of dust bunnies sings me to sleep. And tomorrow at work, I'll pretend I didn't receive eight or twelve or fifteen hysteric messages from him, and he'll pretend that I didn't curb stomp his heart. And I'll pretend that it's just me because I still won't imagine how it's going to work with more than one person.

Miles

497 – My judgment is better than it's ever been.

“How was your first ride with Abel?”

Ben stops at Hank's old locker because no one bothered to clean his old ass shit out yet.

Ben's shit sits in a musty cardboard box, folded all perfect. He's one of those guys who won't leave the house if he hasn't shaved. The kind of guy who goes to Korean nail salons.

“She's uh—” He flaps his big pink tongue and fans his blonde hair, all gelled to hell.

“Well—she doesn't say much. Is she always like that?”

“Only with important things.” I shove on my smoked Nikes, still smell like patio parties and Indonesia. “Ask her about paint and plants and she won't fucking shut up. I guarantee you. I went through high school with her.”

“So you know her pretty well then?”

“I guess.”

288 – I'm easily awakened by noise.

“Then you know if—” He strategically piles his clothes. Cable knit sweater, pressed jeans and—

Of course this fucker's Nikes are pristine. No soot, no soil, no lingering scents setting off Wallace's over the lens glare. Yeah I used to live off Daddy's trust fund too, you stupid prick. “You want to know if she's fucking anyone?”

“Do you know?”

In the corner where the fluorescents flicker, Seamus fumbles with his clown shoes, his hoodie, his faded jeans. Slams into the lockers, a loss of balance. Knocks his high school backpack to the floor. Slaps the cool metal for stability. “Seamus, shut the fuck up man. We’re in the police not Stomp!”

11 – Sometimes I don’t tell the truth.

I turn away from his hopping with one brandless sneaker in his hand like a cell phone, one on his foot. “I don’t know.”

“You just said—”

“That she doesn’t talk.” My duffle bag bulges as I shove my uniform in. It’s starting to smell like cheese. I’ll need to wash it sometime this week, but I hate going to the laundromat.

“Last I heard she was dating some construction site wahoo Wallace probably set her up with. That was a few months ago.”

58 – Sometimes I read advice columns.

“Oh.” Pulls the sweater carefully over his head, so he doesn’t ruffle his dry ramen hair. Covers a perfectly carved torso, completely hairless, obviously not natural. Does Daddy know he’s paying for that?

More noise clatters out from the darkened corner, but we ignore it. Close one eye to that side of the room. “You know you can’t date her.”

“Why not? You think I’m not her type because I’m too—”

“Down boy.” I chuckle; white boy with his chest all huffed looking like a marshmallow in an autumn sweater. “You can fuck her all you want. But you can’t date her. It’s against precinct rules.”

Shame finally stumbles out of his corner; eyes on the ground watching his big floppy feet eat up the cracked tile. He approaches, well what he considers is approaching, which is actually about eight feet away. As he opens his mouth I interrupt, “Good-night.”

4 – I’m prone to seek retribution.

He shuffles out of the room, the swinging door flashes light on Ben, his deep set brow as he mulls on the no dating clause like it’s calculus. Probably can’t even do basic math.

Finally his thick lips open, “I thought that—”

I yank my moldy duffle bag from the bench, from his perfectly erected piles of tagsless and knotless clothing, from his action figure body. “Good luck trying to fuck her too, because I’ve known her for twelve years and I’ve never gotten so much as a handjob on my birthday.”

Wallace

October 2014

“Shut the door behind you.”

Date and sign the bottom of disciplinary papers for Varga from last week. Pen strokes deafening, her body doesn't make a sound. The door doesn't click, her feet don't shuffle, her uniform doesn't rustle when she sits, yet when I glance up, she sits across from my desk.

“Varga—uh—” It's a sensitive subject. I don't want to know about it and she doesn't want to tell me. He transferred out here and—some men are animals. Wild animals aren't meant to roam in a concrete jungle.

I have authority. Seven years now, but it's still newborn and I'm afraid to hold it or embrace it. My finite amount of influence is used to better. I keep the morning meetings short, I train the rookies longer, I dip into the budget to throw shift shindigs. But I'm challenged and when I challenge her I'm afraid I'll lose that newborn embrace I lost years ago. And some men either need expanses of wild to roam or small cages to waste away within.

Varga's papers slap against the pile of Varga's papers from days and weeks ago. Yet firing him is under the brink of my authority, my influence. Reliving him would be uncivil. “He said something happened last night.”

Baritone laughter strikes outside the door and dissipates down the hallway. She doesn't flinch or blink, like a coat tossed onto the chair. Tired of being called in and spoken to, I used my influence to ingrain her in this precinct, teach her to ignore, snuck her a new hat

when they stole hers. They pick on you because they're always picking on you. One single night, a single act can undo the tight knot—

“I’m fine.”

“So Varga—”

“I’m fine can I go?”

The sun warms my pant legs, glimmering off of the ornate fishbowl I hid behind the file cabinet. Rhododendrons clump inside. Water stained murky brown by seven years of smoke lingering in my office. I won’t give it back.

“Yes you can go.”

Abel

Apartment 1008 buzzes. Once and again. The 2am lobby luminescence greens my skin in grass stains and beer bottles. Accents sweat stains and stray hairs on the pillow crunched in my arms. Forensics gone wild.

Won't answer fickle in torment and unreciprocated, he stands alone more than figuratively. My chin scratches the pillow ridge. No crescendo in a radio voice. My thumb flattens on the black phone button. I can't blame him, my honesty scathes.

A voice gargles through the speaker. Pauses with a loud, snorting inhale before he even speaks, "Yeah?"

I don't pause. Thumb candy-striped against the call button, lips cracking against a cackling speaker. "It's me."

Those words, my voice, my presence are all I need. Telltale buzz and I open a glass door I could kick in. Except I retain minimal class and self restraint. A mantra ebbs and flows in my brain and disappears when the air conditioning hits my skin. If I sleep in the lobby, he'll just come down and get me.

I can't afford an air conditioner, and despite a certain person's offer to pay for one; I really don't mind the heat. Until a late August heat wave left my mercury thermometer sitting at 35 degrees indoors.

I don't want to see him, talk to him, touch him. All things I said in yesterday's fight. A substantial one, about his mouth and the words that pour of it like angel hair. The things he

says to me and shouldn't. The way he feels and shouldn't. His emotions diffuse into me, make me sacrifice priorities like I did a week ago for his birthday. It scares me.

Step off the elevator into the muggy hallway, white walls with permanently lit sconces. A modern shroud for fifteen misplaced floors. His door gleams, white as ever, strong in the false atmosphere. I used to be stronger. Found dead in the morning in my own bed with a boiled brain and a swollen tongue. I'm not me anymore.

My knock falls hidden under the constant exhale of central air, but the door swings open. He knows I like to change my mind. The old me wanes, but I'm also stubborn. The odor of burning plastic, stale beer and sour cream and onion chips hits me. A thirty-four-year-old teenager who doesn't understand why I don't want to fool around on a Ferris wheel.

Half-lidded eyes squint into the bright hallway. Lips twitch out a smile, but it dies as he remembers me screaming at him in the kitchen, my feet sticking to the floor. A coarse eyebrow arches at my pillow.

"My house is unbearable. The power went off in my neighborhood and knocked out my fans."

He sighs, his forehead pressing into the cool doorframe, cuts a red mark into his skin. "I told you it was too hot there. You're going to end up—"

"I didn't come here to fight." The pillow covers most of my face. The fabric stuffy, smelly and brown instead of yellow. Sweat swerves between my shoulders, my knees bounce, my toes wave in my sandals.

“Come on.” Like he knows. Just knows I wouldn’t make it back. Would fall asleep in the hallway, elevator, the lounge, my car—God why didn’t I think of my car before—props the heavy door open with his broad shoulder and reaches out.

“I’ll sleep on the couch—I just—I need—”

“It’s okay.” Hand irons my tank top to the sweat on my back, dampens the cotton through. Purposeful, vindictive. Play musical shirts with his collection of indie band tees with shitty names. But he fans my ponytail, circulates sulfur smelling cool air around my body. “You’re just lucky you’re so hot.”

Miles

98 – I know how to have a good time.

Downtown buildings cascade into the sky. I live in a basement near the university. Students traveling in packs pass the stairwell where I cheat cigarettes. I stare at an athletic girl in too low yoga pants wearing some macho guy's arm around her neck like a boa.

Things don't change. From high school to college to whatever the fuck, a party is a party—except that wasn't a party. Booze sure, but too many over forties. Too many cops like Frank, skinny from smoking three packs a day but with beer bellies who have guns in their glove boxes. I know. No pile of coats on my bed to hide a pill bottle under. No slap handshakes exchanging baggies.

101 – I understand rules are rules.

Baggies and briefcases undercover and I'm good at it. I'm fucking good at it because there was no restrictions and conscriptions. All the Chinatown, Chinaman, and can you speak Japanese when I was born in a downtown hospital. All that shit that rolls off my back and into the mud I step on, but nothing holding me back. Really holding me back.

And then I come back and everything holds me back. I can't do shit without asking, like being in fucking high school and asking to go take a piss. I need permission to sign out a car, a gun, count my bullets, arrest a crackhead. Policing the police.

No, policing me.

378 – I'm not an envious person.

Across the street, Ben lumbers against the crosswalk's flashing red hand. Has the waitress from the bar with him. Tugs on his hand and he pulls away. Prods the shoulder he hunches. She's unattractive and desperate, face overdone in makeup to hide her weight problem.

But didn't notice me. I asked for another beer, chicken bones floating in my last one of half head anyway. I made small talk, lousy weather, how loud we were, showcased my scar, stared her down and she asked if I was with the party.

115 – I don't get jealous easily.

We pass each other in the street. Ben's hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket and his waitress trailing, and me. He doesn't look proud or excited, just bored because he expects to go home with a waitress, fat or not. To beat the shit out of whoever when he's on duty and only get slapped with a disciplinary report.

I used to have that, and something happened. I don't understand. I could screw up and get a second or third or fourth chance. I could intimidate. I could charm and now I'm only good for undercover where I can't be seen passing out baggies and keeping one for me. I don't have a gun for my glove box but maybe I could get one. I'll never speak Japanese.

225 – I love the smell of flowers.

“Way to go, man.”

“Shut the fuck up.” He doesn’t look at me, or say my name. I don’t even know if he knows it’s me. Maybe he doesn’t even know who I am. Maybe he doesn’t want to, none of them want to, only the ones who don’t talk, who stutter and move in hieroglyphs. The ones who get laughed at and shrug and walk away. The ones I want to laugh at.

Ben

“Tell me a story.”

I cup her heel in my hand, liquid rhythms attempt to reclaim it in sways and slopes to the beat of a song I'll never hear. Between my fingers and thumb I pinch a miniscule paint brush generating grooves in the polish I stroke onto her nails. My thumb slips, tickling the arch of her left foot, and she bucks me in the shin with her right.

“Once upon a time there was an apple pie—”

I'm not imaginative, or creative, I'm barely entertaining. But I'm devoted. I know she fears recrimination from the precinct. I know I would self-sacrifice to make her life pleasurable. I know I'm painting toenails with squinting eyes because I think I'm becoming nearsighted. Toenails that have nothing and everything to do with me.

“No,” she chuckles, hiding her grin against blankets spilling from the side of the bed. “Not that type of story.”

“Oh.” I trace the outline of her toe to clear away extra color, smudging maroon down the length of my thumb. “How about the one with the girl who repaints her living room once a month, but can't paint her own toenails?”

“I meant a story about you.”

“That is a story about me.”

“You're the girl who repaints her living room?”

“I’m the guy who does all the high corners and heavy lifting.” I release her left foot. Free limbs sway leaves in autumn. I’m stagnant. I’ll never make a rhythm. I’ll never hear the song.

The muggy hardwood peels from the underside of her right leg. The weight of her calf lands in my palm. In the dim bedside light, through the dust motes of a seldom cleaned room, her skin gleams.

I pinch her muscle and hold her leg in place when she tries to kick. “Hey, less handling of the merchandise, and more—”

“I talked to the sergeant over at 53.” Right foot in my hand. The skin on her calf blushes from my contact, prickles and blemishes. “There’s no room now, but in a few months a couple of guys are retiring—”

Foot rips from my hand. A maroon streak slashes across her toes and the skin on my knees. “Why?”

“Because people need to retire?”

“Stop.” Her sticky feet fold beneath her into the ten day old bed linens, mingle with the clouds of dust and clumps of hair from the floor. “Stop.”

“If I switch precincts then the problem with—”

“Ben. Stop.”

“Stop what?” I stand and she doesn’t cower beneath me, but she’s small. So small. Hazel eyes not squinting in abhorrence, or wide in shock. Just patient. I’m patient. But we can never be patient about the same things. I love. She loves. But never the same people.

“Talking or—”

Cool fingers slip around mine, tug me back towards the filthy pile of two week old linens.

The dust sculptures growing under the bed we recline against. The hair tangled and catching in notches between my toes. "Tell me a story."

Her foot returns to my lap. Heel to my palm, her toes spread and my fingers weave between them. Our natural rhythms differ, because I'm stagnant most of the time and she won't slow down. "Once upon a time there was an apple pie."

Seamus

Snap briefing begins. Frank lumberjacks cigarette wisps from smoke smashed sapling. Clear cut back row. Role call. Back row. Stroke. Two empty seats. Same private de-briefing seats.

Her late September. Decaf briefing stroke additional belt loop. Half-day Friday and Monday empty. No one ever born on a Friday.

Snap snap snaps away. Smoking. Drinking. Rubber bicuspid shuffle paper. Feet tap tap tap Morse code. Stroke. S-O-S. Stroke. Social sapling under cigarette loom. Set astray in empty seat sea.

Communications down. The tower of Babel stands five foot four. Translates fidgets into verbal appeals. The ramble babble bubble rubble stroke psycho cycle through his mind.

Clogs the filter stroke his mouth. Lands a knotted words pile.

Sensical appellation value. Shame us. He forever shames. A black mark on the boys in blue.

She translates stroke trans-relates. Ben's derogative description stroke ready willing and. A strong tower empty of life.

"Palmer? Is Palmer here yet?"

Snaps shuffles smoke line. Taps drill floor. Air raid. Panty raid. Debrief.

"Seamus, have you seen Palmer?"

Last night bar face plant damp wood table tequila shots beer chaser peanut handful chicken wing fingernails vomit coat sleeves pants pockets. Ben touches and overtips the waitress.

Peripherals her upset. Only waddled through their relationship lost her in trans-relation.

No one was ever born on a Friday.

He only shakes. Translator late.

Abel

“What?” His upper body juts from the door’s maw. White within consuming him. No color, no dirt, but his gestures anchor. Spotlight the layer of dust in him. “My girlfriend is here.”

Audible skewers, meant to spear through my layer of dust. Roil and writhe until I spit muck. But his words are empty. His eyebrows slant, skewers of their own, proud in his intended hurt. I wasn’t proud of mine. Still not proud of how we ended. Our relationship grew addictive, grew dangerous. So I ran.

“Tell you what.” The staleness of his apartment floods my nostrils when I lean in. Recycled air and fresh plastic. A faint kiss of his laundry detergent hangs from his gray band shirt.

“I’m going to go feed the meter. I’ll be back in ten minutes and she’ll be gone.”

A twitch pulls at the puppet strings around his eyes. Early aging from stress and settling dust. Oily hair stands on end when he runs a hand through. Dull blond compared to the freshly unboxed gleam of his apartment.

“Be back in ten minutes.”

I want to kiss his cracked lips.

Ben

Too many sets of teeth masticate her budget. Groceries, heat in the winter, hydro, water, the Corolla. At the worst, she acts as a wartime mother. Picks who eats and who starves.

Purposely malnourishes the electrical bill and weaves through a living room decorated with emergency candles. Dances like a firefly in a jar.

I offer and reoffer to lend her the money, to downright pay the bills. I tried leaving money on the foyer end table but she construed this as paying for sex. Instead I learn the rules, no meat and dairy not consumed within three hours. No frozen foods. Wean myself from the flash and glare of the sports highlights, the drama of primetime television. We watch landing lights on planes and the haze of a populated sky form over the city at sunset.

She becomes pliable in the darkness with only the meek glow of a streetlight outlining her figure. Initially I protest, I want to see her body, her expression, her every reaction to my purposeful fingers. In my weak sight, I gain a piece of myself through her. Learn Braille through scars, cartilage, and the ridges of connecting joints. Nuzzle the soft hair on the nape of her neck, the wrinkled skin on her elbow or the hard crest of a foot.

A farmhouse alarm clock ticks from the opposite end table. Tributaries settle in abandoned sheets. Lukewarm cotton. She ran out on me the first time we slept together, it proved more a drunken flurry of hands and an inherent need to get off. Six weeks in and I wake periodically through the night to check the bed.

I fumble with boxers until my bare feet touch the tacky hardwood. Without her I remain blind. Smash into her dresser. Knock off an empty bottle of water and a bottle of Aspirin. Paw the rough painted walls until I flick the light switch without any forethought.

The wall cracks with the resonance of ancient pipes and expanding wood. A waft of air laps at my knees until the current changes with her feet slapping the floorboards. But her sprint from the ensuite halts.

“I’m by your dresser.”

“Why?”

“I got lost.”

“Room’s not that big, Ben.” Through the darkness I see her laugh. Plump lips pull and curve. Hazel eyes diving into her cheeks. Round nose tip scrunching.

A few more slaps sound before her cool hand lands on the stressed muscle of my bicep.

Flows down, excavating my fingers from the corner of her dresser.

Miles

64 – I never rush.

“We should probably visit her boyfriend’s house.” She walks a few steps ahead of me over the cracked concrete path leading up to the townhouse. Low-income houses stamped six, or eight or ten to a city block where parents scream and glass smashes and babies cry. The smell of it all makes me want to vomit.

“What?” Key ring spins around my finger. She jingles, jiggles as all the mandatory crap she’s forced to wear dangles off her hips.

Pulls at the passenger door, but it’s locked. Cheeks glistening in the harsh midday sunlight, she waits as I stroll across the street. “I mean, her parents said that was the last place she went.”

75 – I’m very patient with the opposite gender.

“Abel, we’re not doing shit.” I unlock my door and toss my hat to the middle console. It’s already bent and bruised from me sitting or stepping on it too many times. She bitches, but my door is shut drowning out the incessant stream of words. Until I lean over and unlock her side.

“I know it’s not our case.” She flops into the seat with her belt already on, just expecting us to go because it’s what she wants. Fuck what I want. I put the keys in the ignition, and still her mouth is motoring. “But before we hand it over we could at least check—”

313 – People get exactly what they deserve.

“Don’t you get it?” She stops and from a few houses down a baby bellows from a porch.

“Use your fucking head. Look at how she’s dressed.”

I throw over the picture the girl’s parents, her wailing baby parents, gave to us to bring their daughter home. Their failing grades daughter, their stay out too late/sleep in too late daughter, the one with the druggie boyfriend, the one who has no job. The one dressed in a tank top exposing her bra straps and short shorts exposing her ass cheeks. She’s probably wearing a thong at fifteen.

I’ve seen it all before. High school parties where we piled coats on beds and passed drugs around like girls. The girls passed out in the bathrooms and bedrooms and closets with their skirts hiked to their thighs and come fuck me faces and a plastic cup of beer at their feet.

“Things haven’t changed much since high school.”

Wallace

June 2014

Five taps on frosted glass. She sneaks in, small glass vase blown for potpourri or Siamese fish in jewels. Instead three globes bounce in the bowl mouth. Water sloshes gently. She's two days late.

“Look what bloomed.”

June 1985.

Pink bushels of petals, and spears of leaves. Heavy headed in half a body, flowers full with crooked branches. Planted in my backyard

September 1990

A tiny face nuzzled the lowest blossoms for the last time. Fragrant as a half-century.

June 2014

“I told you to stop cutting up that plant.” I clear a stack of paper off my desk. Flowers thrive. No natural light. No air besides the aftertaste of nicotine. “Bad luck to hack it up.”

“Then stop giving the vase back.”

By the weekend, the flowers will be with Kiera. Arranged like a mouse.

September 1990

I cooked her mousey pancakes the morning of. Burnt my thumb on the frying pan.

June 2014

Benjamin Varga. Verbal warning. Written disciplinary. Police brutality, too rough and
stumble. Too bar fueled backwards. A bad influence.

Tap the edge of the vase five times with a pen. Her fingernails chip tarred paint from the
door.

July 1989

Bolted to me, a sliver embedded in her pinkie finger. Cushioned her on my lap and dug out
rotting wood with a hunting knife.

June 2014

“What happened yesterday?”

Shrugs, skinny shoulders. Bashful eyes focusing on floor tiles. What’s missing, what’s loose.

September 1990

Lost her first tooth. The tooth fairy brought her two dollars and accidentally left behind
some pixie dust.

June 2014

“Ben went crazy because a drunk guy got physical.”

“With you.”

Hands in slacks, the pre-cautious ballerina act is over. Stalks through the threshold. Devours my gaze, brow stern, shoulders set. From five to twenty-five. She didn't see twenty-five. Or thirty. Or ten.

In March I place flowers. Second week of June I place flowers.

“What are you getting at, Wally?”

Sorry Honey, I am the law. Had it ready for the first boyfriend and never got to use it. Never even got to—“Is there anything going on between you and Ben?”

“What?” Hands on hips, asserts authority. Temper tantrums and misunderstanding why the front seat wasn't safe. Hands on hips and feet stomping the ground. Aerating the soil. No chocolate whale birthday cakes. No driving classes. No skating rinks or PTA meetings. The toothfairy only visits once. “Wally, I can't believe—“

“End it and end it now.”

Ben

We never carpoled. No family moments waiting in a serpentine drive-thru line. She never punched the dial on my radio, tiring of news and weather predictions. I never swatted her hand away rambling how logical the news was to avoid accidents. Her every action plays on a melody, but her taste in music sounds like tape abuse.

I'm not always late. The news clicks on the same time each day, work or weekend. I'm not always on time. Resonances in showers derail my schedule. The dwindling amount of socks allows me to find buried treasure in a drawer. I dawdle. I daydream.

Fifteen minutes blemishes me. A few cruisers remain speckled in the lot. From the mouth of Wallace, dispatches boom old news. He despises me. Hides it well enough, better than most. I commend him, and take no offense. We don't communicate much, only sharing one common interest.

My SUV lurches onto tarmac, front fender scrapes the back of Frank's pickup parked out of spot. She crouches, back straight against the brick wall. Seamus bounces a basketball and loiters. When the hell will Wallace take him off foot patrol? Just give him his own squad car to rescue cats and illegal immigrants. Sparks grind from my front bumper.

I'm not intuitive. I can't read faces; the not guilty immediately guilty in cuffs and slammed into the side of my cruiser. She's different. I read her like the tea leaf pattern she left on my sheets two nights ago. Something's wrong.

Seamus

“Hey A.”

Porous ball trick tracks. Brick back. Holding court. Lawless. Net screws brick. Screws.

Tricks. Shoes split tarmac chunks. Size fourteens.

Brick back holding court. Habeas corpus. Heels high. No heels. Only balls. Bounces on balls. He bounces a ball. Empty echo. No talk. No bouncy bouncy. Only balls. Hello. Hell. Hey. Uh. Ah. Um. A.

“Ben’s late.” Her editorial. Newsprint skin. Ink smudge. Miles draws monocles. Miles draws moustaches. Miles shaved his head. He grew a beard last year. Grew beardy. Six foot two. Size fourteens. Know what they say about guys with big feet?

Crouches post-prayer. Crouches mid-birth. Fourteen toes tar. Cigarette smash sapling. Saps tricks. High. Just the balls. Porous. Corpus. Trick or treating. Bounces empty echoes. Smell his feet.

Pimple prick shark skin smooth. Sweaty tips grip. Tar toes mingle. Mangled size thirteens.

Dribble drabble ribbon rubble. Orange skin. Garbage bin. Paper print. Next of kin.

“Wallace is looking for you. Knows you ducked out.”

Quack. Empty echo. Quake. Tarmac crack and earth ache. Time. Chorus chimes. Hey. Uh. Ou. Ah.

“I’m getting real tired of his bullshit.” Crouches in mid-cannonball. Teeth grit tar’s pit. Legs buckle. Belt buckle back grates bricks down. Trickle down sap. Cindered cigarette trunk.

Tricks sap. Sappy face glues hair. Corvus corpus. Scrapbooks hair. Sweat and flesh. Sweet and fresh. Grows flat palms frowns fronds. Corpus flawless. Holding court.

Quacks. Thirteen and toes cramp. Truck bonfire. Thirteen and misplaced. Out of space. Corporeal and counting empty echoes. Bounce back only balls. “He just worries.”

“What’s new?” Grit teeth. Flat feet. Brick back holds court. Habeas courtus. Rim shadow halos. Corporeal. Cigarette pupils snuff tarred sapling skin.

Glorious chorus. In. Fact. You. Ate. Shun. Empty echoes. Quakes and cracks tarmac. Halo head dead skin lip vein. Face another brick wall. Another court. Another hateus corpus courteous courtship. “Everything’s a little hectic now, but once Miles gets—”

Metal spits metal. Bouncy bouncy. Only balls and bonfire truck. Toes curl tar. Only thirteen. Missing a whole number.

Sighs in empty echo. Her editorial, “Ben’s here.”

Cigarette butts smolder sapling. The sap. Hand sticky cold to help stand. Clump tar. Face newsprint crumple. Rim shadow halo. Heavy echo.

They wear some long socks.

Abel

“Hey Abe.” The couch jumps underneath his weight and my book dives to the floor, bruised spine, bent pages, splayed covers half sticking out from beneath the coffee table. I’m never going to finish reading this book.

I don’t say a word as he paws and digs the remotes out from beneath the cushions. The TV blares, flashing bright screens of neon lights and loud commercials. My eyes hurt, I might have a headache. I might have a tumor. My body is too hot and peels away from the back of the fake leather or whatever this couch is made of.

“I made an appointment with a realtor for Friday.” Body naturally reclines against me, against the couch; heavy limbs heat me up and push me off.

“What?”

Bounces his foot against my thigh, slides my bare legs across the leather or whatever and my skin peels and rips apart. I shove his foot into a cushion crevice. “The lease on my apartment is coming up soon and I thought you and I could look at three bed—”

“What?” I was never involved in his moving. Maybe I would help move but I wasn’t planning on moving. Not with him. Somewhere else. Or together. With three bedrooms to paint blue and waste.

“Well we’re going to do it eventually right? I thought—”

“I don’t want to move.”

“This place needs too much fixing up.” He is still watching TV. Like this is a conversation about how Frank set off the fire alarms, or what we’re doing on the weekend which is not seeing a realtor. He just expands on my couch, toes pawing my skin.

I already have a blue empty room with no electricity and no use. Sitting, rotting, giving me high blood pressure because it gives him ideas. “You know I don’t want kids.”

“Right now.”

“Ever.”

“Well what about me?” Eyes scroll up from the TV bass beat flicker flash. What about me? I pop out one kid and he’ll end my career. We both can’t be shot at. We’ve both never been shot at. My parents didn’t raise me and—“Do you even give a shit about me?”

“I think you should leave.”

“Abe—” Sighs it with his arms thrown over his head, like I’m making a big fucking deal out of a big fucking deal. I didn’t get in this to start a relationship; I honestly don’t know what I got in it for. I was kind of drunk. I thought he understood why I left.

“Neither of us is going to change.” I grab the remote from his lap and turn off the TV. He flips off the couch, feet slamming into the floor and crushing my book. “You should go.”

Miles

249 – I take my job seriously.

“Man, turn that shit off.” I reach into the slobbering brown bag on the center console and yank out a burger wrapped in near clear yellow paper.

“Shouldn’t we get that?”

“No, we’re eating, you idiot.” My palm, covered in ketchup and mayo, slams into the radio ending the dispatcher’s request. I get one fucking lunch break a day, like I’m gonna let my burgers get cold because some idiot punched some other idiot. “Let Ben and the Golden Girl get it.”

357 – Meal times hold meaning to me.

My smirk cuts its way into my burger bite. The fucker beside me is still unwrapping his and probably has to eat slow or will get indigestion. “If he keeps pulling at those panty strings he’s gonna snap the beartrap. Smarter men than him have tried.”

Shame doesn’t say anything as he daintily unwraps his first and only burger. I shove a handful of fries into my mouth. Vinegar. My hand plows through the bag. Those fuckers forgot my vinegar. Why the fuck do I specifically ask for vinegar if they don’t even bother to put it in. I should fucking—

7 – I’m an independent person.

“Are you scared?”

“Of working vice?” Burger stop halfway to my mouth, a pickle falls out and slaps my thigh. Not the first uniform I’ve stained. Shame eats a fry. A single fry, like we got all the time in the goddamn world. “Fuck no. I’m not worried about it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it comes with freedom.” Milkshake cup condensation greasy on my hands. The inside thick and my straw won’t budge. Won’t suck.

“How can living a lie—”

“Because I can fire a gun without having to sign off on bullets. And I won’t have to dress up like a fucking prick whenever someone I don’t give two fucks about dies.” Slammed vanilla milkshake slops onto my slacks. I slap it away with the back of my hand and wipe it on the seat cushion.

Ben

The buckle handle of my sock drawer comforts me. Contains the only two physical mementos I maintained of her. A Polaroid picture from some ethnic festival or pride parade, I couldn't tell the difference. A person high on colors, costumes and noise trapezed through the crowd snapping pictures and free gifting them.

No proof of our relationship existed then. Photos stood concrete evidence for the disciplinary board, pinned in our files; a swan song for Sunday afternoons spent surviving the apiary of her backyard. The inside of my locker a husk. My phone static of images. She wouldn't allow it.

But in the throngs of people I grabbed her. Chin to shoulder, I kissed her cheek. My arms wrapped around her waist.

Before she elbowed me off, a single perfect picture snapped. Our entire relationship captured in figments of light. A lick of her hair against my neck. The coolness of her cheek masking my lips. The angle of her hips in my palms. Infinite in a Polaroid in my sock drawer beside a bra.

C36. Pushup. Burgundy with a black lace trim. I hooked the strap from our wicker laundry basket when our breakup became apparent. I bought it for her. Not so she would dress up for me. Didn't salivate and run a hand up smooth mannequin thighs or ogle the decapitated busts in the store.

The underwire of her bra began to creep out while we were on duty. Poked and jabbed under her arm. She shifted uncomfortable and didn't tell me until I saw raw skin. So while she did paperwork, I bought her a new one. Knew the size and type from her others. She prefers dark clothes, so I picked a dark color and the lace—the lace might have been for me.

She asked for it back. A week after the split, after the dissolve of bathroom ornaments and safe pollen perfumes, she sat in the passenger's seat, face a little pallid with line drawn lips and asked for her bra back.

I told her to come and get it. I wasn't her deliverer anymore. I wanted her back in the apartment. Wanted it to feel whole if only for the few subseconds she stood in the doorway. Grasped at the chance to be alone with her, to rebuild and reform words. Wanted to keep her there, safe and loved and infinite as a photograph. But the power is very rarely mine.

Abel

I watched him check out waitresses. He window shopped during our relationship, toiled over bodies wrapped in bright shirts and tight black pants. Cheeks cherry blossomed and apple dappled and he over tipped with a crooked smile. Somehow ended up in my car, in my house, in my bed, on me.

Soil stains my knees as I curl against the rhododendrons. Late bloomer, early riser. This isn't serious is what he said and a month later you're all I want. You're seriously all I want which ticked me more than you're all I want but not seriously. String and tag, like a ribbon around a tree trunk. Wound tightly like an ampersand not a black pair of pants.

The leaves spear my skin, adamant in death. I wanted what I didn't want and then the opposite. I don't know what I want, but it might not be this. Leaves snip and fall. An amputation and I stem the sap with a pinch of my fingers.

Had enough of his wayward leers. The tuts at my unbalanced popcorn breakfasts. The way he re-cleaned every room I left like I carried a plague. The overuse of spit when he talked, when he ate, when he kissed and it dried my skin hard and I couldn't move. I just can't move and I have to move now or I never will. I wanted it but I didn't and I did.

My neighbor's open window projects the porn he's watching in exasperated moans. An early autumn wind rustles the leaves which scratch my skin. Abe, you awake? Abe? And slop and spit and sweat and I can't move.

I sit cemented by the rhododendrons. Pale as a garden statue, a third of the leaves pouring from my hands and onto the ground. Only bare branches and plump puffs of flowers remain sagging down in age. Sit soft in my hands, sap sticking until I pinch my fingers.

Emptied out my house. I wrung out bras in my basement sink beside a stinky heater. Wrote a grocery list in the kitchen with week old stains on the garbage can lid. I checked my calendar and then I knew. He waited in the living room, fat head hit the loose stair spindle, spewed apologies and pleas of forgiveness and I wasn't listening because I was trying to do math in my head. Trying to remember the spit and the sweat and the stains on my nice floral sheets and the pills when did I last—

So I can't go inside. For a week I imagined cramps. Unwrapped tampons to throw them cotton white in the trash. I sat on the edge of my graying tub waiting ten minutes for ticking to stop. For my life to continue. And when I found out it wouldn't I left the stick on the side of my sink and just went outside. Hands raking the dirt as the sun abandons me and the volume increases from the row house beside me.

Miles

342 – I work well in groups.

“Hey girl.” I grab her arm as she tries to scurry by me. Her arm the color of perfect white and my blank slate. But she yanks it away. “I’m on my way upstairs to nail this psych test.”

“I need to—” She points to the door, and smooths out the wrinkles of my touch. Unfurls her rolled sleeves. Her uniform unironed and wrenched from the back depths of a closet.

63 – I have a one track mind.

“That’s fucking cold, man.” She looks sloppy today. I don’t think she brushed her hair; she just slapped some makeup on. She did the top button up. She never does the top button up. She’s going to hyperventilate by the end of the day. “You’re not even going to wish me good luck?”

She won’t meet my eyes; instead she’s watching Seamus over my shoulder. The fucking moron is still waiting for Wally to give him his beat, Wally is still waiting for him to quit. Classic stalemate. “I’m already late.”

“I need to go anyway.” I flip Shame off. Fucking stare at me. Fucking flash his badge at me. Fucking judge me in a room full of cops. Cops who’ve worked here ten or twenty or thirty years and know how to kick the resistance out of him or send him packing. It’s too fucking early for long sleeves “You should fix your shirt, it’s embarrassing.”

Seamus

Breaded wings in a red basket. Saucy nails. Sours breath. Miles chicken jerks. Spicy fingers sharpie scrawl. Miles favorite alright.

Saucy nails steamy Tupperware. Welcome home. Miles sired from a Bunsen burner.

Abandoned in a dime bag. Handles man. Dying skin tan. Crawls home on his stomach.

Manhandles opaline lobby tiles. Arm snapping chicken necks. Shocking olive skin. Ants scatter around their feet. Favorite game is Horse. Lot games with her. Quits after the third shot and calls her a whore all day.

Tupperware stutters hands. Sauce laces fingernails. Her whiskey neat shirt fumble. Miles sour stumble.

Olive skin rumbles in a tower quake. Miles likes to jerk the chicken. All right. Pluck single feathers. Hear the scream.

Miles lit the tower of Babel aflame.

Abel

I didn't get—he didn't—kick—but—can't breathe. I don't understand. What was—and he was—and I just—there.

The floor. I stared at the stucco semicircles on the ceiling—but I wasn't on the couch.

Clothes—half—pushed and—I don't understand and I can't breathe. My stomach hurts.

A knock knock and on the floor—but he didn't knock knock me but I can't and how did I?

I cracked an unpopped corn kernel against a filling—there was a knock. The butter in the bag burnt my fingertips.

Frosted mugs crashed and chicken bones snapped apart. Meat all licked up. Beer battered breathe, I don't under—no paper cut on my ha—but be positive blood—from a— semicircles to circles to scorpions.

I don't underst—I was on the floor, but I don't know how I go there—and I know exactly how I got there without knowing how. My stomach hurts—not so much my stomach as my back—from when I was on the floor, but I know exactly why I was there only I don't.

I can't breathe—but I do.

I bolt both locks.

Ben

We plagued each other with bad habits. My laundry lives where it drops. Socks and boxers. Hours of basketball festers by the door, behind the toilet, under the bed, beside the stove. The piles disappeared and I assumed she conformed to the ways of my mother and aunt in tidying after me.

She threw out my clothes. Dirty and clean.

Her front door evokes the same irritation in me. She doesn't lock it. Forgets to lock it. Just doesn't lock it. I installed a second lock, a chain for reassurance—mine not hers—and she doesn't lock that either. The mottled and gapped tooth porch steps scare off some unwanted visitors, but internal or chain, both remain unbolted.

The interior door bounces off the frame. I didn't notice from where I curb the SUV, but my fingers keep ticking, keep rubbing. I fumble the keys from ignition to mat. From palm to asphalt. No perception.

The door open. Just wide open. Sunlight pierces the eight by three checkerboard of glass inlay. The humid breeze billows a lace curtain by the trio of front windows. Her black sandals splayed. The white armchair capsized. A farmscape photo from the wall in shards of glass.

I'm lost in a house I know like a woman. I know both. The inactivity of the room. The blowing curtain. No creaks from upstairs, no resonances of sound through a crashing picture or thrown chair. Bird songs and a car muffler from a street over. My fingers scrape together like sand paper.

The sun snuffs behind me. I don't want to touch anything. The backdoor slams. No one to phone. Feet slap against kitchen tile, hips sway with our wicker laundry basket cradled under her arm. Her free hand submerged into a bag of microwave popcorn on the kitchen counter. My fingers still with her crunching.

“Hey.” Greasy finger points at me. She spits kernels and holds the basket like a life preserver. “Be careful. I knocked a picture down.”

Abel

The tiles shudder as the front door slams. I hear his shoes click against worn wood. I live in a two bedroom semi-detached townhouse. The front room muted. The spare bedroom has that tacky blue carpet worn from decades.

Smudges on my body. Lipstick across my cheek or jam between my fingers. Blood clots filtered through cotton. At night the blue room looks yellow.

The precinct, the other cops all talk lost. Blame any show of emotion on my woman show. My flow. Truthfully, I withdraw. Speak less than a written page when preoccupied with cramping and headaches and tampons and pills and did I take it and take two now then. I understand Shame's silence, not his inability to communicate, but his ill-want of words. Wonder if a hole bleeds through him too.

For my lack of mood swings, he vacillates. Angry to happy to depressed to furious to needy—just needing to be constantly touched or praised or affirmed. Safety and danger in a partner, in a lover. Riding with a guard dog, riding with a powder keg. I needed to let go. He had plans for the spare room.

A subject hit me once. Down on the ground with a paper cut and he tackled the subject. Canines glaring in mock mastication. And I waited through pummels and punches. Waited because I couldn't hit back, and I wanted it and didn't want it. I never wanted it. I never did.

A bloody nose. Blood painted toes. His shoes clop. Front teeth bite down, smear my lipstick. Across the hall an empty room mimics and blares.

Miles

57 – I don't notice a difference.

I cut myself on a chicken bone, while under some TV spewing sports highlights. Everyone too fucking drunk to notice. Drinking late mortgage payments and their kids' questionable sexuality. Frank hasn't talked to his homo son in ten years. Not my return, not the scar on my chin and my long hair. I hate my fucking hair.

The door chimes above me and I slink by the front counter. Two twenty-something pieces of shit stop eye fucking and giggle, "You looking for Chinatown?" Fucking high school, the cool crowd and the hot girls' lockers. Beat up or get beaten up.

69 – I'm comfortable with my sexuality.

I grab two bottles of whiskey. Drink for my return—spit it in their eyes. The chuckling stops when I slam the bottles on the counter, fingerprints sappy with blood. How did I cut myself on a chicken bone? "Do I look like it?"

The little asshole at the till breaks into another chuckle; the girl ducks her head and flips her hair. They drink for themselves, and no one understands my return. I don't want to cut my hair. I lick my lip, and scratch at my scar. The girl turns away.

Ben

The kitchen sink tap has a habit of lodging when I need to wash my hands. Steam smothers the window pane hiding under half drawn blinds. Outside, the backyard tangles in an overgrowth, sun scorched in a gray October afternoon. Her plants weep in wilting. I no longer feel welcomed.

Boards creak above my head as she descends slowly down the stairs. The water isn't hot enough, but my hands puff pink anyway. The garbage can still sits under the sink, empty popcorn bags and bottles she could recycle. I dab my hands dry on towels embroidered with watering cans and trowels. "Your rhododendrons are dying."

"Come on in," mumbles into her collar and turns her back to me. Her body blocks out the natural light filtering through lacy curtains. Twitches as her hand stabs at her waist to tuck her shirt in. She shuffles into the front room; one I've helped paint four times. One that's not maroon.

I hang the towel up. She doesn't like it when I leave things lying around her house. I'm so fucking neat in my house and then create a mess in hers. Wet towels against the wooden floors and doors, stripping veneer, sacrificing strength.

"You moved your couch."

"I'm so glad you feel comfortable enough to critique my home décor. Can we—"

My hands immolate, the flesh, dead flesh at the side of my nails burn. I pick and dig and she fumbles with her badge, her head hanging low, refusing to meet my eyes. The dead skin, the pain, the dust that should be in this room and isn't. Dust that should pile under the furniture

and along the baseboards. That should grow like weeds between pieces of dull hardwood and tumble in clusters. “You didn’t lock the door. You never lock the fucking door. How many locks did I buy you?”

“Oh please, Ben.” Narrows her eyes at me and tosses her badge onto the armchair. I picked out that armchair because her room is too busy, her life is too chaotic, she tries to cram too many—“Please tell me how this is about you.”

Different circumstances, I shouldn’t have given up so easily. Not two months ago when she ripped me out of her life like a hangnail. Not two nights ago when she pushed me out half-dressed, ashamed at her choices or my elevating words. “Because I care about you.”

“You think you do, but it was always about you.”

And I know her. I know her sidestepping techniques, her ways of debating, her methods to turn the attention elsewhere. “Who.”

“This doesn’t concern you.”

“Do you know him?” Whiskey soured snapshots flip through my head. Denied, I left the party when she did. Dozens of guys from the precinct who talk shit in the change room, who I’ve talked shit to. “Is that why—”

“If you have a problem, take it up with Wallace.” Shoves my chest and I topple back a few steps. Allow her that win, to retreat when she couldn’t before.

“Don’t think I fucking won’t.”

Seamus

“You got search warrant officer?” Key clatter totter table batter bottle Russet lensed forest. Moldy carpet waterlogged teary pipes. Basement apartment scored in an alley entrance. Beer and piss and pissing in the pit from the bar entrance ammonia eating away limestone. Chicken basketed with frothy head. Ben handling Lexus the waitress. Her grin tumbling to the earth. “The fuck you want Shame?”

Horror movie black and white flash. Douse couch Miles’s bare chest purple way in florets and fireworks. Froth spat from his uncut mouth while looming. Planting. Pruned. Ate away limestone. “Do you know what you did?”

Suckles the beer. Wrings the neck. Wipes his mouth. Hand on pants. Eyeshine. Mouth cut and flapping. Knees tabled and bottles gossip. Trees fall buildings topple her smile. Sips and hisses. “I done a lot of things, brutha.”

Same table bottles. Sprouting garden weeds. Rhododendrons die in fall. Her grin tumbles to Earth. “I’m not your brother.”

Cracks a new bottle. Couch mausoleum. Salutes sloppy drops foamy head. Lexus deal out drinks. Pitcher in heavy hand swayed and splattered siren’s whoop Ben grabbed her ass. She laughed—she lefted. Left. No one left with. None left with. One left after. “Truer words.”

Half tumbles of whiskey wring heavy in his hand. She drinks whiskey. Straight. Well cocked eyebrow. Challenges. Miles drinks draft. Fills mugs with masticated chicken bones. He memorizes wooden table patterns. Waves and ebbs nourishing skylines and potpourri. Looked up and empty. “Do you remember what you did to her?”

Sip and hisses. Gossip in the skyline. Swigs and chugs and grunts. “Why you want me to tell what it felt like? What sex is—”

Whiskey is not neat.

Abel

In my kitchen, like old times, like three months ago when I had a teenage boyfriend in a thirty-something's body standing at the open fridge at two in the morning and gorging his empty stomach. The cake I was saving, the cherries I was saving, the milk I was saving, the eggs I was saving all thrown into the same waste disposal.

Wipes his hands on my gardening towels. I used the dish towel last night for—to clean the floor, which is so clean it's dull. Repainted the wall celadon over slate over months lost. The light fractures around my body, my shadow falls to the floor. I'm full of maroon.

“Your rhododendrons are dying.” He faces the kitchen window, scrubbing his hands dry. I'm not that dirty. I over preened the plant when he left. When I left him. When my shadow collapsed on the ground and the maroon poured out of me in globes and paint palettes.

The paint and the maroon leaking through my bed sheets, shakes my shadow. “Come on in.” My voice is weak and I turn back to the front room, with rearranged furniture covering a memory.

Heavy footsteps follow me. Trudge dirt over dull hardwood smelling of bushels of lemons. I fight to tuck my shirt in, but my skin burns against the fabric. My belt on the loosest loop sags my trousers low on my hips, and each step burns. “You moved your couch.”

“I'm so glad you feel comfortable enough to critique my home décor. Can we—”

“You didn't lock the door. You never lock the fucking door. How many locks did I buy you?”

“Oh please, Ben. Please tell me how this is about you.” Throwing his tirades all over like his dirty laundry, like my wet towels. Using my pain to promote his good name. Remember when you were sick and I took care of you and you wouldn’t even let me spend the night? How is that love Abe?

“Because I care about you.”

“You think you do, but it was always about you.” How I became an addition to his personality, how he had our futures all planned with wedding bands and ampersands and all the rhododendrons my heart desired even though they smelled awful to him. Even though he’s allergic to bees. Look at all my sacrifices Abe.

“Who.”

Ben

A news anchor's voice wakes me four minutes after the alarm. Rambles about an accident on Gardiner. How can you wake up to some stranger screaming at you she mumbled face down in the pillow. Beside me the bed is empty, but full of lingering wrinkles. The scent of summer plucked petals and blades of grass. I haven't changed the sheets in two months.

In an unshared bathroom I shower quickly. Soap film grays white tiles in the morning light. I usually shower quickly but if I think of her, I take longer. My hands aren't as soft as hers. I leave the mirror untouched so the vapor recovers the secret script from her finger pads.

Hunched over the counter, dabbing shades of brown onto her eyelid, she complained about the constant string of rainstorms in July, and box office controversies, and recalls in tainted food, and the whisperings from within the department.

It's good to stay informed I told her. Sometimes shadow dust cakes onto my arm. Dyes the blond hairs in streaks. Sometimes I see the whorls of her fingerprints on the chrome faucet.

I'll know if anything happens to him. Didn't stop penciling her eyes, inking her lashes, pastelizing her lips. Words to a reflection I wish she had enough foresight to trace with her finger pads. Before they say a fucking word, I'll know.

Our toothbrushes were married. My comb and razor congest in a rectangle. Minimal tools of hygiene clear from the faint mosaic of her morning arsenal. Slept in longer than me, bare back and face buried. Rushed to complete her routine.

Our toothbrushes divorced. Wrenched and thrown into an overnight bag. Thrown into a trash compactor. All ornaments, conduits of her disappeared from our countertop. The apartment silent sobs, quiet as an open house.

Abel

“You’re not arresting me.”

“Again.” I exhale and Ben’s chuckle eats it up. He leans on the hood of the cruiser, refuses to engage in dialogue with the subjects, with the victims. His thumbs punch the screen of his phone until they become violent. “I’m not trying to arrest you, Sir.”

The guy grunts, sits half in, half out of the back seat. Feet planted flat, but wobbling against the asphalt. “You were involved in an altercation at this bar. My partner and I are just trying to establish your identity.”

Set up the line for Ben to drag his ass around the front of the car, hands on his belt, near but not touching his gun to just visually put the rough into this guy so he’ll give us a goddamn I.D. We just need to see an I.D. and we can let him go with a verbal warning. Just an I.D. and I can go home and fall asleep to TV static and a bowl of stale popcorn.

But he stays perched on the hood like a leaping jungle cat. Just scrolling on his phone and chuckling to himself, probably about me, most likely about something else. My knees begin to burn. This guy better not throw up on me. He’d better not throw up in the car. I’m not cleaning it up. I cleaned—

“Huh?” Loudly lurches forward, spewing vodka laced breathe into my face.

I hold my blink and almost lose my squat, knee bones fragmenting off each other and into hairpins. “Do you have any form of I.D. on you?” Ben sighs, belt and walkie thumping on the hood as he finally slips his phone away. “A driver’s license or health card? Maybe a passport?”

The guy burps into his throat and swallows, but doesn't answer. Ben looms behind me, his hands on his hips. "If you don't show us some form of identification, we're going to have to take you in."

As I turn over my shoulder to tell him not to be so blunt. The guy probably has priors, or he would've handed me his entire wallet by now. There's no need to agitate him.

But I only manage garbled words because he punts me right in the stomach, and I just kind of roll backwards and watch Ben leap like a jungle cat. I can't breathe. Probably for only seconds, but I can't breathe. The pits of my uniform are drenched. I roll forward and my shirt sticks to my skin.

I wheeze, sitting on my hands and knees, skin blushes a mosaic imprint left by road pebbles. There's a small cut across my knuckle. Nothing more than a paper cut, but blood spreads in the tributaries of my skin.

Ben flips with the guy, fighting for dominance. Winning, losing. Smashes his palm flat into the guy's nose. Gets smashed in the nose and there's blood, more than my rivers. The guy readies to hit again.

Only I hit first. Once and hard and with my paper cut hand. Right into his eye. Only I didn't want to.

Ben

I didn't have time to clean the squad car. The grime, the dirt from last night, from two days ago keeps scratching my fingers. Permeates my skin. Two months ago she would notice my unease, wipe the dashboard to live with a gray scuff on her sleeve.

The radio crackles, neither of us move to answer. Driving is passive dominance. I control the vehicle. I steer unanswered calls to her in some farfetched hope she'll knit a relationship with the dispatch girls. Go to their Tupperware parties while eight months pregnant with our son, retire from active duty to become a stay-at-home mom, and make potato salad for my precinct picnics.

She doesn't answer the call. Shifts in her seat, quiet and withdrawn. Work shoe and black sock caress her calf. I miss her calves. The dust settles in the depressions between my fingers and the car swerves.

"Are you going to answer that?"

Doesn't acknowledge my voice. Upset because I left the bar yesterday night with that inflatable waitress, Mercedes or Volvo or something. The one who wouldn't get off my couch this morning, and shot questions at me while I fumbled with my zipper. I didn't want to fuck the waitress, but she refuses me, teases me with hints of our previous life. I'm only allowed on her couch, she's never naked with me, and I'm tired of questioning myself.

"I'm answering the call." She stills, stuck in the opposite corner of the car. Her skin shines pale, not soft ivory, more of a gray. She wears no lipstick and her eyeliner curves stunted and

rushed. Maybe I wasn't the only one who went home with company last night. Two nights ago she scrambled to leave our relationship open. "You didn't—"

"I want coffee." Her finger taps the window at a shop. I stop a few stores down, the dispatcher still screeches at us for contact.

I wipe my hands on the tops of my legs, a mixture of sweat from gripping the wheel and dirt from dust. Disgusting. Frank's gruff voice murders the dispatcher. I pick at slivers of dead skin preventing my response.

"Large with milk." She hesitates, waiting for something, her fingers resting on the door handle. "It's your turn to buy."

"I know." Her usual roar muted, weakened by lack of caffeine and a late night with a mystery guy. A mystery guy who sleeps in her fresh floral linens and witnesses the dust clouds under her bed. Is privy to her exposed body, radiant without sloppy pants around her knees. I need to find who.

On her arm, the size of a quarter sits a dollop of color. Maroon and I don't know what psychological defect she has, but she constantly needs to paint her front room. From sky blue to orchid to celadon to maroon apparently. The guy last night ramming her unclothed into the wet wall, touching what isn't his—

"Hey," I clutch her arm, dust encrusted tips on her skin before she wrenches away. Doesn't wrench away on the couch. Shrugs me off, turns away, becomes disinterested when I just need to hold her. But she gets to run off with who? "Jesus. You just—"

Again I reach for her and tug her sleeve up to show her the paint. She shoves at my hand, but I refuse to let her keep this attitude about my infidelities. One waitress and the cold shoulder? One realtor and broken up? I need to be more monogamous, but don't be so clingy and I'm so tired. And she gets to fuck who?

But the color—the quarter of color starbursts out from maroon to orchid and all the hues she's ever wanted to paint her living room. Prints in patterns the least of which is the smudge from my filthy tips. Stained into her skin like a church window.

“Who?”

Abel

My back twists in half sleep filled with newscast flashes of getting kicked. And I'm hot. I hear my phone vibrate in the blue hazed room. It's too early. I'm so hot. It's drizzling outside, grumbling thunder and once I got kicked in the stomach. Late October. My chest vibrates. Sheets papier-mâché to my legs where my pajama bottoms have hiked up. My back hurt like hell afterwards, which was weird. Dust motes drift like gossamer through the soft streetlights. I rip the sheets away from me. The pain—kick, doesn't. Colors my hand black in clots, fingers stringing clumps.

“Ben.”

Permeates the sheets, the comforter too. Too early. Broke my water too—his nose almost broke after that punch. Hair plasters to the back of my neck. Shirt bundles under my breasts. Heel drags sticky when I kick to sit up. Early next week I had an appointment. Once I was kicked in the stomach and it's so hot I can't breathe.

“Ben.”

But he's not here because I sent him away. The house is empty. Outside thunder groans.

Seamus

High school lobby. Higher school lobbying prodding poking pawing. High school precinct sunked. Concern corners anti-semicircle four square school bulls in a china shop. Not smelling field flowers. Anti-semicircle chortles bag kicks bawdy bounces. Intimidate inability to imitate.

“What are you going home to?” Cigarette pre-light. Smoke wisps clerk flees butt smashed sapling. Unwilted willow leaves ripple pond water stones skip. “Watermelon and welfare?”

Bawdy chortles. Throat embers cigarette smoke. Not smelling field flowers. Honor and inkblot and sweat softens his signature. “I—uh—it—uh.”

“Nice, I was waiting for the remix.” Cheshire grins and backslaps and he huff laughs. Agree and disengage or locker smashed and folded. Broken braces and a collarbone.

Anti-semicircle bisects. Walk-by wallops Ben’s hat off. Town center tower of Babel constructed strong. “Are you serious right now?”

Dusts hat and hair. Ground shuffle and stare. Sorry sewn lips. Diffuses from china shop to field. Fresh cut flowers on bedside tables. All he ever wanted.

Phlegmy chortle. Fire at the stake. Smoke chains at her feet. Willow leaves in the water.

“You pussy whipped the shit out of—”

“Shut up, Frank.”

“You’re becoming a real mouthpiece since your little gook friend went vice.” On her. Dishonorable. Bull crushing bone china. Snorting out smoke. Smashing saplings. “One of these days I’m gonna teach you how to use that mouth.”

“He’s not Korean.”

He speaks to her. Unedited. Unremixed. Straight words off the rocks. Hit her with words. As he was. As Miles will never be. “He doesn’t care.”

Wallace

April 2014

“You leaving already, kid?” Streetlights illuminate puddles across the lot. The heels of her weather beaten boots kick up water. Still nights in the city aren’t the same, no crickets, no calmness, no wind on the leaves.

She pulls a tense smile and hugs her purse tighter. Warm light spills from the windows. Inside the bar, the boys are chortling over country music and heady beer. Silhouettes dancing against a backdrop.

The wind out of the leaves and in between my fingers chilly and moist. Stopped the rain, but the air is heavy, salty with another round. She shrugs, but actions aren’t words. Actions aren’t heard in the booming city. In car alarms and sirens. In broken glasses and toppled tables. “It’s just not my thing.”

“They’re drinking because of you.”

“They don’t need a reason to drink.”

“All right.” I think my sigh looks like nicotine smoke, but I gave that up. Long before seven years ago. Before yellow stains tacked onto my office walls and drowned water in grey. The door crashes open, bouncing off of a brick wall. A raindrop smacks my earlobe. “Maybe next time.”

“Maybe next time your tits won’t get in the way?”

“And maybe next time you won’t be too busy jerking off Rory to answer the call.”

“Hey, hey.” I grab her bicep as she pivots to follow Frank if he utters another insult, but he only chuckles and lights a cigarette between cupped hands. Wisps pirouette between falling drops.

“That’s engaging.”

She rips her arm from my grasp and I remember so clearly.

“He started it.”

Temper tantrums and bartering through basic cable to get a five-year-old dressed in the morning. Tutus and magic wands and handfuls of glitter in my work slacks. Handfuls of flower petals in a fishbowl on my windowsill.

“Then you end it.” Rain dances in a light sheet, reminiscent of wind on the leaves, hinting at a dulcet rustle lost somewhere in harsh words.

“I just did.”

Miles

457 – I only drink on special occasions.

Wipe the beer bottle on my jeans. Water stains the navy. I submerged enemy lines. Not fit for a true officer.

37 – I like to work with my hands.

The TV flashes faux blue-grays. Bottle brigade jostles when my foot hits the coffee table. Couch to space, my hand in the waistband of my boxers meets slick skin. Horror movie marathon.

444 – I always put others before myself.

Cell screen screams voicemail. A woman in the Technicolored movie screams postfall. Upstairs neighbor screams for me to turn down my fucking TV. I scream that I will break his fucking neck. Seamus left a message because he can't leave me alone for a fucking day.

19 – No one understands me.

Hey Miles. It's Shame.
I just wanted to say.
You talking to
someone this late?
Didn't mean to leave
so. Hang up that
phone. I'm not
dragging your ass outta
bed for work. I'm glad
you cam—

4 – I have a good memory.

The message deletes easily from my mind and the phone. The connection mutes before twisting tail with movie screams. The screen blinks with ceiling stomps. Bottle tepid and empty joins the fallen. My hips ache war wounds. On TV, an advertisement weakens in green lettering. The color tastes familiar.

Ben

She recovers with long baths. Locks herself in the washroom for hours while I leave shoeprints in the layer of dust forming in the hallway. She ignores my knocks, my questions, my conversation starters about supper tonight or work tomorrow. Ignores how I jiggle the handle to see if the lock has miraculously come undone. Implores that we need our own space but we have our own cars and our own houses, we have enough space. I don't understand why she needs to lock me out.

“Hey.” My forehead crinkles against smooth mahogany wood. Disciplinary hearing because guys can't keep their hands—doesn't like to shower at my place, let alone take part in ritualistic bathroom relaxation. I don't know why. “Did you remember to put down all the towels I set out for you?”

“What?”

“The towels on the counter. Did you put them down the ground before you got in?”

Decimates the bathroom with a single bath and is happy to let lakes of perfumed water remain on the floor. Pretends water doesn't drip down the walls peeling the paint, doesn't slither between the tiles to eat away at the grout.

“I can't hear you, just come in.”

“What?” I jiggle the handle and find the door unlocked.

“I said to just—” I'm inside already. Her legs cross to the corner of my tub, larger than hers. Could fit two people comfortably. White skin blushes from the hot water spiraling off her body. Her hair dries in waves against the tile backdrop. Her routine requires she dry her hair

straight, then curl it with an iron despite it having a natural wavy quality. We argue about this frequently. How many bathroom appliances she needs to buy, store, use, and break before she sets a “—come in.”

I could easily misconstrue this as an invitation to join her, and my fingers touch the buttons on my jeans. But my socks submerge into one of the puddles mottled across the recently retiled floor. The paint on the wall blisters from heat. The mirrors clog with steam showcasing the streaks from when I cleaned them this morning. I struggle to rip my socks off and fluff from between my toes floats into the cold overrun.

“I told you to put down towels.” I retrieve a tower of gray towels from the counter. Each folded, tumbled in the dryer, and folded again until perfectly executed. Each absorbs only a small area of water before becoming obsolete and waterlogged. “I swear I told you, Abe.”

“Why would I need towels before the bath?”

“Why do you do things like this?” I pinch one of the towels between my forefinger and thumb, and slap it into the sink. Water trains onto the granite counter, and down the front of the wooden cupboards.

She folds her arms against the lip of the tub, and sets her chin down, grinning at my frantic shuffles across the tiles with towels at my feet. “I don’t know. Why do you need to clean up?”

I create a ration of towels within my mind. She’ll need one to stand on, one to wrap in her hair, and one to dry off with. My toes curl against the cold tiles. I can’t bleach gray towels.

“How long have you been in there?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Her body shifts, pink and rubbery soft, but pours more water over the edge against my mosaic floor. I can feel the grout coming loose. “Does forever seem too long?”

From the water on the floor, forever is an adequate answer, yet my lips purse together before I answer her. I squeeze out my shirt, knowing it will be in the garbage shoot in fifteen minutes and leave to retrieve a garbage bag. “If you’re going to stay in there, add more hot water or you’re going to catch a cold.”

Abel

“God I missed this.” Grunts in my ear, hand caught in my hair, knots on his watch and fingers. Outside crickets seize as his heel pounds the ground. Zipper teeth grind against my thigh. “I missed you.”

Open screen door and someone’s no longer complaining about locks or the flaccid bolt hanging from my wall. Cool wind licks my hips. I yank my shirt down, shimmy my pants up, blushing moist skin covered by a light autumn sweater.

Touches my neck, squeezes my thigh, leans forward to use his lips to soothe, or what he thinks soothes. Placate me while he tries to suck out some form of conversation.

Communication because maybe that’s what really gets him off, but I’ve seen him with waitresses and—that’s not what this is about.

Mumbles you’re so fucking gorgeous into my shoulder wet with his spit and I wrench away. Eye fucking waitresses and a continuous string of compliments so fat and bold I can wear them like a pearl necklace are not what it’s about. One night stands sans a relationship. Sans a stick with two blue lines I stitched into my eyelids and stained into my sheets.

He doesn’t know and I don’t know why I let him be near me or inside me. It’s not about feeling up waitresses or what signs form on sticks. Maybe torturing him with brief skin flashes while he fucks me is enough to break him. I stare at my stucco ceiling.

Maybe I’m self-destructive. I think I like to be near him, and part of me was lonely. Hand tugs at my sweater and I hold it still. “I think you should go now.”

“Abe, are you ever going to let me stay over?” Whines, hand digging between the couch cushions where his keys fell halfway through. He started growing a beard or some sort of facial hair, it blends in with his skin and is teenage awkward. Like when he eats over the sink and drinks from the carton.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at the party.”

Wallace

October 2014

Light flickers from the porch as moths dart and smack against the screen door. She sits across from me in an oversized arm chair that she probably uses for reading. Sits and stares

because I haven't said a word since she told me. I don't have words to say.

I sigh deeply and try to imagine the walls adopting a sunlit overtone, the grays and greens inviting me in for a Sunday afternoon coffee. For a stroll in the backyard to revisit the rhododendrons now rotting in a bowl on my windowsill.

"What you told me." My head hurts, my skull, from pressure. "Is true."

"I told you it was."

"It's just—" A car ambles down the street dragging shadows across her living room. Offering globes of light dancing across the couch I sit on. The accusation, the evidence, the paperwork. I'm going to have to sign off on it. I'm going to have to head it off. I don't think—"not an easy situation."

She straightens from crumpling, from relaxing into the chair, straightens completely until she's almost standing. Heavy breathing timed tracing car lights and lagging motors, timed with a pendulum swinging porch light and a trail of moths.

"There's going to be inquisitions, they're going to need evidence, and paperwork. Miles failed his psych. exam today—"

“You need to leave.” She stands, the chair rocks on its legs in time with her breathing, with the porch light’s swoops, with furry moth wings. Four globes of light dance over my arm and I remember catching fireflies in a mayonnaise jar during humid June nights for her.

“Right now.”

“Isabelle, look—“

“You need to leave.” I didn’t raise her, not much, but I helped make her strong. Her t-shirt exposes stagnant shadows stitched onto her arm. She can still be a good cop. But one word erases her. “I’m better off alone.”

Abel

The door shuts behind me, the noise from the bar diffuses leaving only the wind rustling leaves. The parking lot shimmers with autumn puddles and I stretch the sleeves of my sweater into my palms.

I'm stuck. In a job that's more tiring than rewarding, empty of natural smells and sounds, in a relationship that isn't a relationship. Foot stomps, dropped glasses, slammed furniture and opened-mouth guffaws bleed into the clear air as the door reopens. "You leaving?"

I don't even need to turn around. My boots keep milling over the puddles, water seeping in fabric tears. Soles ripped away. "Go back inside, Ben."

"Jus—Gimme a sec." Leans into the brass handle, already three beers ahead of me when I walked in. Sweet slurring the waitress with his hands on her thighs, and I think it's time for me not to care anymore. Maybe it's time I don't care anymore. Transfer away from the crossed wires of a light blue room and the naked branches of a rhododendron bush.

"Gimme—and I'll go get—"

"I'm going home."

"I know." Stops with his sneakers soaking in a puddle. Silver ripples flowing under floodlights. "I need a ride."

I hunch my shoulders as a cool wind breezes across the parking lot. Having to wear sweaters in his apartment in the summer because of the air conditioning and getting heatstroke in mine. A missing bra from my laundry. The crickets are all dead. "You're not coming with me."

“Abe?” His voice ripples and breezes over the parking lot. It oozes into my boots and glues my socks to the space between my toes. “Abe, you serious?”

I don’t know if this is what I want, or if this is what I wanted to do all along. We’re too different. He’s bouldered in one place and I float around him. We’d do different things with a blue room. We make different stains on my bed sheets. He can’t change, I can and won’t.

Our relationship is a cruel knock knock joke, only offering one of us solace at a time. I don’t want it despite the closeness and reliability. I don’t need it. “I’m better off alone.”

Gender and Race Complexities within *Just World*

“[It] put a human face and identity with a phenomenon called rape” Wendy S. Hesford Assistant Professor at Indiana University quotes one of her student’s reactions to *Rape Stories* in her essay “Reading *Rape Stories*: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation.” Hesford who teaches gender and sexuality studies concentrates on unpacking the social, political, and psychological impact of rape on Margie Strosser, the creator of *Rape Stories* and a vengeful rape victim. Both women strive to provide an identity for rape victims while the majority of media negates such an identity by labeling raped women in a stereotypical way. Raped women become branded “as if that [was their] sole identity” (Hesford 213) through the validating of victim blaming and slut shaming. Most contemporary fiction, as a mode of media, accepts rape in the same scripted roles and, when it does so, limits readers’ ability to understand the rape victim outside preset modes.

Combining the elements of blaming rape victims for the crime and the mistreatment of minorities in social institutions, my project, *Just World*, invokes the just-world hypothesis—a judgment which assumes all live in a fair world and are treated equally; therefore negative actions incur negative results. The just-world hypothesis acts as a basis for victim blaming in rape cases and also in the situations of race-based stigma my characters suffer. My thesis project consists of alternating, first-person narratives. The reader, then, is invited to raise questions about which version is more correct, which characters are more justified in their actions, or if any one of them is ultimately unjust.

Major genres profit from using rape as a plot device. Countless young adult novels such as Melody Carlson and Gary L. Thomas’s *Damaged: A Violated Trust*

(2011), Colleen Clayton's *What Happens Next* (2012), and Amy Ellis's *Fault* (2013) focus on moralistic preventative measures against rape through narratives of warnings concerning high school parties, alcohol, and revealing clothing which perpetuate victim blaming and slut shaming scenarios. A less common representation is that of the vengeful rape victim. In *Rape Stories* (1989), Margie Strosser speaks of becoming preoccupied with seeking retribution. The same motivation is used for Lisbeth Salander in Stieg Larson's *Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2008). Hesford acknowledges that "the spectacle of violence or victimization [is] the critical challenge for rape victims...not [to] reproduce" (193). The need to extract revenge is a psychologically justifiable response for women as they attempt to "negotiate, resist, or reproduce rape scripts with their bodies, actions or narratives" (Hesford 193). However, acting out revenge fantasies invests women with the same violent outlook as their rapists resulting not in a power shift between rapist and rape victim, but in the same branded rape victim identity.

A renowned novel dealing with rape is William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931). Temple Drake is characterized as a "fast girl"—terminology that suggests readers should be unsympathetic. In addition, by never describing the rape scene as it occurs Faulkner invokes a unique narrative ploy implicating the reader, in an act of reading that is passive toward and removed from the rape. Laura E. Tanner's *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction* summarizes the description of the rape in *Sanctuary* as "continu[ing] to assert the purely literary nature of the violence enacted in the reader's mind" (18). The reader may be able to track the scheming and the movements of the rapist, but Temple's own experiences are available to the reader largely through her stuttering. Though the novel alludes to Temple's violent rape throughout, the

reader never has access to the ensuing psychological or emotional trauma; such lack of access ultimately objectifies Temple.

Patricia Cornwell in her genre novel *Book of the Dead* (2008) writes about an attempted rape on protagonist Dr. Kay Scarpetta by Sergeant Pete Marino. Scarpetta knows how to defend herself, and is intelligent and capable, yet the attack occurs in her own house. However, Cornwell describes the attempted rape using curt sentences and a stereotypical depiction of the struggle resulting in a list of Marino's actions followed by Scarpetta's responses. When "he kisses and grabs her...She turns her head away...He rips her blouse open. She tells him to stop" (Cornwell 179). At the end of the attack, Scarpetta "helps Marino up, helps him back into the guest-bedroom off the kitchen" to care for her drunken would-be rapist (Cornwell 180). Scarpetta's passive reactions coupled with the removed third person voice disconnect the reader from the rape. Instead the attack becomes a plot point allowing Scarpetta's trauma to remain irrelevant to Scarpetta's character development and to the reader. Scarpetta's responses to the rape dull the seriousness of the situation and instead portray a rape scripted for entertainment value.

Contemporary feminist literary writers often produce novels analytical of rape emerging from preset scripted modes. *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Atwood critiques victim blaming and slut shaming scenarios. Upon learning of Janine's gang rape, the Aunts acting as an authority figure to the women demand to know, "'Why did God allow such a terrible thing to happen?'" (Atwood 72). The women show no sympathy in their programmed response, "'[to] teach her a lesson'" (Atwood 72)—thus displaying the power of social constrictions. Alice Walker's representation of rape in her

novel *The Color Purple* (1982) compares to *The Handmaid's Tale* as both novels critique female subordination to men. Squeak's rapist states that "this is just a little fornication, everybody guilty of that" (Walker 96) and when Celie cries, her rapist responds, "you'd better shut up and git used to it" (Walker 1). M. NourbeSe Philip also critiques female subordination through her long poem *Zong!* (2008). The poem employs fragmented language; however, the violence is immediate and not at all distanced as with Faulkner's Temple though the reader learns of the rape and abuse scenes through the perspective of a white male seaman. The notion of rape as a male-based adaptation is a source for victim blaming as women bring out these behaviors in men. Atwood and Walker's characters perpetuate the victim blaming stereotype by showing apathy towards rape victims. In *Just World*, the male characters react to the rape with varying responses. Both Ben and Seamus react by seeking vengeance, and although the notion appears valiant, neither consults Abel, not blaming her, but patronizing her. Wallace reacts neutrally, but begins to refer to her career as over, and her life marked by one event. Though I did not chose victim blaming as a response, Miles expresses instances of victim blaming throughout the novel. The aforementioned novels and poem address issues of victim blaming and avoid media stereotypes, by having only one predominant perspective concerning rape; therefore, only one character deals with or perpetuates the injustices.

Just World deals with the psychological after effects of rape through the use of multiple perspectives. I want to discourage the aforementioned stereotypes surrounding rape in contemporary literature by revising Faulkner's indirect writing method. Instead of writing reactions during the rape, I have the victim, Abel Palmer describe the rape directly after its occurrence. This allows me to avoid the unnecessary reiterations of

brutality and focus on the psychological trauma. Abel works both with and against the stereotypes of an imagined rape victim. Similar to Cornwell's Kay Scarpetta, she is a policewoman able to defend herself, and is aware of the threat of violence. She also fits the average rape victim as a female in her mid-twenties. My goal is to challenge the notions of victim blaming that suggest women who are raped are unintelligent by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. My character is attacked in her house by a fellow officer—a scenario invoking Cornwell's staging for the rape; however, I avoid media-influenced rape scripts which perpetuate a lack of identity for the victim or neglect to examine the impact of sexual assault as with Scarpetta.

The concept of a police narrative introduces an important idea in my novel—that of the police procedural. The plot of these narratives focuses on apprehending the criminal through the use of police-related strategies such as the collection of evidence or interrogation. However, much like the glamorization of rape which occurs within contemporary modes of media, police procedurals have been embellished with quick bursts of action, and heavy explosions of male-based violence as seen in Joseph Wambaugh's *Choirboys* (1975). Wambaugh, a police officer turned author, writes about the exploits of the police in Los Angeles. His novels are often void of the modern scientific terminology popularized by prime time television, but his focus remains on the reliability of violence, of fists and guns. The brotherhood of the Los Angeles police is equated to the brotherhood evolved throughout war, and although tensions exist between fellow officers, the violence unites. Male officers fraternize with prostitutes at the park, and sexually assault female coworkers during parties. After shift policemen “still...need to uncoil and have a drink and talk with others [about] who had been on the streets that

night” (20) marginalizing female characters as only reasons for male characters to boast of sexual prowess. Racialized officers, Calvin Potts and Frances Tanaguchi are partnered together and referred to as “the Gook and the Spook” (92) and stereotyped or called derogatory names by other officers. However, since Potts and Tanaguchi adopt the violent actions used by the Caucasian officers, they are adopted into choir practices in the park, but still not treated as equal.

Although Wambaugh’s style of writing police procedurals appears outmoded due to racial and sexual marginalization and violence driving the majority of male characters, the description fits the majority of contemporary police procedurals. The media continues to glamorize law enforcement particularly through depictions viewed on television—for example, *The Shield* (2003), which features Vic Mackey, the leader of an all male strike team in Los Angeles. Although *The Shield*’s cast represents better diversity, with women and racial minorities holding high positions in the precinct, Mackey acts without consequence by stealing drug money, or killing his teammates. The precinct, while not fully aware of his illegal acts, supports him because he is a good cop, epitomizing the brotherhood of violence Wambaugh depicted twenty-five years prior. Relying solely on violence not only supports the stereotypical male dominance within the social institution of a police station, but is also unrealistic. The majority of an officer’s time is not spent in shootouts or car chases or breaking the hands of subjects during interrogation, but rather with routine paperwork and area scouting.

My novel is set in Canada; I feel the overuse of violence and action in police procedurals is even more inaccurate in a Canadian setting, and instead I wrote my narrative in a more realistic style supporting the uninteresting events which occur during

a shift. I also represent racialized experiences within the social institution of law enforcement. The majority of my male characters are racial minorities, portraying the diversity in Canadian culture which seldom exists in contemporary television representations of police such as *Rookie Blue* (2010) or *Flashpoint* (2008). No representations such as mine exist in Canadian literature.

Aside from portraying the perspective of the victim, I wrote the perspectives of those closest to her in order to capture the reflections and opinions of those who inhabit a phallogocentric environment. In a television episode of *Dispatches* (2006), Detective Nina Hobson tackles the subject of sexism within the police force, discovering that gendered attitudes result in neglect towards rape cases and victims. The negligence creates inferiority complexes and issues of broken trust; as a female officer states, “If I’m ever raped...I’m never reporting it to the police...The help you get from these people is just ridiculous” (“Undercover Coppers”). The police station, as a male-centric institution, allows for another interpretation of the rape. The duty of brotherhood implicit in policing evolves into a male bond compromising all men: “when one man is responsible for a particular harm, other men are implicated...[they] share in the responsibility for a harm such as rape” (145). Therefore Abel’s rape is the shared responsibility of all male officers.

Drawing influence from Aritha van Herk and Bret Easton Ellis’s style of employing alternating perspectives, I wrote from multiple first-person perspectives in order to examine the gender and racial differences among my characters. Point of view can be employed in numerous styles to distinguish plot and disclose character development. While van Herk focuses on allowing each of her characters to advance plot

through their perspectives without delineation or interruption from others, Ellis's characters directly disagree with previous perspectives and retell plot points offering a very ambiguous narrative. However, I wanted to develop this style by moving away from plot-centeredness to create a character based-narrative, establishing shifts from one perspective to another concerning tone, quirks, and descriptions specific to each character. To create a unique format for each character, I employ lists, dates, questions, memories, and stream of consciousness. The plot then is restructured according to the information each character is present for and how they perceive events. By allowing my characters to rewrite or include additional information concerning the plot, they become a more integral part of the narrative, instead of merely two-dimensional fixtures enacting the plot.

Each character's distinctive structure showcases their personality traits or opinions, and in turn invites the reader to engage with the narrative through these specific queues. Seamus Sullivan's passages are written in hectic, stream-of-consciousness style which involves the use of onomatopoeias and rhymes. Though his manner of inner monologue is not straightforward, Seamus is the most perceptive character to detail situations. He frequently describes settings, people, events and attitudes creating connections through specific words linking the past and the present in his observations. However, his rampant almost musical flow of words is completely juxtaposed by his inability to speak, particularly when surrounded by the other officers at the precinct. Instead, his verbal reactions and responses are often spoken with a stutter, or in curt sentences to denote his anxiety around those who bully him due to his race, his lack of voice and lack of aggression. In return Seamus's confidence suffers creating an

inferiority complex in which he refers to himself in inner monologues as 'he' because he is unable to connect with himself and feels inadequate in his body.

The structure of Miles Kahn's passages replicates his main goal within the narrative. After completing an eighteen month undercover operation as a drug dealer, Miles only needs to pass his psychological test before being readmitted back to active duty. The numbered statements which cut through his passages are the form of his response to the psychological test questions. Some questions play on humor as Miles's reactions in the text following his responses are different than his actual responses, and some questions ominously foreshadow his actions as Abel's eventual rapist. In their essay, "Men in Groups: Collective Responsibility for Rape" Larry May and Robert Strikwerda suggest popular literature depicts the rapist "as a demonic character, as the 'Other'" (144). As a social institution, the police station should segregate Miles as an other for his violent actions; however, since the police force is a brotherhood built on acts of violence, Miles's propensity for aggression remains unobserved. Miles does experience segregation within the police force due to his race, and in turn reacts with the violent and racist nature he witnesses from fellow officers in order to retain a semblance of masculine bravado. I explore psychological and sociological influences on Miles in order for readers to comprehend his motivation for the rape. Psychological factors often receive precedence in cases of aggression; however connecting similarities of experience between gender and race minorities allows me to focus on the interconnected "sociological, political, and material forces that facilitate and sustain violence" (Hesford 196). Miles alludes to a history of enacting sexual assault and rape by repeatedly referring to high school during which he flourished in the status of a rich white kid,

despite being Vietnamese. His development relies on male-dominant socializing at parties and seizing women he wanted by force. However, at the precinct, he is unappreciated and instead stereotyped within an ethnicity he has never identified with. In turn, Miles envies the Caucasian officers like Ben and Frank, who are able to break the rules while he is constantly being watched. Miles becomes preoccupied with his high school image and life, imitating the officers when they bully Seamus and joining in on locker room talk about Abel as he feels the need to ingrain himself with the powerful.

In a manner similar to the way in which psychological exam questions bisect Miles's passages, Graham Wallace is preoccupied with dates. Wallace's passages mimic the method in which he keeps logs or starts papers as the precinct's Sergeant. These dates give chronological structure to the text through the braiding of present events with Wallace's past, including the death of his daughter. The memories of his daughter surface frequently around Abel, as she represents a second chance for Wallace to mentor and protect. However, despite having authority over the other officers, Wallace is not respected. His influence only travels so far within the department: his requests to fire Ben are denied. In return, Wallace begins to lose appreciation and enthusiasm for his job ignoring injustices occurring to Seamus, or Miles's attitude and instead focuses on 'raising' Abel to survive the precinct.

Though still employing prose poetry, Abel Palmer's passages are written as the most simple. Her character instead emerges through mannerisms and motifs. She speaks in an unhindered vernacular, stating clearly her opinion of people and their actions. She is the only person who defends Seamus; however she is always unsure in matters concerning herself, and often has to repeat or reiterate her choices and outcomes. Her

uncertainty permeates prominent aspects of her life including her relationship with Ben, and her decision to become a police officer. A sense of loneliness and alienation develops from her living and mimicking a phallogocentric environment. Her rape only leads to further segregation and miscommunication, leaving her to be “better off alone”. She tries not to succumb to the aggression surrounding the precinct, but eventually the ingrained violence corrupts her; she hits a suspect, an action that leaves her to question herself. While Abel enacts violence on a single occasion, she becomes a channel for violence throughout the novel. The trauma Abel experiences is both inflicted by others as with her rape, or naturally occurring as with her miscarriage in which blood becomes a motif that will recur and bind together several of her passages.

Ben Varga portrays the power which all other characters lack. Despite his several disciplinary reports, he is never truly punished. Ben’s internal monologue creates a highly intellectual understanding of the world. He comments in a removed and scientific manner on objects and situations around him extending from his characteristic cleanliness. However, he develops a more emotional, more sympathetic outlook when responding to Abel’s actions. Their relationship becomes his motivation. His love borders on obsession as he is willing to risk his job, or transfer in order for them to remain together and is preoccupied with her safety both on and off the job. He is jealous of and spiteful toward any other relationships, sexual or otherwise, that Abel enters, and upon learning of her rape he is vengeful. Although it is not obvious, Ben and Abel’s relationship works in reverse gender roles. Abel is content to keep their relationship sexual but not serious, while Ben needs to marry her, and immediately start a family. In doing so, Abel would revert back to the female role, allowing him dominance. However, after their breakup,

Abel initiates a casual sexual relationship; although Ben is displeased by her lack of emotional response, he agrees to engage in physical contact, reestablishing the flipped gender binaries.

There is no pattern to the characters' passages within *Just World*. In specific instances, passages were written for a certain incident in the narrative; for example, the ending and beginning concern the same scene in a chronological setting, but from different perspectives. I wanted the reader to enter the story as Seamus to experience his alienation through his inner monologues, but also to adapt to his wordplay. In the same scene from Abel's perspective, she focuses on different objects, different people, and has different emotions, yet both she and Seamus hate the party they are forced to attend. Her final words to Ben and of the novel reiterate a statement she has made in previous situations but with a different context. I placed Abel's rape as a central scene in the novel, as it is climactic, but ripples out to affect all other scenes as others' opinions of her begin to change. The male reactions throughout the narrative are individualized, concerning only themselves, without the wellbeing of Abel in mind. Although the plot is nonlinear, I created the narrative order by grouping passages with similar motifs or similar settings; the passages are voiced by different characters to allow for different often opposing perspectives on the same situation. By employing this use of narration, I am able to show connections not only among characters, but among themes within the text. The issue of discrimination within the precinct then becomes apparent as it affects Seamus and Miles through their racialization, but also Abel through her gender. *Just World* portrays the complexities of varying discriminations allowing Miles—subordinated through racialization—to achieve dominance in the patriarchal hierarchy of the police precinct.

Similarly, Abel is subjected to gender oppression, but by being white, she is allocated a strong voice; her experience opposes that of Seamus whose male privilege operates in conjunction with the subordination of his racialization.

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