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BENJAMIN PERCY AND QUEER ECOMASCULINITIES: IDEAS OF THE SHORT STORY FROM HEMINGWAY TO THE PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

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The 21st Century has ushered in a need to problemetize and challenge traditional boundaries between social and philosophical realms. It is therefore more important now than ever to revisit the classification of literary genres, specially the short story. Through the intersection of queer, literary, and ecocritical theory, this book reexamines the current identity of the contemporary American short story in order to posit that it is a queer formation, a hybrid of both the novel and the poem, among the generic literary landscape. Through this queer literary form, the short story subsequently has the ironic potential to reveal insight into 21st Century heteromasculinity. More specifically, this dissertation will examine five of Benjamin Percy's short stories, a writer who both maintains some of the masculine characteristics of Hemingway's hypermasculine characters and natural environments and reenvisions heteromasculinity and the relationships between men and natural spaces, in an effort to offer new models of heteromasculine behavior in the 21st Century.

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CHAPTER 1: THEORETICAL PROLOGUE & CONTEXT

The rise of transgressive social and political groups in the 21st Century, for example the Black Lives Matter, #Metoo, and LGBTQ+ movements, have engendered a more imminent imperative to question the status quo, to challenge oversimplifications, and to scrutinize hegemonic standards and traditional ideologies in response to patriarchal injustice. Such movements have also subsequently highlighted the "fragility of boundaries in genre distinctions" (Hernandez 167) as Hernandez argued about the boundaries separating literary genres. Therefore, this fragility is not limited only to racial, gender, and identity divisions. Author and professor Timothy Morton at the University of California explores one such threshold between humans and the environment, which he describes as a "mesh" boundary of "interrelations...between species, between the living and the nonliving...that blur and confound boundaries at…any level" (Morton 275). Generally, Morton's goal was to intersect queer and ecocritical theories in an effort to assert that "[a]ll life-forms, along with the environments they compose and inhabit, defy boundaries" (Morton 274). It is my contention that we should not stop at ecopolitics. As Morton learned from queer theory for the sake of ecology, this book seeks to encourage and extend such queer ecological thinking and critical thought to literary discourse and criticism. "[I]n [a]n age of ecological panic and scientifically measurable risk" (Beck), there are American fiction writers who, through their stories, are exploring these relationships. This book, however, intentionally focuses solely on the short story genre, specifically Benjamin Percy's short stories, because it is a queer literary genre that Benjamin Percy uses to explore the dynamics between natural spaces and heterosexual male characters.

For centuries, literature has been organized into distinct categories, and according to former NYU professor and theorist Mary Louise Pratt, this organizational method is an effort to classify types of writing “by a cluster of characteristics and tendencies" (Pratt 93). Despite the already lengthy history of critical work from theorists like Bahktin, Watt, and McKeon recognizing slippage with such literary genres as the novel, in a time of reevaluating categories and antiquated definitions, it is important to reexamine literary categories that have been historically neglected and the implications said categories generate in the narratives through the assistance of queer and ecocritical perspectives. Although my objective in this book is not to offer a history of the American short story or a comprehensive analysis of masculinity in the late 20th/early 21st Century, these two topics are tangential to my goal of expounding upon the ecomasculinities within Benjamin Percy’s short stories while situating his work as part of a hypermasculine tradition of short fiction beginning with Ernest Hemingway, a tradition which Percy both respects, adapts, and, in some ways, deviates. In addition, the final chapter of this book presents my own creative writing as a way to continue some of these traditions and offer my own style and perspective on the ever evolving relationships between men and natural spaces in the 21st Century through the medium of short fiction.

English professor and short story theorist Erik Achter notices a “'splintering frame'[,]” especially with regards to “short story theory” as it has been “forced to abandon or at least call into question the unifying, universalizing critical framework...that had been introduced and reinforced by short story theorists of the preceding era, beginning with [Poe and Matthews]” (Achter 76). It is not a coincidence that ecological and queer perspectives also share this agenda of questioning frameworks, and suddenly,

these three perspectives do not seem to be as strange of bedfellows as initially assumed. Although it is generally understood that all genres of literature — whether it be the novel, the poem, the graphic novel, et. al — have been influenced by and assumed characteristics of neighboring forms, the short story is one of the most critically underrepresented and overlooked forms. To this end, the American short story is in need of reexamination given its ambiguous and "paradoxical form" (May xvii) and its potentiality through its close compatibility with queer and ecocritical theories.

There is a crucial reason for my focus on the short story — specifically the contemporary American short story; I aim to redefine the genre as a queer formation. This argument will be supported through the help of queer and ecological theoretical frameworks. The following characteristics contribute to the short story's queer identity: **a**. its ambiguous category, origins, and historical evolution, **b**. its shared characteristics of both the novel — its "illusion of [wholeness]" (Pattee 294) and containment of the elements of all narratives — and the poem: fragmentation, ambiguity, compression, and brevity; **c**. its "paradoxical...form" as it attempts to express both the particular and the universal simultaneously (May 64); and **d**. the short story's heightened ambiguity as a result of all of the aforementioned characteristics. After establishing the short story as a queer formation, I will introduce a successful and popular contemporary short story writer, Benjamin Percy, who uses the queer generic formation of the short story to develop queer ecomasculinities within the narratives in an effort to offer models of heteromasculine behavior for the stories' central male characters and, ultimately, the readers. Chapter 2 will position Percy as an author who writes short stories that are part of a hypermasculine short story tradition established by Hemingway. However, although

Percy adopts some characteristics of the Hemingway tradition of writing about men and masculinity, he develops rural settings that assist complex heterosexual male characters toward reimagining their masculinity, extending Hemingway's tradition into more progressive 21st Century territory. Chapter Three will explicate, in detail, five short stories chosen from each one of Percy's short story collections. These stories will be chronologically organized by the publication date of each collection, the order in which they appear in each collection, and more importantly, by the ecomasculine theme of each story: The Ecological Language of Power, Violent Cycles of Exploited Ecology, Exploring Ecology for Heteromasculine Empathy, Reconciling Relationships through Cryptoecology, and Ecospecters of Preservation. Chapter Four will conclude the explications with a reflection on the examined stories, creative and academic considerations for the future, and new understandings addressing gender, ecology, and the short story genre. Chapter Five will conclude the book with creative works of short fiction I have personally written that attempt to embody both the representation of heteromasculinity and the development of natural spaces around these central male characters who play a role in the transformation of said characters in similar ways as Percy. Just as Benjamin Percy attempts to adapt the Hemingway tradition of writing about men and manhood, I too will offer my own perspective on the subjects. One story specifically, "It's All Fun and Games," was personally workshopped by Benjamin Percy himself at the Minnesota Northwoods Writers Conference in June of 2022.

Generic Distinctions

Gender theory, specifically the term "queer," is employed throughout this book to interrogate and characterize the short story because, like the short story, "'[q]ueer

[t]heory' celebrates the symbolic disruption of...categories" (Connell 59). Although traditionally associated with discussions of gender, the term "queer" since the 1990s has been used more broadly to emphasize the "slipperiness of meaning and the transgression of categories and boundaries" and has "constituted from a range of academic and non-academic contexts[,]...animated by a desire to create publics that understand differences of privilege and struggle" (McCann & Monaghan 2-3). Modern critical theory of queerness, therefore, applies the term in many disciplines and contexts. Like queer human identities, the short story defies its category and indicates certain power relationships and positions of privilege within literary genres and its classification system, subsequently relegating the short story, like marginalized gender identities, into an inferior position due to its ambiguous form and historical evolution.

Gender theory has the ability to help challenge literary categories as gender and genre share many commonalities. In fact, the term "genre," like queerness, "is not [even] solely a literary matter…[It] applies to all verbal behavior, in all realms of discourse" (Pratt 92). Genre is defined specifically as "a particular...category of works of art" (OED 1a) as in literature, but more generally, genre denotes a "sort" or "kind" (OED 1b). More interestingly, however, the etymology of "gender" seems to originate from the French term "genre," again meaning kind or sort (OED). Genre and gender appear to be influenced from the same Latin root "gener-," meaning race, kind, and also grammatical gender. Grammatically, these terms are independently and ironically genderless, and in many languages — Latin, French, German, English, et. al — the nouns and pronouns associated with these terms are "distinguished by the different inflections which they have and which they require in words syntactically associated with them" (OED 1a).

Hence, both literature and human identities are existing and organized within the same categorical constructs that seek to define things, and even the terms used to categorize are inherently queer, used for many disciplines, used in many contexts and multiple languages, and grammatically dependent upon other terms for definition. It is this system that is, consequently, not entirely capable of accurately defining; instead, it implies an instability within the classification.

This book is not merely concerned with identifying the short story as a queer formation, existing in an unstable categorical system. Queerness is also "a kind of *doing* rather than *being* — [and] holds the most political potential because it focuses on resistance (rather than description) and practice (rather than identity)" (McCann & Monaghan 3). Consequently, this newly redefined short story identity makes it worth revisiting because the direct outgrowth of its queerness makes the short story capable of "doing." In a similar vein, Timothy Morton believed that ecological thinking could benefit from queer theory because "ecology *is* queer theory and queer theory is ecology: queer ecology" (Morton 281). Therefore, if we are to now consider the short story as a queer formation, it certainly seems that the literary landscape could benefit from queer ecological thinking, especially when discussing short fiction and their writers who are keenly invested in developing and utilizing natural environments in their fiction. What should be noted, however, is what professor and ecocritical scholar Dr. Steven Mentz posits when considering the "fluid process of contact and exchange" between two realms, which presents boundaries as "*rough differences and separations…*resulting [in destabilizing] boundaries but…not dispens[ing] with them entirely" (Mentz 283). Thus, this book aims *not* to completely eliminate the "mesh" but instead to examine it as

presented in literature as a way of thinking about the relationships between a perceived Nature and humans and the ways in which natural spaces can illuminate new models of human behavior, specifically heteromasculinity.

Historical Context & Short Story Identity

There are pivotal moments in the historical development of the short story, roughly from the early 19th century into the early 20th century. I seek to reexamine these moments in an effort to highlight alternative ways of rethinking the origin, evolution, and current identity of the short story. Subsequently, new, relevant definitions and theories are needed, primarily those comparing the short story to the poem and the novel, as a means to expose the current characteristics of the contemporary American short story. Finally, this newly redefined identity of the short story allows it to be particularly suitable as a queer stage for literary ecologies.

Before revisiting the history of the short story, it is helpful to first examine the short story genre and related literary categories as these classifications are equally important toward understanding the short story's identity. Although Derrida may well believe all genres to be “queer” in a way, my examination will suggest that the short story identity is a queer form as it, like other genres, “participates in one or several genres[;] there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging"“ (Derrida 65). In addition to this generic slippage, within this type of generic classification system, “a 'single' genre is only recognizable as difference, as a foregrounding against the background of its neighboring genres” (Devitt 700), as seen historically with the comparisons often made between the normative genre of the novel and the marginalized form of the short story. Although this book is not primarily

concerned with dissembling genre categories necessarily, a part of this book is, however, implicitly invested in identifying the inadequacies of generic classifications with forms that are inorganically classified, such as the short story. The issues I raise concerning generic systems may, therefore, indicate a need for "reformulation of canonical genre boundaries and definitions" (Patea 20). Granted, it is certainly helpful, to an extent, to use the term "genre" as a means to characterize a work of literature. As Dr. Steven Mentz implies, there are dangers of dispensing with boundaries entirely; a genre distinction "is the reader's first real contract with the writer, since it indicates the structure of the story as well as the mode and the kind of language it will use" (Penn 45). However, as Derrida implied, the genre paradoxically exhibits an overlap of other genres, which makes categorizing a work of literature for the reader difficult, especially with more liminal categories and subcategories of literature like creative nonfiction, micro and flash fiction, prose poems, et al. Accordingly, such complicated efforts to define literature throughout history have inadvertently constructed power dynamics among the forms and genres as "one may be 'marked' with respect to the other (as long poem is to poem)[;] they may be related as 'major' to 'minor' or as 'greater' to 'lesser'" (Pratt 91). These imbalances of power expose biases within those who create said categories and prioritize some forms and genres over others. Consequently, this type of literary prioritization is only one of the many causes for the short story's marginalization as a form throughout the centuries.

In the case of the short story, even in the name "short," it implies a form that is lack, incomplete, and brief. The name precedes the experience of reading the story with a notion of limitations; "the very notion of lack that goes with shortness, all conspire to deny it the status of art" (Pratt 110). Furthermore, it is only considered "short" when

compared to the novel, which is, historically, the dominant, normative genre" (May xvi), the unmarked hegemony of literary categories:

> [T]he novel is, and has been for some time, the more powerful and prestigious of the two genres. Hence, facts about the novel are necessary to explain facts about the short story, but the reverse is not so [until the late 20th ce. into the early 21st ce.]. The novel has through and through conditioned both the development of the short story and the critical treatment of the short story...Between these paired genres, relations of long to short coincide with relations of unmarked to marked, of major to minor, of greater to lesser, even "mature" to "infant." (Pratt 96)

Literally, the short story is less than in terms of word count; it is missing the bulk or the "totality and completeness of the novel" (Pratt 98). However, the difference between the novel and the short story "is not one of mere length only, but fundamental" (Matthews 78). Aside from the mere aesthetic feature differences between the novel and the short story, there is an historical difference. For the better part of the early 19th century, the short story, or "tale," to most writers, readers, and publishers at that time, "was an inferior thing, a fragment, a convenient, apprentice exercise, a stepping stone to better things — the dignified novel and the stately romance...but not things to be lingered over and thought of in terms of artistry or finality" (Pattee 292). This is seen best in a statement made in an 1887 issue of *The Critic* when the editor said that the short story "'is produced in youth, while the novel is a product of experience'" (Pattee 292). The statement that the short story is "produced in youth" imbues the form with both aesthetic and essential characteristics of immaturity, a form that is stunted and that is still in need

of development to be taken seriously and to be considered a fully formed work of art like the novel or epic.

Conversely, the short story, in many respects, "has always been more closely associated with lyric poetry than with its overgrown narrative neighbor, the novel" (May 169). It emulates the brevity, fragmentation, and ambiguity of poetry, and both genres conceal more than they reveal and leave "much unsaid…[T]he short story has pursued its movement away from the linearity of prose toward the spatiality of poetry...by using the metaphoric...language of the poem or by radically limiting its selection of the presented events" (May 169). Even the famous short story writer, himself, Raymond Carver admitted that he wrote many of his short stories in much the same way as he had made his poems (Carver 276). But unlike the poem, the short story offers, as stated, all the elements of a narrative that the novel typically has: plot, character, setting, conflict, and point-of-view. Thus, there is still the expectation that, as opposed to the poem, the short story offers an illusion of wholeness. Even at the rhetorical level, the short story offers "a sense of the inevitability of each sentence and persuades us that they are as complete as possible, that any addition or deletion would destroy their aesthetic wholeness" (Ferguson 219). The novel is rarely compared to the poem, and vice versa. The short story, however, resides between and exhibits traits from the two of these forms. Since its origins, "the short story was considered a form that mediated between the lyric and the novel, [and] within its space it came to exhibit a protean variety" (Patea 7). So unlike the poem or novel, there are, therefore, distinctive expectations of the short story, arguably greater than those expectations of the poem and the novel, expectations of the fragmentation and brevity of the poem and the illusion of wholeness and development of the novel. The

"contact zone" threshold between the literary binary of the novel and the poem, in many ways, creates what Indian English scholar and critical theorist Homi Bhabha would consider a "Third Space," in which literary hybridity exists. And although a "willingness to descend into that alien territory" of the short story may not "open the way to conceptualizing an international culture[,]" (Bhabha 38) this Third Space does seem to create a type of crucible for literary queerness, a development of a "new...form[] within the contact zone produced by [a form of literary] colonization[,]" that engenders this hybrid literary form, the short story, to illuminate "something beyond itself" (Cortazar 247). I argue that the quality "beyond itself" that is created is generic queerness, which offers insight into every subject, but in this book, the intersection of heteromasculinity and ecology.

This dissertation is not a survey of the history of the short story because this has been achieved before as seen in the works of Pattee and others. However, key historical moments in the evolution of the short story serve to underscore the genre's paradoxical origins and current ambiguous identity. It is true though that very little has been written in the way of "generic/historical examination[s]" (May 30) of the American short story besides brief and more philosophical papers on the genre such as Pratt, May, and other short story writers and theorists. It is also valid to assert that history has contributed toward and, in some ways, helps to explain its current form; therefore, it is necessary to raise such historical moments in the history of the short story in which the genre encountered significant transformations in its identity in an effort to reestablish the short story as a new, queer form. This includes, but is not limited to, the evolution of the early 19th century short story from the sketch, tale, romance, lyric, and other genres, the

burgeoning of annuals in America, especially the *Lady's Book,* and the various stylistic transformations as a result of influential authors, editors, and publishers. The primary concern when examining the history of a particular genre of literature, as professor and short story scholar Charles E. May points out, “is deciding where to begin” (May 31). The American short story is widely considered to have begun in 1819 with Washington Irving as he was the first formally published short story writer of merit, according to modern standards (Pattee 34). He elaborated on the sketch and the tale of romantic incident (Pattee 141), and he “made short fiction popular, stripped the prose tale of its moral and didactic elements, and recognized [that] the shorter form could be made new and different” (Pattee 20-21).

“Short story” as a term to “designate an independent literary form and not 'a story that is merely short'“ (Pattee 291) is a concept that arose nebulously, gradually, and unintentionally, at least in terms of classifying short writing as a distinct genre. The term is a relatively “new addition to critical terminology, as recent...as the eighteen-eighties” (Pattee 291). Irving wrote what was considered 'sketches' and 'tales,' and Poe also wrote 'tales'“ (Pattee 291). Poe seems to be the first to recognize the short story as a distinct literary genre separate from genres like the novel and novelette, but his famous critique of the short story was actually a critique of the tale. The term “short story” grew imperceptibly in popularity in the 1860s and 1870s, “but never in a generic sense...It connoted simply that for general magazine purposes fiction must be severely shortened” (Pattee 291). By the late 1800s, the short story “had become...a new literary entity with a form of its own” (Pattee 291, 293). Matthew Brander, developing Poe's theories, argued that the short story had unique traits. However, three of these traits seem particularly

useful when conceiving the short story as a queer form: its illusion of unity, its compression, and its brevity.

Theoretical Application

Now that the short story's queer identity has been established within the generic literary landscape, it raises important questions: why does the short story's queer identity matter, and what does this queer identity enable contemporary American short story writers to accomplish through their narratives? One particular contemporary American short story writer Benjamin Percy, in his short story collections — *The Language of Elk* (2006), *Refresh, Refresh* (2007), and *Suicide Woods* (2019) — "has always found inspiration in the natural world" as he "grew up 'off the grid' in Oregon" (Schaub). He has also been highly influenced by his mother, "a botanist who once worked for the U.S. Forest Service and passed on her love of biology to" Benjamin Percy (Schaub). Consequently, his development of rural landscapes in his stories "comes…honestly" (Schaub). As a short story writer, he is also keenly aware of the heightened ambiguity, compression, and brevity that the short story genre possesses. Through these characteristics, he develops vivid, oftentimes personified, and narratively central natural settings and rural environments, and he explores the ways in which these environments offer models of and insights into heterosexual masculinity for contemporary men who are attempting to find their place within a society of pluralizing identities. Unlike novelists who oftentimes have the space for sprawling descriptions of the settings within the novels, short story writers must compress their settings and use the short story's inherent generic ambiguity to their advantage. Although Percy may not be the only writer who is crafting short stories that are considered "queer" in this way, he is a successful

contemporary American writer who, although part of a hypermasculine tradition expounded upon in Chapter 2, uses the short story's queer form to blur the fluid boundaries between human and natural spaces, to form literary ecomasculinities in order to teach men to figuratively "learn to swim" in "an increasingly fluid world" (Mentz 293).

Upon initial consideration, this book immediately presents a seemingly contradictory queer agenda to its hegemonic vehicle. In other words, this book's queer ecological lens and the short story's queer formation may seem ideologically juxtaposed to the examination of Benjamin Percy's stories — a white, heterosexual writer — in order to establish that said queer identity reveals a conflict about heteromasculinity. First, it is only a mere assumption that masculinity, feminism, and queer studies "are...antagonistic and interdependent, the rise of one determined by the fall of the other[s], with anxiety on [all] sides[,]" (Gardiner, *Masculinity Studies…* 6-7) just as it was an assumption that "[e]cological criticism and queer theory seem[ed] incompatible" (Morton 273). In fact, according to acclaimed professor of gender studies, Judith Kegan Gardiner, nearly "half the empirical research in masculinity studies today comes...through queer theory" (Gardiner, *Masculinity Studies…* xi). In other words, much of the insight garnered on masculinity has been through the queer examination of masculinity as an unstable construct, so especially in a time of pluralizing identities and masculinities, it is important to look toward what queer theory offers and continues to teach about masculinities in all its forms.

Moreover, Benjamin Percy is a contemporary American short fiction writer who typically writes about white, heterosexual men within a masculine tradition, but only to

expose the conflicts, fears, shortcomings, and insecurities within this demographic. Furthermore, his narrative mode is described as a queer formation of many genres as "many of Percy's [stories...are]n't easy to classify, blending elements of thriller and science fiction[, horror]" and more (Schaub). Percy is a successful, award-winning short fiction author, the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts, a Whiting Award, a Plimpton Award, two Pushcart Prizes, and he has been included in *Best American Short Stories.* His writing has been featured in *GQ, McSweeney's, Esquire, Men's Journal, the Paris Review,* and *The New York Times,* to name a few. Bestselling author James Burke identifies Benjamin Percy's unique style when he characterized Percy's prose as having "the masculine power of Ernest Hemingway's, but also the sensibilities and compassion of Eudora Welty." Many observations of Percy's writing superficially notice his obvious masculine sensibilities, as seen when *Kirkus Reviews* noted that his stories often examine "trapped, uncomprehending men," and again when *Short Review* observed Percy's writing:

> [m]asculine…Robust. Muscular. Unflinching[,]...stories about Men[, h]unting, shooting and fishing men[, m]en pitting themselves against nature, and against other men[, m]en in the prime of life, and at either end of it[, b]oys who want to be men, and those who mourn the passing of their youth[, c]omplex men and simple men in complex situations.

Percy is very active on social media accounts such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and on any given day, his photos and posts often entail the outdoors, fishing, cutting down trees, and whiskey, but you will also see his movement toward a respect for the environment with his recent purchase of a hybrid truck, symbolic of his progressive

masculine identity: retaining the rugged appearance and lifestyle while respecting the natural world. But what makes Benjamin Percy especially appropriate for this book is that he is very much interested in the heteronormative "chaos in the geopolitical theater" (Schaub), offering pathways forward through his narratives. He uses a masculine tradition in his short fiction to scrutinize heteronormative masculinity with a partially sympathetic yet highly critical lens. Take briefly, for instance, his short story "The Woods" out of his book *Refresh, Refresh* in which a father and son in an estranged relationship embark on a Hemingwayesque rugged journey filled with camping, fishing, and hunting, only to stumble upon a few dead bodies and a mysterious creature stalking campers and hikers in the woods. Chapter 2 of this book will outline the details regarding the tradition of writing about hypermasculine American men in short stories, but for instance, a story positioned within the hypermasculine tradition may have ended with either the father and son finding and killing the threat or being killed by the threat, as seen in Hemingway's popular story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." Percy's story "The Woods," instead, ends with the father and son leaving the camp grounds and frightened of the unknown, never discovering the external threat, but overcoming the emotional barriers in their relationship because of the threatening external presence; their relationship is restored, figuratively having briefly switched roles, and their understanding of each other is finally established after years of resentment. Therefore, very much like my effort to not completely disassemble boundaries and categories, Percy writes stories using some of the previous characteristics of writers like Hemingway, but he pushes barriers, blurs boundaries, and queers Hemingway models to

challenge contemporary men to be better and look toward the environment for help in doing so.

According to American sociologist and gender studies theorist Michael Kimmel, "[m]asculinity remains the unmarked category, alongside heterosexuality, whiteness, middle-class membership, and other superordinate positions." Unambiguously, the "consequence of that privileged unmarked status...is [that] it [is] often invisible to...writers themselves" (*Richard Ford and the Fiction...* "Forward"). It has been the central goal of such scholars as Kimmel, Armengol, and Brod to thus focus on "the superordinate instead of the subordinate group" as it will produce "a paradigm shift that can illuminate both sides of the gender divide in new and informative ways" (Brod 166). Therefore, it is also precisely because Percy is both a successful, contemporary American writer and a writer who writes about white, heterosexual men that he is the focus of this book, for it is my effort to render "masculinity visible" which is essential "for its analysis and critique" (Armengol, "Gendering Men..." 76). In other words, the work presented here may be perceived as "paying special attention to the fiction of (white) male authors[;]" however, "the study, while [focusing on] male fictions, will be centrally concerned with problematizing them, thus challenging rather than reinforcing traditional readings" (Armengol, *Richard Ford and the Fiction...* 15-16) in an effort to accurately identify current central conflicts of contemporary American heteromasculinity.

CHAPTER 2: BENJAMIN PERCY AND THE HYPERMASCULINE HEMINGWAY TRADITION

Benjamin Percy is a heterosexual male writer who oftentimes writes about characters who share that of his own identity. Certainly there are the exceptions (e.g. "The Dummy" et al.), but the majority of his central characters are of this particular demographic. I will, therefore, seek to answer a few main questions in this chapter: what are the Hemingway hypermasculine short story characteristics, in what ways is Benjamin Percy writing within and deviating from this hypermasculine tradition, and why does it matter that Benjamin Percy is part of this hypermasculine tradition of (short) fiction writers? I should clarify that there are many biographies, analyses, and documentaries written about and filmed on the life and works of Ernest Hemingway, for instance Burns and Novick's recent documentary, and his influences on other writers such as Palahniuk, Coupland, Carver, Bradbury, Beattie, Kerouac, Salinger, and more: American and British writers alike. Therefore, this chapter will not attempt to retrace what has already been uncovered about the life and works of Ernest Hemingway, but instead identify masculine characteristics similar in both the writing of Percy and Hemingway and also highlight the deviations Percy makes from Hemingway's masculinities. Finally, through the examination of his short story "Indian Camp," a short story that shares many of the same topical and elemental characteristics as Percy's in this book, I will draw parallels between some of the similarities and indicate some departures between the two writers' stories.

The 20th century hypermasculine tradition of short fiction began with writers like Ernest Hemingway, a writer who ironically popularized the compressed yet masculine,

minimalist form of the short story. He wrote during a time when it was believed that masculinity was something sought to be recaptured, as Gardiner still argues today:

> Masculinity is a nostalgic formation, always missing, lost, or about to be lost, its ideal form located in a past that advances with each generation in order to recede just beyond its grasp. Its myth is that effacing new forms can restore a natural, original male grounding. (Gardiner, *Masculinity Studies…* 10-11)

Hemingway wrote on a number of topics and themes, but arguably none more than males in conflict with masculinity and manhood. Although certainly not the first writer to address issues of masculinity, Hemingway popularized masculine short fiction in America during the early 20th Century. In fact, in almost every piece of scholarship on the writer, the phrase that Hemingway was a writer "obsessed about his manliness" and masculinity (Linde 16) is present for obvious reasons. One need only read any one of his works to see the validity of this statement. Besides many of the gender conflicts he experienced while growing up, he wrote during a time, in the 40s and 50s, when homosexuality was considered a psychological disorder (Linde 17). Consequently, these personal and social conflicts during his lifetime engendered a clear subtextual anxiety in his writing, a fear seen "[b]eneath Hemingway's public image of courage and valor[.]…Behind the mask of machismo was an obsession with unmanliness" (Garrigues 61). However, this is one of the many aspects of Hemingway's writing that differs from Percy's, which this book intends to contend. Percy is concerned, not obsessed, with manliness in an effort to expose, deconstruct, and reconstruct. In other words, Percy does not entirely champion or wholly criticize masculinity as a monolith; he celebrates certain aspects and offers suggestions for improvement through the environment.

Hemingway seems to position masculinity central to most of his short fiction. Some scholars like Philip Young label Hemingway's men as “code-heroes,” men who live honorably despite living in a chaotic and painful world. DeFalco and Williams argue that his central males develop coping strategies amidst suffering, which prevents their total defeat as a man; however, camouflaging highlights the man's anxious masculinity. He is unable to conquer stress and remain in control” (Dömötör 1). Others like Armengol identify a shift from Hemingway to writers who continued this hypermasculine tradition. He noted that Hemingway offered a more simplistic view of life and masculinity and an idealized portrayal of women, whereas “Ford, Carver, and Dubus...often share their problems and their acute sense of the compatriot nature of human suffering with women, who thus become 'fellow victims'“ (Armengol, *Richard Ford and the Fiction...* 12). Contrastingly, in Richard Ford's stories, “characters smoke cigars and eat steaks and they are apt to own firearms, but [Ford] is a post-macho writer in the way that others are post-modern'“ (Armengol, *Richard Ford and the Fiction...* 14). What made writers such as Ford, Dubus, and Carver unique in their writing about masculinity in short fiction after Hemingway was their willingness to challenge traditional models of masculinity, and they began to “empathize with men when they challenge[d] and critique[d] masculinity as ideology and institution” (Gardiner, *Masculinity Studies…* x).

Percy continues this heteromasculine tradition in some ways, but one of the main differences is the way in which Hemingway and Percy typically use the natural environments in their stories and the relationships the heterosexual male characters have to these environments; Percy is an ecologically inspired post-macho writer. Both in this chapter and in Chapter 3, Hemingway develops stories that place the male characters at

the center of the narratives in an anthropocentric manner. The men are often stoic, burdened by their sex and forced to endure these burdens, forced to learn about being men through other oftentimes flawed male role models, and taught to use their natural environment to perform and/or prove their masculinity. Hemingway often uses the natural environments in his short fiction as symbols or as proving grounds for masculinity; his natural settings are often exploited as a means to achieve or prove masculinity and manhood. In contrast, Percy resists anthropocentric environments in his stories. His natural spaces are as important as or more important than the heterosexual male characters. Instead of exploiting the setting, these characters use the natural spaces to become more sympathetic men, more understanding fathers, more empathetic humans, and all the while still maintaining some of the cherished masculine characteristics of Hemingway's male characters. As seen in Chapter 3, Percy, similar to the very nature of queer theory, "challenge[s], interrogate[s], destabalise[s], and subvert[s]…relationships" (McCann & Monaghan 1) between men and other men, men and women, and men and the natural world. Central to Percy's narratives is heteromasculine vulnerability. His male characters, even the most stereotypically masculine as seen later in "The Language of Elk," are emotionally exposed, trying to connect with those around them, but initially, helplessly failing.

Despite the early criticism of Hemingway's depiction of men and women in his stories, more recent scholarship has reexamined Hemingway's fiction more sympathetically, giving more credit to Hemingway who is often criticized for his one-dimensional characterization of the women in his fiction[;]" but English Professor at East Carolina University Margaret Bauer believes that those critics are "actually arguing with

Hemingway's choice of focus. The problem they have with Hemingway's female characters is not that they are one-dimensional[,]…but that they are usually not central characters" (Bauer 126). There are even more recent critics like English Professor Ryan Hediger at Kent State University who are examining the links between ecology and fiction…[in] Hemingway's fiction to reveal such arguments as the "interwoven character of human and nonhuman selves" (Hediger 1). Pertaining to Hemingway's fiction and nonfiction alike, Hediger notices that Hemingway retained "complex views and practices regarding animals. He hunted them all his life even as he nourished a growing sympathy for them" as seen in his nonfictional text *Green Hills of Africa* (Hediger 14). In contrast, there are also valid interpretations of his stories, arguing that they sometimes reinforce the "'extraordinarily fixed nature' of male-female relationships[,]" and that the "traditional gender relations" found in his stories "'are irreducible' in their fiction[,]" and the central male character in these stories "invariably subscribes to an idea of manhood that has not changed in half a century" (Armengol, *Richard Ford and the Fiction...* 12). This book allows for a multiplicity of perspectives on Hemingway's work and seeks to both overlap and juxtapose some of the characteristics of Hemingway's work to that of Percy's, despite this inclusive stance.

Hemingway is known for his sparse and powerful writing style, especially with regards to dialogue, as a technique which "marks the beginning of the minimalist short story in America. [His] often-quoted dictum that employs an iceberg analogy to say that seven-eighths of the meaning of fiction should take place under the surface level of the story" (Champion 7) revolutionized short fiction in the 20th Century. While Percy certainly maintains a level of appropriate restraint throughout his stories, he appears to

reveal more about character than Hemingway, specifically through environmental metaphors and natural symbols. Hemingway attempted to mimic the classic stoicism of masculinity through sparse dialogue and terse descriptions of the setting. The settings, specifically the natural environments, in Percy's writing adopt lives of their own, become characters, obstacles, vehicles, and almost always instructors of human behavior.

Armengol argues in favor of literary masculinities studies for the following reasons. First, masculinities studies illustrate how masculine ideals affect, restrict, and complicate men's lives. Furthermore, literature is a social document registering American society's concepts of masculinity. In addition, literary presents representations of masculinity. Finally, literary masculinities studies offers alternative models of masculinity and manhood (Armengol, "Gendering Men…" 79). Although all of these points are technically addressed in this book, the third and fourth bullets are the most important: specifically representations and models offered to the white, heterosexual males through the natural environments in each of Percy's stories. It is, therefore, my responsibility and partial goal to review how a writer like Percy is adjusting, adapting, and reimagining heteromasculinity in the aforementioned ways in an ever-changing and pluralizing social milieu and literary landscape. However, before delving into Benjamin Percy's stories, it is first helpful to examine the work of Hemingway as a means to both parallel and contrast the presentation of heteromasculinity and the relationship between masculinity and natural environments in both writers' stories. I chose Hemingway's short story "Indian Camp" from his famous linked collection of short stories titled *The Nick Adams Stories* because it contains all of the aforementioned hypermasculine qualities,

masculinity and manhood significant to the narrative, and a natural rural environment central to the story that will be examined in Percy's fiction later in this book.

Ernest Hemingway's "Indian Camp" is a story about the literal journey on which a young boy named Nick embarks with his father and Uncle George to an Indian camp and a figurative journey for Nick toward becoming a man. This journey is initially symbolically indicated through the story's setting: at the environmental threshold of a "lake shore" with "two Indians" as their guide who will row them toward a "young" pregnant "Indian woman" (Hemingway 16, 17) who is struggling to give birth due to a breeched baby. Besides the natural environment, the mention of the two Indians as guides signal Nick's transition from the familiar to the foreign and imply power dynamics between the races, a mutual reliance: Nick's white male father needed for medical attention and the Indians needed for the natural navigation.

The story is entirely immersed in the natural environment like most of Percy's stories, moving from land, to water, to beach, to woods as Nick, his father, and his Uncle George approach the Indian camp, but the characters rarely interact with the environment, unlike Percy's stories, besides moving "[a]cross[,]…through[,…and] into" (Hemingway 16, 17) the landscape to signal a shift to a foreign environment from the shores of Nick's home. As a young boy, Nick looks to his father for guidance on how to be a man; in fact, most of Nick's dialogue in the story is comprised of questions, asking his father where they are, what is happening, and why things are happening. Nick's tendency to look toward the prominent male role model in his life is characteristic of Hemingway's portrayal of heteromasculinity in his short fiction. In fact, most of his father's dialogue consists of answering his son's questions in as concise of a way as possible and narrating

his medical procedures while helping the Indian woman deliver the baby. He is laconic and does not divulge any emotional responses, even in the face of the screams of the pregnant woman giving birth, screams that the father does not "hear…because they are not important" (Hemingway 18). Hemingway's clipped dialogue also contributes toward interpreting Nick's father as emotionally aloof. It is possible that his father is simply conditioned toward hearing the suffering after having been a doctor for many years. It is also evident that his father believes he must emotionally detach from the patient in order to effectively do his job. Therefore, his father cannot seem to conflate being both compassionate and professionally successful, a lesson his son undoubtedly begins to learn.

Even after securing his masculinity through successfully delivering the baby with no anesthetic or formal medical tools, performing a "Caesarian with a jackknife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders" (Hemingway 19), he is emotionally unmoved by the experience. The rural environment in Hemingway's story, existing outside of modern civilization, is only used as a means for Nick's father to prove his abilities outside of "civilized society" rather than as a lesson to learn how to be a man, as seen in Percy's stories.

Nick's father's stoicism continues even after he checks on the husband because the fathers are "usually the worst sufferers in these little affairs" (Hemingway 20). Besides trivializing the pain and role of the mother after labeling it a "little affair," he implies that men also suffer during the delivery process and that it is a burden to be a man who has a pregnant partner. Nick's father shifts his attention to the husband's burdens when he thinks the father has actually been "pretty quiet[]"(Hemingway 20) during the

delivery. Instead of showing concern or compassion toward the mother who just gave birth, Nick's father directs his concern for the husband and never returns to the mother for the remainder of the story when he soon discovers that the husband "had…cut [himself] from ear to ear" (Hemingway 20) in the bunk directly above his wife. Nick's father immediately regrets having brought Nick along (Hemingway 20), exposing him to the graphic scene, indicating the burdens of fatherhood and difficulties in balancing both being a father while simultaneously adhering to the expectations of being a man. Through this, Nick learns both the burdens of manhood, from his father's responsibilities and the husband's inability to emotionally handle his situation, and masculine indifference toward the suffering of women as seen through the questions he has for his father at the end of the story: "Why did he kill himself[,]" and "[d]o many men kill themselves?" (Hemingway 20). His father's response is that men kill themselves probably because they can't "stand things" and that "not very many" men kill themselves (Hemingway 20). This line of inquiry reveals that Nick has been emotionally affected by the experience, enough for the young boy to already begin questioning the motives of men, why they do what they do. Now Nick begins to grasp the difficulties of being a man and that not all men are able to "stand" the burdens placed upon them. Therefore, to Nick, masculinity and becoming a man, according to his experience on this evening, is being burdened and choosing to endure these burdens. This lesson becomes even more clear to him after he asks his father if women kill themselves, and his father says that they "hardly ever" and only "sometimes[,]" juxtaposed to the "not very many" men who commit suicide (Hemingway 20). Given the sequence of events in the evening, it is possible that Nick may begin to learn that women suffer less or that men have more responsibilities and

more to endure in life. Uncle George implicitly cannot endure the events of the night as he vanishes as seen when Nick asks his father where Uncle George went (Hemingway 21). At the very least, Nick understands that being a man means that at some point in his life, he may be burdened toward a point of questioning his own existence or desire to live. This question is prevalent in the final lines of the story.

The final trip back home represents a return to the familiar, and yet Nick's questions move from asking about the mother and father to more philosophical questions about life: "Is dying hard?" (Hemingway 21). Instead of engaging in a conversation about the complicated topic with his son, Nick's father offers an oversimplification of death: "[I]t's pretty easy...It all depends" (Hemingway 21). After watching his father stoically deliver a baby without help, hearing the tragic fate of the father of the baby, and realizing his Uncle's absence from the events of the night, Nick is only certain of one thing; he feels "quite sure that he would never die" (Hemingway 21). With the symbolic rowing of the boat, Nick's father helps Nick to feel safe. As long as his father is in control, Nick feels that he will never die. However, Nick's father has given his son a false sense of invulnerability. His father's ability to remain calm during the trauma, deliver the baby, and offer simplistic responses to life's greatest questions is both a strength and a flaw. In this final line of the story, the shortcoming of traditional heteromasculinity is overconfidence and feelings of grandeur, which Nick has now adopted — a false sense of security. The natural environment at the end of the story offers a symbolic depiction of Nick's new false, idyllic frame of mind: the sun rising, the bass jumping, and the warm water trailing behind Nick's hand (Hemingway 21), and yet there is still a "sharp chill of

the morning" (Hemingway 21) that Nick notices before choosing to ignore that he is subject to death like everyone else.

Although this is only one of many short stories that Hemingway wrote, it is indicative of the masculine tradition for which Hemingway came to be known: stoic masculinity, the burdens of men in society and relationships, the expected endurance of these burdens, the need to learn how to be a man through other males, and the use of nature either as a symbol or as an exploitative tool for male characters to practice or prove their masculinity. In the next chapter, I will explicate five Benjamin Percy short stories in order to highlight some of the ways in which Percy continues Hemingway's masculine tradition within his short fiction and, more importantly, how Percy adapts Hemingway's heteromasculinity by developing queer ecomasculinities in his stories as models for 21st Century heterosexual male behavior.

CHAPTER 3: QUEER ECOLOGICAL MODELS OF HETEROSEXUAL MASCULINITY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SHORT FICTION

What I offer in this book, at its core, is something as old as Plato: the power of storytelling. Even Plato insisted first on using storytelling to educate the Guardians (Tasseel) because of the truth in stories. Short stories in particular have arguably been in existence longer than most genres given that "the tradition of the short story has descended from myth" (May xviii), something we as a species have looked toward for as long as early civilization. So let us not stop now to seek truth in this form.

The short story's newly defined queer identity encourages readers to do what most sides of philosophical debate fear, and yet need the most: to embrace ambiguity, difference, and otherness. And so if we begin to expose ourselves to a literary form that "is something other,...something more than a mere story" (Matthews 73), it is possible that the short story can be a sort of vector, a type of Mortonesque "mesh" that acts not only as a permeable boundary between genres that blurs literary classification in the interest of literary scholars, but also as something much more practical; this genre can be something entirely more accessible for the masses, something that, within its heightened ambiguity, offers a queer literary landscape of models for human behavior. I would further argue that this rationale may highlight the true reason why the short story is oftentimes considered a "unique art form" (May 21) and yet relegated as inferior to a genre such as the novel; it is because the short story disorients and distresses with its ambiguity, it discomforts the reader like what Dr. Steven Mentz describes as a "seep ecology," an identity that "conjures…potent fears of groundlessness" and ultimately has a "disorient[ing]" (Mentz 293) effect on the reader. But it is because of this very nature that

it may be a crucible for change, akin to the natural settings' effects on the central male characters in many of the stories Percy writes.

In this chapter, I will explicate five different short stories from three different short story collections written by Benjamin Percy in an effort to underscore how his short stories form a queer landscape in which the natural environments offer new models for heterosexual male behavior. In the first story "The Language of Elk," Pete, the central male character, learns a new way of communicating with his autistic daughter and relinquishes control through learning the language of the environment. In "Refresh, Refresh," Josh resists a murderous act at the end of the story and instead, for better or worse, redirects his anger toward a foreign threat, which his exploited environment provides him. Kevin in "The Caves of Oregon" becomes an ideal model of heteronormative masculinity in the 21st century, relinquishing control, accepting a more supportive role, and still maintaining his masculine. In "The Woods," Justin and his father find a way to reconcile a decade or more of resentment through an ambiguous threat in the woods. And finally, in "The Cold Boy," a threatening environment that takes the life of his nephew forces Ray to emphasize the preservation of life rather than death and himself and the child he once was. Whether elks in the forest, foreign and familiar threats in a local town, a cave beneath a house, a murderous creature in the woods, or the very icy pond and sinister crows of a niveous property, each natural environment exists in each story as a paradoxically threatening and yet instructional facet, each character learning powerful lessons from each environment: a deconstruction of the threatening environment followed by a reconstruction of the natural space into a territory for transformation; for what is ecology but something "conscious of the ways nothing stays

the same forever[,]" something "that life always gathers anew" (Smith 240)? Thus, each story is prefaced with a theme, identifying the particular relationship between heteromasculinity and the ecology in that particular story.

The Ecological Language of Power: "The Language of Elk"

In Percy's first published collection of short fiction titled *The Language of Elk* (2006), the eponymous story displays a natural environment that offers lessons concerning control for its heterosexual male central figure. Pete Foder, although missing the additional "d" in his surname, is a symbolically fecund character who generates rich insight into the anxieties of a man who struggles to gain control over his marriage, child, and environment and the subsequent personal growth from looking toward the environment for answers. This story contains a natural environment with nonhuman species which literally create an ecological language through which Pete, once ecologically fluent in said language, is finally able to learn how to be a father and communicate with his daughter.

Through first person point-of-view, Percy uses Pete as a symbolic masculine vehicle of domination and power through revealing what Pete "own[s,]" like the elk on his ranch (*The Language of Elk* 52); in addition to his house and his elk, he also claims the grass, huckleberry, and even the soil itself as something he owns (*The Language of Elk* 52). He finds comfort in the things and activities he is able to manipulate and control as seen immediately following this passage expounding upon the description of his wife, Willow, who is "good in th[e] way…she will bring [him] another beer" (*The Language of Elk* 52). She is something "good" for him because she obeys and becomes something Pete can manipulate or use for his benefit. Therefore, Pete's definition of goodness

appears to be rooted in solipsism and domination, and the origin of their relationship and role as parents is grounded in Willow's trauma; Pete raped her. Before their marriage, while he is out hunting and camping with his buddies, Pete returns to the tent after killing a bear:

> That night I was wild with gore and liquor, something beastly. In the tent, I found Willow and we made our pact in the dark, fast and hard, and she was a victim beneath my system of limbs. I remember her screaming no, no, *no.* I remember her little fists. But I wouldn't stop, and beneath her skin, my violence must have imprinted something wrong. She said it was like a monster, the tearing inside. Then came Sonora and eleven years of not being able to make things better. (*The Language of Elk* 66)

After killing the bear, Pete transfers his violence to Willow in an effort to confirm his dominance like he did to the bear, but he dominates Willow obviously in a different form. Percy reinforces the connections between violence and male sexuality. Pete even acknowledges that Willow was a "victim[,]' that she did not offer consent to engage in sexual activity with him through her voicing of three "no"s. His memory of her "little fists" juxtaposed to his description of himself as a "beastly" creature coupled with Willow's description of him as a "monster…tearing" indicates the violent power imbalance on which Pete capitalizes. He becomes like a beast instead of a civilized heterosexual male seeking the consent of his partner. This language may also indicate Pete's desire to condemn his own actions as it is told through his point-of-view and in past tense. In addition, after "eleven years of cold distance" since this moment, Willow has "tried to help [him] recognize" the fault in and damage caused by his atrocious

behavior (*The Language of Elk* 65). Equally significant, however, are the words "beastly" and "monster[,]" which indexically offer different categories of violent men to imply a type of spectrum of male behavior. Pete uses the word "beastly" to describe himself. Although it dehumanizes himself, it still categorizes him as a creature of this world, as part of nature, albeit a violent part. However, it is Willow who labels him a "monster," removing Pete from the natural world almost entirely. Therefore, he becomes an uncanny figure that straddles two realms, an aberration of nature, something mythological and in the realm of cryptozoological. In other words, Pete has yet to fully take responsibility for his behavior even if he still retains guilt for his actions. Aside from the liquor he was drinking, it is possible that Pete uses the word "beastly" as if to offer an excuse for raping Willow, that it happened because he is a man, a beast who cannot fight his inherent primal desires and urges.

As if the trauma of Willow being raped was not heinous enough, Percy indicates that there are long lasting, generational consequences to Pete's masculine violence: Willow became pregnant with Sonora, and Pete believes the violent circumstances surrounding Sonora's conception "must have imprinted something wrong" (*The Language of Elk* 66). So when Sonora is eventually discovered to be on the spectrum with an autistic diagnosis, he believes it is due to his actions. He and his wife are now "not right" (*The Language of Elk* 52). Their marriage "used to be…beautiful[,]" but now Sonora "bleeds a wound between" them (*The Language of Elk* 52). Sonora demands sensitivity, patience, and understanding. She becomes someone whom Pete cannot control in the typical ways in which Pete is accustomed, someone who Pete believes has "wound[ed]" his marriage. In fact, one night, while standing over the sleeping bodies of

his wife and daughter, he considers them "female things" who "belong[] to [him]—either by bloodwork or legal certificate" (*The Language of Elk* 54). In an effort to feel comfortable with feelings of intimacy and love, he resorts to objectifying his family as gendered "things" to create distance and a power dynamic in which he is the apex predator. Pete even describes his love for Sonora as "a thing of distance. Like looking through the wrong end of a scope" (*The Language of Elk* 65). Even if he were to "reach out and feel her skin…she remains so far away" (*The Language of Elk* 65). This metaphoric comparison, looking through the wrong end of a scope, is used in more than one of his short stories because he experiments with emotional and physical distances that separate men and the relationships in which they are in all of these collections. However, unlike the stereotypical masculine figure, Pete at least expresses a desire to "want to make [their] closeness real," and so he extends a hand out to touch his daughter and wife, but his "husked…callus and…hairy [hand]...trembles[,]" and he "only [feels] more alone" (*The Language of Elk* 54). Particularly symbolic is the use of the word "husked," which is usually an external covering of a seed or fruit that is removed to access the nutrition. The calluses and hair, symbolically stereotypical of a working man, parallel a barrier separating Pete from emotionally and physically connecting to his family. This husk, a masculine barrier, is the very thing that Pete must peel away in order to become vulnerable with his family and connect to them on an emotional level. It is possible, however, that Percy uses the word "husked" associated with nature to imply that this is a "natural" process, natural meaning a process also existing in nature and nonhuman species as in the husk on any seed or fruit, to which men like Pete should submit, relinquish control, and experience if he seeks successful, meaningful

relationships. Despite the obvious lessons the natural environment offers, Pete initially ignores them and instead uses and exploits nature for his own gain.

Percy belies the fixed nature of heteromasculinity when, despite Pete's masculine persona, he is willing to modify his cherished ranch and rugged identity in an effort to make money. For city tourists especially, he "will liquefy [his] vowels, heighten [his] twang for drama[,]…exchange muscular hand shakes[,]…talk of the weather and look at the sky[,]…walk with a cowboy swagger[,]…[and] develop a dramatic deepness to [his] voice" (*The Language of Elk* 53, 58). These social performances are used to acquire financial security and control the societal perception of him instead as a masculine, rugged cowboy persona and manipulate tourists, "pathetic people" for whom "nature is a foreign thing" and who "shoot *one* animal and all of a sudden consider themselves card-carrying members of the Davy Crockett bloodline" (*The Language of Elk* 62). Although Pete may have valid criticisms of tourists who wish to appropriate rural western culture, he is hypocritically exploiting nature in an effort to perpetuate stereotypes of said culture. Pete controls this false narrative through the exploitation of nature in other ways beyond his mere appearance and mannerisms. He inverts concepts of indoors and outdoors in artificial ways, particularly with regards to the building structure of and decorations within the ranch:

> [T]he skeletons are what make it special. Take for instance the shaved elk-bone rods fitted into tables, dead lumber…Braiding the pillars and crossbeams are fangs and molars and claws…a counter made entirely of vertebrae, fitted together like some morbid puzzle. There are antler chandeliers and bullhorn chairs and a cougar mounted on a log…next to…five pheasants frozen in flight…The walls

> are crowded with nearly fifty skull-and-rack mounts of deer and elk and antelope and one boar and two moose…[an] enormous grizzly bear skin with its claws and its head attached…its jaw propped open…[and] the skeleton from which it came…I killed these things. I built this place. It is mine…[M]y hands put all this together and could just as easily take it apart. (*The Language of Elk* 56-57)

The inside of the ranch is described as a grotesque hybrid, as if nature has been turned inside out in an effort to grant the tourists the fantasy of being as close to nature as possible without the dangers, dirt, and discomfort of the outdoors. Pete concludes the description of his ranch with, again, a reference to possession and domination. He reminds the reader that he has controlled every step in the development process, from decorating and conceptualizing, to the killing of animals in order to furnish the ranch, to the actual building of the establishment, to the ownership of the business. More frighteningly, he alludes to his ability and his perceived right to disassemble the entire structure "easily," as if threatening someone, maybe himself. Pete finds power in potential threat or creation. In addition to being a ranch owner, he is also a taxidermist. This profession is used again in a story explicated later in this book titled "The Cold Boy." Percy's appeal to the taxidermy profession might be that he can imply men's desire and ability to control the preservation of life through artificial means, to create the illusion of life and animation, to recapture what once was very much like his core anxiety associated with masculinity, a nostalgic formation. Pete boasts his ability to, "for a small fee[,]…turn [a cow] into a bull…with a pictograph narrative of [the tourist's] weekend at the ranch…so [his] neighbor would be impressed enough to whistle…Never a dissatisfied customer" (*The Language of Elk* 60-61). In this way, Pete is an artist who credits himself

with queering nature. Equally important to Pete is his ability to control the customers' and his ranch's narrative to the public. Therefore, the images of his profession, identity, masculinity, ranch, and marriage all seem to hinge on his ability to reconstruct them, very much like a taxidermist, into an illusion of realness, wholeness, happiness, and success. But there is no greater threat to Pete's control than the one person in his life whom his desire to control ironically engendered and whom he feels he can now neither control nor understand: his daughter Sonora.

Sonora symbolically jeopardizes the illusion of heteromasculine strength and control that Pete attempts to maintain. From the moment he and his wife discovered that she was autistic, Pete felt "there was no fixing her, nothing [he] could do" (*The Language of Elk* 64), a play off of "fixing" livestock, as in castrating bulls, et al., which indicates both his ignorance regarding autism and apparent instinctual desire to physically "fix" what he considers to be deviant or uncontrollable. It may even indicate his unconscious resistance to avoid something he knows he cannot control. The few moments of tenderness and humanity expressed in the story are moments when he speaks about his daughter, specifically her euphonic singing voice, which can make a person "believe in heaven" (*The Language of Elk* 64) it is so beautiful. She also has an inherent gift of perfect pitch. It is not surprising then that her name, in Spanish, means "pretty sound" (*The Language of Elk* 54), and yet, being her father makes Pete feel as if he "need[s] to prove something" (*The Language of Elk* 64). It is for this reason that Sonora "tugs [Pete] in and out of love" (*The Language of Elk* 54) due to both the beauties of her personality and identity as well as the challenges Pete faces while raising and attempting to connect with her on an emotional level.

Percy constructs a symbolic parallel between Senora and the natural environment when Pete suddenly hears a “high-pitched moan” and finds Sonora lying on the back of Mangold, Pete's stud bull elk, granddaddy elk of Foder Ranch. When Pete attempts to help her off Mangold, Sonora “shows her teeth” and threatens to “bite [him]” (*The Language of Elk* 67) like a wild animal. When Pete tells her to get down, she releases a “horrible banshee cry” that makes Pete “shiver” and feel “lost” (*The Language of Elk* 68). He is unable to communicate with his daughter, who acts more like an animal in nature than a human in civilization, and understand why she feels a need to connect and spend time with the elk. His frustrations invert her naturally beautiful voice into an unnatural shriek as if to imply that his desire to dominate subverts the natural world. While admiring the Cascade Mountains the next day, he ironically says to the mountains that they “make perfect sense” (*The Language of Elk* 68) and questions why his wife and daughter cannot be more like them as those mountains “are *always exactly* the same” unlike “frigid wives or freaky daughters” because the mountains “happened before words…[and] emotion” and therefore “make [him] feel young and tender” (*The Language of Elk* 68, 53). Pete then recognizes that the language of elk sounding from the “cavities of [the mountain's] woods…seems a fitting voice: old and strong” (*The Language of Elk* 68). The elk are personified as the voice of nature throughout this story, and Pete is only now beginning to listen, but in a superficial way. Percy's apostrophe to the Cascades reveals that Pete still does not understand that his daughter could potentially be the mesh threshold between humans and the natural environment that will facilitate his gradual shift toward looking within natural spaces for the answers to the questions and concerns he has regarding his role as both a father and a husband. His address to nature in

this scene is only fueled by frustration and not a genuine interest to learn. It is not until the second time he discovers his daughter on the back of Mangold that he begins to notice the role of his daughter and nature as instructors rather than something to be objectified, dominated, or exploited.

Consistent with flawed, heteromasculine Hemingway characters, like Nick's father in "Indian Camp," Pete struggles with communication, specifically with Sonora. So when he comes upon Sonora again on top of Mangold, "whisper[ing] into his ear[,]...having a conversation" with him, Pete feels "obscene[,]" his "stomach tightening into something like jealousy" (*The Language of Elk* 69), and he pulls her from the elk. She looks at Pete, and through her eyes, she "tears away [his] layers…makes [him] naked…[and] smile[s]" because "[s]he knows [him] in a special way—beyond all [his] brawn and horsemen bluster" (*The Language of Elk* 69). Unlike tourists, Pete is unable to manipulate, persuade, and charm his daughter. Either Sonora actually has the ability to see Pete past all his false bravado and into his insecurity as a man and father or Pete is projecting his insecurity onto her and only fears that she can see his insecurities and shortcomings given her silence. He grows so angry toward Mangold that Pete actually "wish[es] for *his* death" because, up until this point in the story, Pete has been able to conquer and exploit all aspects of the natural environment except Mangold. He even viewed the language of the elks as "old and strong" (*The Language of Elk* 68), and yet, still indecipherable. In his rage and jealousy, he "squeeze[s Sonora's] arms so hard there will no doubt be bruises come morning" (*The Language of Elk* 69). His language thus far has been violence, and this language does not allow him to communicate with his daughter, though he blames her for this: "You don't talk, Sonora. That's not your way.

What were you telling Mangold? Why won't you talk to me? Talk to *me*" (*The Language of Elk* 70). He never considers that she just may not speak the language of exploitation and violence. In response, Sonora does not speak, but Mangold responds in a language that Pete can understand when he "moves in with the hoof. It catches [Pete] below the knee…[Pete] feel[s] jealous" again, but this time "of [Mangold's] animal strength" (*The Language of Elk* 70). Mangold communicates with Pete through violence, something with which Pete is very familiar. This is the second time that Pete has been jealous of the elk. Not only is Mangold able to communicate with his daughter, who deeply upsets Pete, but now it is clear that Mangold is also stronger than Pete, a characteristic that Pete has touted about himself. Nature slowly begins to humble and instruct him through humility. As Pete's efforts to protect his daughter from a now raging elk fails, he tries "to be the hero[,]" but instead, he ironically "hide[s] behind [his] beard while wishing for a gun to grip, a bullet to chamber, dreaming red punctures into [Mangold's] silver hide" (*The Language of Elk* 70). Like his clients, Pete often finds a "remedy" to his issues "through the muzzle of a gun" through which "everything is under control…Bang, [he is] powerful" (*The Language of Elk* 74). Unable to mask his fear of being harmed and unable to use his gun that normally grants him the illusory courage to face threats, Pete is exposed, physically vulnerable, and unable to protect both himself and his daughter. He is out of control without a weapon, his greatest fear. What is more embarrassing to him is that it appears as though his wife Willow saves both him and their daughter when the "beer and adrenaline…blur" (*The Language of Elk* 70) the sequence of events. Sonora ends up in Willow's arms, and yet, even after this event, all Pete can think to do is "paw at [Willow]" on the way into their house and make "lecherous" remarks, to which Willow

"slaps" Pete (*The Language of Elk* 70), an emasculating moment of vulnerability, helplessness, and impotence. This vulnerability motivates Pete's aggressive and inappropriate advances as he desperately attempts to feel more like a man. Instead of attempting to learn from Mangold, Pete has consistently resorted to bravado and violence. However, the difference in this scene compared to the last scene in which Sonora is with Mangold is that Pete here moves figuratively closer to the transformation of learning from nonhuman species. This next phase of Pete's transformation occurs the morning after the incident when Pete begins to consider if Mangold "feels[,] and thinks[,] and dreams, like [them,]" and wonders when Mangold looks at him if he is regarding Pete with "hunger or thankfulness" before finally releasing Mangold into the wild and freeing him from the constraints of the ranch by using his revolver and shooting around the elk to scare him. After scaring the elk, he is smug because "*now* the feeling [of fear] is mutual" (*The Language of Elk* 72). In part, Pete's actions still indicate his reliance on artificial means of acquiring power, like using a gun to inflict fear on the very thing that inflicted fear upon him. But this scene also exposes an effort to finally consider the perspective of another, specifically nature, to personify and anthropomorphize nature and question whether parts of the environment can feel. His reflection on Mangold's feelings is a step closer toward empathy, indicating a desire to know "otherness" and "difference." Contrary to this perspective, he also releases Mangold from the ranch to prevent the further development of Mangold and his daughter's relationship. But if he wanted the elk dead, he would have shot the elk, as he says earlier in the story with regards to having the power to destroy anything he owns easily. Even in the elk's name, Mangold, the animal exhibits masculinity, "man-," and superior quality, "-gold," while still existing as a part

of the natural realm. It is the natural environment, therefore, that is the gold standard of natural human behavior.

The natural environment finally begins to act as a catalyst for Pete's slow transformation into the man and father he is capable of being when Pete finds Sonora staring at a wall. He does not speak to her. Instead, he listens, watches, and stands "in the doorway as if to say: 'I'm *here* for you." He reflects on the second night, when he found her with Mangold, and realizes that "[e]ven though she never said a word, a sort of conversation took place between [them]...Never ha[s he] felt more intimate with her, and the feeling remains barnacled to [his] mind…like [they] were communicating" as a typical father and daughter relationship (*The Language of Elk* 73). Pete is no longer reacting to her lack of typical communication with anger, frustration, or violence. Instead, he is, for the first time, listening, reflecting, and attempting to understand instead of attempting to be understood and dominate. Pete, once again, feels jealous of Mangold, but this time, he is envious of Mangold for likely being "reunited with his family" (*The Language of Elk* 73) instead of being jealous of his physical strength or the relationship he has with Sonora. Previously, Pete wondered if Mangold could feel and think, and now, he seems to know that he does, and he potentially projects his own desire for a unified family onto Mangold. But the most dramatic change in Pete's character, besides the concluding paragraph of the story, is directly after this moment of reflection when he watches Sonora get "on all fours and puff her chest and bugle[]—from the thin reed of her throat—the language of elk." The sound she makes rattles the windows, and they "threaten to shatter, along with [his] ears" (*The Language of Elk* 73). The rattling of the windows and Pete's ears indicates a symbolic character shift that also parallels Sonora's

change. As Sonora grows more atavistic and in tune with the elk and nature through learning to communicate with them, Pete slowly begins to learn how to communicate with his daughter, first by listening. Unlike the last few scenes in which Pete finds her on Mangold, he does not yell at or grab her forcefully, and he avoids resorting to violence and derision with her.

In the final pages of the story, Pete completes his transformation from desiring control and domination of all people and aspects of his life to relinquishing some control by learning how to emulate the very natural environment he once exploited. Pete takes a client named Francis and a few others to hunt elk. Francis returns later, screaming and bloody, running toward Pete, explaining that Mangold and another young elk were engaged in a fight, and the young elk won. When Francis attempts to put a gravely injured Mangold out of his misery, Mangold stands and charges, but Francis escapes. Suddenly, as Francis is speaking with Pete about the situation, Mangold emerges again from the forest as if a symbolic ecological harbinger. Through the scope, Pete recognizes Mangold is not a threat to them given how badly he has been injured. Suddenly, unlike earlier in the story, "through the scope, everything is so close" (*The Language of Elk* 78) instead of things appearing far away as if he is looking through the wrong end of the scope. With a new perspective given the recent micro transformations in Pete's character, he is literally and figuratively using the scope properly. Now through the scope, he watches Mangold collapse "into a bag of bones" (*The Language of Elk* 78). When Pete lowers his rifle, he sees Sonora in the window of the cabin, but she "does not notice" Pete as she is "focused on the forest" with a "look of joy…across her face" (*The Language of Elk* 79). This is when Pete recognizes that she does, in fact, have the "capacity for love"

(*The Language of Elk* 78). He desperately wants her to "acknowledge [him] in *some* way[,]" but finally, on the last page of the story, accepts the fact that Senora "is out of [his] control" (*The Language of Elk* 79). Pete, until now, has never acknowledged that Sonora can love, and he has never voiced his inability to control anything or anyone. But the final, more impressive and significant transformation is when Pete not only recognizes Sonora's ability to love but attempts to emulate her at the end when he "puff[s] up [his] chest and sing[s] along with the elk[,...initially] to remind [himself he is] alive" (*The Language of Elk* 79). His act of singing and the language used in this passage is similar to the description written earlier when his daughter began to sing with the elk. This singing begins as a way to do more than acknowledge that he is not in control of her; it is his way of attempting to understand his daughter. He suddenly feels differently as he continues the ritual:

> [He] feel[s] a shifting inside, like some worm turning over in its sleep…[He] begins to feel strong—sort of the way shooting makes [him] feel—and [they] all sing together and the sound, the purest sound you can imagine, rises up and fills the world and eventually fades. (*The Language of Elk* 78)

Beyond understanding the way in which his daughter communicates more clearly, he directly states that there is a "shifting" occurring within him. Even the simile used to describe the type of shift is ecological, indicating many levels of depth: a worm in the ground and a worm sleeping. He likens the type of strength he begins to feel to shooting a gun, the most power he has ever felt prior to this transformation; however, he states that it "sort of" feels like shooting. The difference between the two is that he does not have a gun, and yet, he learns through the environment how to finally feel powerful without a

gun for the first time through "sing[ing]." The power, the pure sound, comes from the "all sing together." Thus, the story ends with a convergence of all those who have learned the language of elk, a common ecological language that offers power without guns and understanding without control.

Percy implies an inherent relationship between masculinity and the environment, but in a way very uncharacteristically Hemingway. The heterosexual male in this story gains some understanding and power through relinquishing the superficial power of guns and domination over women, animals, and the ecology in general. Instead, Pete gains a different type of power that is depicted, in the final lines, as something much more primal and significant. He does not look toward learning the language of other heterosexual men. He instead finally allows himself to become vulnerable to learning a new ecological language that potentially begins a productive relationship with his daughter.

Violent Cycles of Exploited Ecology: "Refresh, Refresh"

In many ways, almost all of Percy's central male characters desire control over the things that they cannot control in their lives. This is equally true in Benjamin Percy's short story "Refresh, Refresh" from his short story collection *Refresh, Refresh* (2007). The difference is that this story follows a young adult who responds to a lack of control with violence. Percy continues this same thread of uncertain familial relationships; however, unlike the "Language of Elk," Percy now explores a young adult's fears concerning his father's wellbeing as opposed to an adult concerning his child's wellbeing as in "The Language of Elk." "Refresh, Refresh" is arguably Percy's most successful short story in this collection; the story was originally published in *The Paris Review,* it won the Pushcart Prize in 2006, it was included in *Best American Short Stories 2006*

edited by Anne Patchett, it was adapted into a graphic novel in 2009, and it is was adapted into a screenplay that won the Lynn Auerbach Award.

Superficially, the story has all the hallmarks of a hypermasculine narrative: heterosexual white males engaging in bloody fistfights, war, hunting, sex, and booze-fuled antics. However, it also indicates that Percy is well aware of hypermasculinity as a type of repression and vulnerability. The narrative begins with Josh and Gordon boxing each other "[w]hen school let[s] out...to make each other tougher" (*Refresh, Refresh* 3). The shirtless activity is primal, and the rules are simple; if you step out of the ring, cry, get knocked out, or yell "'Stop![,]' you los[e]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 3). But the boys do not only fight each other to become tougher and expel anger; Josh and Gordon fight to avoid their fear of existing as ambiguous males, or what Josh calls "vulturous men[,]" like Dave Lightener, who reside between two main types of men: those who have "paid their dues" and those who are "incapable" (*Refresh, Refresh* 9) of paying their dues. Thus, the central male characters are already struggling to maintain a similar type of masculinity seen in Hemingway's stories through asserting their physical toughness and endurance.

Percy immediately presents a masculine spectrum, or types of men in Josh's town that are all dependent upon violence in some way. There are fathers who have "left [them]" to fight in the war and the "old men" who have "paid their dues" who have already "fought their wars" (*Refresh, Refresh* 9). These men seem to exhibit primal and stereotypically masculine characteristics as they fight, protect their country, and also work their manual labor jobs when they return home. They are admired and emulated by the young men in the town as seen when Josh and Gordon paint their "faces...with camo-grease [their] fathers left behind" and wear their "father's overlarge cammies" (*Refresh,*

Refresh 8, 12). The second type of man in town is those whom Josh labels "incapable" (*Refresh, Refresh* 9). Even in the title he gives these men, there is the implication that they are weak, deficient, and lacking some quality that other men who are capable have. They are lazy men who typically live in "trailers and fill their shopping carts with Busch Light, summer sausage, and Oreo cookies" (*Refresh, Refresh* 9). In between these two categories of men, though, is a more ambiguous type of man he calls the "vulturous men" (*Refresh, Refresh* 9). Despite the plural title, Josh only categorizes one man of whom he knows who belongs in this category: Dave Lightener. Dave exhibits some of the characteristics of the stereotypically masculine identity given that he is in the military, he has a "standard-issue high-and-tight buzz" haircut, and he talks in a seemingly confident, "too-loud voice" when he boasts "about all the insurgents he gunned down when working in Fallujah" (*Refresh, Refresh* 9). Like a vulture, it looks like a bird but preys on the weak. The critical diction Percy uses like "standard" and "too-loud[,]" to describe Dave, in addition to the accompanying descriptors of Dave, like the fact that he drives a "Vespa," that he still "live[s] with his mother[,]" that he can be seen "parked outside the homes of young women whose husbands had gone to war[,]" and that he is typically on the lookout to capitalize on "angry and dissatisfied and poor" kids (*Refresh, Refresh* 9) to recruit into the military, conveys the resentment Josh has for such "vulturous" men. In other words, Dave is *of* the men of the town but not *one* of the men. Percy expresses, through these juxtaposing descriptions, that Josh resents Dave's fraudulence, that Dave is a counterfeit male even worse than an incapable man. At least with incapable men, they do not pretend to be something they are not. It is this deception that fosters anxiety within Josh, possibly because it represents a type of uncertainty that he already despises.

Furthermore, Dave is in the military, protecting his country, and yet he is ironically preying on the young boys in his town in order to manipulate them into enlisting. Percy also achieves this through the use of environmental metaphors as vultures, within the animal kingdom hierarchy, are animals that prey on other helpless or dead animals. He is a man who externally presents as a protector of the weak, as an independent adult, but he is a vulture in eagle's clothing. He still relies on his mother and does not appear to be married or to be in a committed, heterosexual relationship with a woman. According to him, he has experienced war and witnessed death, and yet, unlike many war veterans who struggle with PTSD, he ironically feels comfortable enough to brag about his martial exploits. He is an American soldier, and yet he drives an Italian scooter. He advertises a "*Support Our Troops*" ribbon on his scooter, and yet he is sleeping with the vulnerable women of his fellow brothers-in-arms. Dave, therefore, exists in between the realm of the two other aforementioned types of men. For these reasons — and the fact that if Dave shows up on someone's doorstep, he is probably there to inform a family that someone has died while at war — Josh "pray[s he]...never find[s] Dave...on [his] porch" (*Refresh, Refresh* 10). Dave seems very much aware of this resentment, and so he knows "better than to bother [them]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 10) in particular. Dave is both the source of Josh and Gordon's resentment and the literal harbinger of loss, the vehicle through which Josh's fears become reality, and so Josh and Gordon mainly exert their energy throughout the story in an attempt to emulate their fathers for fear of becoming someone like Dave, someone who exists in two categories. In fact, they would rather be weak, fail, or lose than be like Dave because even if they "went down" in a fight, they "would go down swinging, as [their] father[s] would have wanted" (*Refresh, Refresh* 4). Thus, to them,

what is more frightening than becoming weak or being stereotypically feminized like one of the "incapable" men, is instead becoming "vulturous," not committing to either type of heteromasculine identity, not meeting or exceeding the masculine standards their fathers had defined. Although, the minor characters in the story are not the only elements that complicate their masculine identities. The physical environment in which they live also problematizes these masculine efforts and goals. In truth, the setting significantly exacerbates their fears of their uncertainty with the intentions of helping the boys confront and overcome their fears. As the boys grow more uncomfortable, however, they act out in violence.

The setting — Tumalo, Oregon — adopts a hybrid identity too and, consequently, only further breeds more anxiety in the boys that manifests in violence, aggression, and resentment. It is a small desert community with only fifteen hundred people. Even the barren physical environment is personified as threatening while Josh rides his dirt bike through the hills when it "bullie[s him and]...drag[s him] from [his] bike" (*Refresh, Refresh* 5). But the more corruptive aspect of the town is that it is without a clearly defined identity. San Antonio has The Alamo, New York City has The Statue of Liberty, Nashville has The Grand Ole Opry, and even Flanders, Long Island has The Big Duck. In Tumalo, however, "[n]othing distinguishes [it] from" any other nearby places, like "Bend or Redmond or La Pine or any of the other nowhere towns off Route 97" (*Refresh, Refresh* 4). And it is this nebulous identity that inflicts the most harm onto the males who live within the town directly because of its ambiguity, for its only feature is that it is home of "the 2nd Battalion, 34th Marines" military base (*Refresh, Refresh* 4). It is like "any...other" town and it is both in the middle of "nowhere[,]" as Josh states, which

implicitly offers its residents "nowhere" to go but the military. The geographical space the town occupies, therefore, contributes to confining the boys to come-of-age with very few opportunities and professional options given their narrow vision of what they think a man should become when he matures. The base is the only significant landmark near the town, and so the boys and men would rather simply accept what they deem inevitable, that all men of age, mainly young fathers, will enlist part-time as reservists, and as a result, "vanish, just like that" merely for "beer pay" (*Refresh, Refresh* 5, 4). This current identity of the town is incredibly ironic given the origin of the town of Tumalo. An actual town in Oregon, Tumalo's name derives from the indigenous American Klamath Tribes' "memorable associations with Tumalo Creek: *tumallowa* (icy water), *temolo* (wild plum), or *temola* (ground fog)" (Winch). The Klamath Tribes were deeply connected to and respectful of the natural landscape of Oregon as seen in the naming of the location based upon the landscape. Like many indigenous Americans, they were eventually forced onto reserved lands from the expansion of EuroAmerican colonizers (Winch) who sought to exploit the land's natural resources. Therefore, the name itself is indicative of the violent history of displacement and subjugation, and Percy possibly implies in this story that the American government continues to exploit the land for the gain of domination.

The exploited natural setting results in a figurative and literal option for boys and men in the town: uncertainty. The phrase "Our fathers," like a prayer the narrator recites throughout the story with the hope that his father will safely return from war, is repeated eighteen times, even in the last line of the story. In some of these moments, this phrase is paired with words like "vanished" (*Refresh, Refresh* 5), an indication of the overwhelming collective loneliness the children of the town experience daily in the wake

of their fathers' absence. The lack of opportunities in the setting, thus, breeds a lower middle-class which forces its fathers to sacrifice their relationships with their children for mere “beer pay.” The absence of Josh's father renders him without guidance, forcing him to develop with a heightened sense of uncertainty during an already uncertain time in a child's life. In their father’s absence, Josh and Gordon attempt to reconstruct who their fathers are and what their fathers do; they often “imagin[e] them doing heroic things[;]” they “imagin[e] them silhouetted by fiery explosions;” they “imagin[e] them burrowing into the sand” (*Refresh, Refresh* 8). The repetition of “imagin[e]” is a direct result of these various types of ambiguity they face daily, particularly because they do not exactly “know...what [their] fathers *d[o]* over there” (*Refresh, Refresh* 8). The uncertainty with which they are faced encourages Josh and Gordon to construct a reality in which they idealize their fathers rather than resent them for their absence. The paragraph that directly follows this repetition of “imagin[e]” underscores the consequence of such uncertainty in the boys' lives as the narrative immediately returns to the two boys boxing each other again as a means to cope with the emotional sting of paternal loneliness directly due to their environment. Consequently, the violence in which the boys engage is yet another tragic byproduct and only crescendos throughout their lives.

Percy expresses both the dangers of absent fathers and the opportunities it presents young men in looking toward nature as an instructor of masculine behavior instead. Josh, especially, is even more lost as his mother and father divorced, leaving Josh with his elderly grandfather while his father is stationed in the military. In the absence of his father, Josh finds ways to construct fantasies of his father through the use of his aforementioned imagination in which, on “the horizon, [Josh's] father would be waiting”

(*Refresh, Refresh* 5). But despite his best efforts to maintain hope through his imagination, the gravity of Josh's father's absence is too burdensome, and Josh's paternal fantasies are often quickly juxtaposed to a symbolic reality, the "Hole in the Ground" (*Refresh, Refresh* 5) he and Gordon frequent, made by an unexpected meteorite that landed nearby many years ago. While staring into the deep, black abyss of the hole, Josh recognizes that it does not "take much imagination to realize how something can drop out of the sky and change everything" (*Refresh, Refresh* 6). The meteorite, something people are unable to anticipate, created a "five thousand feet wide and three hundred feet deep" (*Refresh, Refresh* 6) hole in the ground that could have killed hundreds of people, including Josh, if it had simply landed a few miles in a different direction. Staring into the darkness of the hole reminds him of just "how close [he] came...to oblivion" (*Refresh, Refresh* 6) — the indiscriminate nature of human tragedy. And yet, as much as he fears the uncertainty in his life, he often returns to the Hole in the Ground to dangle his "feet over the edge of the crater" (*Refresh, Refresh* 6) as if ironically attracted to the very danger and uncertainty he also fears. Josh and Gordon, whose father is also enlisted, are both continuously reminded of the stark reality of their situation, that they live in a poor town with little to no familial support and even less hope at securing a successful professional and financial future. It is no wonder they attempt to live life "so fast [their] minds empt[y]" and they feel "like flying and falling" (*Refresh, Refresh* 16). When they slow the pace of lived experience, they often feel fifty years old (*Refresh, Refresh* 15) as they have time to notice that they look and feel "warped and ghostly[,]" and that their fathers are continuously "haunt[ing them]" when they simply look in the mirror (*Refresh, Refresh* 17). So although they admire, idealize, and glorify their fathers, the memory of

their fathers ironically paired with the uncertainty of their fathers' safe return home situates the boys in a constant state of existential anxiety. To cope with this anxiety, they fight, drink, and have sex with women. Even when they meet women who ask for their names, they "g[i]ve them the names of [their] fathers" and then have sex with them (*Refresh, Refresh* 18). The boys hijack their fathers' identities to reap the benefits of their fathers' masculine achievements at war. Through having sex with these women, they may also vicariously feel some form of intimacy with fathers who are largely absent in their lives. In addition, the sex in which they engage helps them to cope with said loss and they achieve heterosexual, physical intimacy without ever actually becoming emotionally vulnerable given that they do not see these women again in the story. They would rather suffer the taste of "burnt urinal pucks" (*Refresh, Refresh* 18) in the women's mouths than confront the "beautiful and terrifying...dark oblivion" (*Refresh, Refresh* 20) that is their loneliness and fear of the unknown. But a part of the tragic circumstances in which these kids live is that the town itself is contributing to "imprisoning" (*Refresh, Refresh* 17) them in uncertain social, financial, emotional, and professional states. The town exacerbates Josh and Gordon's masculine conflicts and personal lives by producing other boys, like Seth Johnson, who are wrestling with the same fear of uncertainty as they are, but who instead decide to project this stereotypical masculine aggression onto others like Gordon.

Symbolic of what would be considered toxic, aggressive heteromasculinity, Seth Johnson, who is a "no-neck linebacker with...hands like T-bone steaks[,] beat[s] Gordon until his face swell[s] and split[s] open and purple[s] around the edges" because Gordon is an easy target: "[h]is collarbone poke[s] against his skin like a swallowed coat hanger.

His head [is] too big for his body and his eyes [are] too big for his head" (*Refresh, Refresh* 3, 6). Gordon becomes the target of Seth's aggression partly because Gordon's physical appearance is that of grotesque masculinity — misshapen and out of proportion — and partly because Seth faces similar fears as Josh and Gordon; Seth's dad is also in the military. Gordon does not adhere to the stereotypical masculine appearance of a man, and so Gordon is forced "to be ready" (*Refresh, Refresh* 3) for the uncertainty of when, where, and how he will be beaten by Seth merely because of something he could not control: his natural physical state. Interestingly, the description of Gordon parallels the setting. Both are identified by a physically ambiguous identity. The description of Dave Lightener is also very similar as he has "big ears and small eyes" (*Refresh, Refresh* 9). Dave's features are unusual, but not extreme like Gordon's. This description of Dave, coupled with his military position unlike Gordon, maintains his protean character identity on the spectrum of types of masculinity in the story. Gordon, however, is at least accepted by Josh. Dave is not accepted by anyone, as seen in separate scenes when both Seth and Josh physically assault Dave. This underscores that, on the spectrum of heteromasculinity in this town, the men do not simply reject and marginalize other males because of an ambiguously masculine identity; they also categorize men based upon a collective sense of loss and uncertainty. In other words, the physical landscape that has shaped the town into a violent military town has also redefined the connective tissue between heterosexual males in the town and the criteria for acceptance and rejection.

Seth's dangerous and corruptive masculinity is contagious, breeding only more aggression and violence like the "refresh" cycle of fathers and sons joining the military. After being physically attacked multiple times by Seth, Gordon decides to make the

aggressive move to retaliate against Seth instead of continuously and anxiously awaiting to defend himself. While out hunting, Gordon and Josh stumble upon Seth and other members of the varsity football squad who are also hunting and camping. Gordon literally has his gun's sight set on getting revenge on Seth with his finger "on the trigger of his thirty-aught" (*Refresh, Refresh* 12). When Josh encourages Gordon to "quit fooling around" and put down the gun, Gordon does so "guiltily," as he simply "wanted to know what it [feels] like [to have] that power over someone" (*Refresh, Refresh* 12). This desire for Gordon to seek revenge is obviously a result of the vicious beatings he had endured, but his desire to be in control also highlights something more profoundly terrorizing than the physical beatings he received. If Gordon attacks Seth first, it allows Gordon the power to control when, how, and under what conditions the attack takes place. As previously mentioned, arguably the most frightening aspect of the attacks was not knowing when he had "to be ready" (*Refresh, Refresh* 3) for them. When Gordon suggests that they "'fuck with [Seth and the other boys] a little[,]" Josh disagrees, reminding Gordon that Seth and his friends have guns (*Refresh, Refresh* 12). But after Josh kills a stag, Gordon is so intent on revenge that he even challenges Josh's manhood when he scolds Josh to not "pussy out" (*Refresh, Refresh* 13). Josh agrees with the promise that the prank would be to only "scare Seth" (*Refresh, Refresh* 13). When night falls, Josh helps Gordon prepare for the prank as if it were an ancient, atavistic ritual by "smear[ing] blood across his face" and Gordon holding the stag antlers "in each hand…[while he] slashe[s] at the air as if they [are]...antler-claws" (*Refresh, Refresh* 14). Gordon's plan is to tear through Seth's tent with stag blood on his face and sawed-off antlers in his hands as if he were "some cave creature hungry for man-flesh" (*Refresh,*

Refresh 14). And it works. According to Josh, Gordon makes "Seth scream the scream of a little girl" (*Refresh, Refresh* 14), thus reducing Seth to what Josh thinks is the opposite of an adult man: a young girl. The "horrible smile" (*Refresh, Refresh* 14) on Gordon's face after this prank is indicative of the power he finally feels from regaining some sense of control. But Gordon feels powerful because of *how* he scares Seth. He exacts revenge in a way that instills the same type and level of fear Gordon had felt before, during, and after each beating, and without ever physically assaulting Seth. As mentioned, one of the most frightening parts of the beatings Gordon experienced was that he did not know when they would occur. To simulate this fear in Seth, first, Gordon attacks during a time Seth feels the most at peace: sleeping. Gordon then embodies a hybrid "creature[,]" a beast that is part man and part animal. Embodying the crossbreed symbolically conveys both the primal act of asserting dominance through becoming part animal and the heteronormative masculine fear of ambiguous physical forms. These two decisions that Gordon makes create an effective "nightmare that...descend[s] upon [Seth] without warning" (*Refresh, Refresh* 15). Suitably, in order to effectively gain revenge on Seth, Gordon becomes the very thing that scares him and the other heterosexual males in this story the most: ambiguous masculinity.

Despite the vitriol between Gordon and Seth, Percy parallels an important shared masculine experience between them: absent fathers in the military. Seth's father is "a staff sergeant[,]" and just before Christmas, his father "stepped on...a cluster bomb...and it tore him into meaty pieces" (*Refresh, Refresh* 17). Dehumanizing Seth's father using a phrase like "meaty pieces" trivializes the death of Seth's father, but Josh does not minimize the loss because of the resentment between the boys. The loss is a shared experience, a

communal loss, despite the animosity among the boys. Josh recognizes that each member in the town, boys and girls alike, is impacted by such a loss:

> And we weren't alone. Black bags grew beneath the eyes of the sons and daughters and wives of Tumalo, their shoulders stooped, wrinkles enclosing their mouths like parenthesis. (*Refresh, Refresh* 17)

The dehumanizing diction and the simile, comparing the wrinkles to parenthesis, exposes Josh's fears of recognizing Seth's loss, which vicariously injures Josh as he is forced to confront the possibility of the loss of his own father who is at war. The mouth, the method of communicating thoughts and feelings, is enclosed by the "wrinkles[,]" the anxiety, thus conveying that there is an unspoken understanding in the town regarding the fears of the loss of their fathers, which is contained by their unspoken anxiety. For Josh, the continuous state of uncertainty regarding the safety of his father is understood and shared by all members in his town. Even Gordon, when he learns of the death of Seth's father, "place[s]...all the money he had...under [a] six-pack...of Coors...on [Seth's] porch" because, according to Gordon, it is "[f]ucking Christmas" (*Refresh, Refresh* 17-18). The boys recognize that men are not to share their emotions, especially having compassion for a bully. They are to contain sharing the emotions that exit their mouths with a reticent, but widely understood, misery, like Hemingway's male figures. Gordon and Seth, therefore, reconcile their differences temporarily through a shared bond of loss and an unspoken agreement to avoid commiserating with one another as mentioned earlier. It is important to notice that this bond is never created with Dave simply because of the lack of loss Dave appears to have experienced, making him a masculine outsider and culminating into a final violent denouement.

The title of the story “Refresh, Refresh” refers to both the literal moments when Josh, while on his computer, “would hit refresh, refresh, *refresh,* hoping” (*Refresh, Refresh* 8) for an email from his father, and the figurative implications; accordingly, the title is a registrant for Josh's level of anxiety associated with his fear of the uncertainty concerning his father's wellbeing. Additionally, the stereotypically feminizing technology places Josh and other sons in a position of powerless abeyance and indicates the cycle of violence that Josh and other young boys reenact, like their fathers, to be more like and psychologically closer to their fathers. Josh's fears tragically become a reality when he “find[s] Dave Lightener waiting for” him at his house, wearing the ceremonial “black band around his arm” (*Refresh, Refresh* 18) to signify the death of a soldier. “Before [Dave can] speak” to tell Josh his father was killed at war, Josh brings his “fist to [Dave's] diaphragm, knocking the breath from his body[,]” continuously beating him until “he collapse[s into] a bloody bag of a man” (*Refresh, Refresh* 18-19). Similar to the “meaty pieces” phrase used to describe Seth's dad's body upon his death, Josh once again dehumanizes Dave when he describes him as a “bloody bag of a man” to facilitate his decision to assault Dave. The violence Josh inflicts upon Dave also parallels the prank that Gordon plays on Seth as they both seek revenge. Although Gordon does not physically assault Seth, and Dave neither bullies nor physically attacks Josh, Josh and Gordon both seek control over things that deny them power, over things that generate pain through uncertainty. Unlike Gordon, Josh is unable to retaliate against the physical object, person, or thing that causes him pain. Instead, Dave Lightener is present to deliver the news. The expression “Don't shoot the messenger” is a valid reason for resisting the attack of innocent victims. However, Dave is more than a messenger of loss; Josh targets

him because Dave also symbolically represents the very ambiguity, as previously proven, that has led to the anxiety and fear associated with his father. Even when Dave attempts to reveal to Josh that his father died as Josh beats him mercilessly, Josh warns him, "*Don't* say a word. Don't you dare. Not one word" (*Refresh, Refresh* 19). After months of wondering, not knowing, "refreshing," and hoping for a response from his dad, he finally has the opportunity to hear the truth and ironically rejects clarity and prefers ambiguity. At least while in a state of uncertainty, there was possibility. Now there is the uncertainty generated from a certain future without a father.

Instead of the natural setting teaching the boys a valuable masculine lesson, the final paragraphs of the story indicate that Josh and Gordon may exploit the setting instead to perform an unhealthy and dangerous form of masculinity when they bind Dave's wrists and ankles and drive him to the aforementioned Hole in the Ground. "[H]ardened with anger[,]" Josh pushes Dave "slowly to the lip of the crater…[and f]or a moment...forg[ets him]self, staring off into the dark oblivion" (*Refresh, Refresh* 20) of the hole in the ground. To Josh, Dave already represents a type of ambiguity he resents, and so his actions imply a desire to kill Dave with oblivion, itself, a symbolic self-consuming ambiguity. But despite, or possibly because of Josh's anger and sadness, the oblivion of the hole is paradoxically "beautiful and horrifying" (*Refresh, Refresh* 20), and soon after this moment of awe, Josh feels "shameful and false" (*Refresh, Refresh* 20). Regardless of the fear and anxiety that the uncertainty has caused Josh throughout his life, he also recognizes the allure of and his attraction to the ambiguity: the *'appel du vide*. Therefore, he and Gordon leave "Dave...sobbing at the brink of the crater" and join the military instead in order to "make [their] fathers proud" (*Refresh, Refresh* 20). Initially, Josh is

fearful of uncertainty that the exploited natural, militaristic setting and war create, and yet he is also mildly excited by them. In this final line of the story, Josh ultimately moves beyond recognizing his attraction toward ambiguity and crosses the threshold into becoming the ambiguity through his decision to not simply emulate his father, but to also become him by enlisting in the military and all the dangerous uncertainty that this life has to offer.

In all of the examined stories in this book, the natural environments offer valuable lessons to the male central characters. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain whether the natural environment or the exploited natural space that the government artificially constructs is either teaching or conditioning the boys as violence exists in all forms within natural spaces and non-human species. Unlike all of the other stories in this book, this story may offer a slightly more sinister and pessimistic implication concerning the exploitation of the natural environment as a means to exploit the angry and saddened youth into serving in the military. Therefore, Dave is merely a single physical manifestation of the military base, the government's facade of heroism and courage. Then again, maybe the military base's goal is ironic local preservation, the only opportunity for an already angry youth to direct its hostility on a target more "foreign" rather than on something local.

Exploring Ecology for Heteromasculine Empathy: "The Caves in Oregon"

Benjamin Percy often merges foreign and familiar environments in his short stories as a way to increase tension and create a conceptual space through which the central characters are forced to confront uncomfortable truths and traumas. Similar to the convergence of the foreign and familiar settings in "Refresh, Refresh," Percy's next story "The Caves in Oregon" offers a literal threshold between two juxtaposing spaces that

allow the characters to confront a miscarriage. The central character, Kevin, “is a big man” (*Refresh, Refresh* 21) who works in a foundry, a job that demands physical strength and endurance while “swinging a fifty pound sledgehammer” (*Refresh, Refresh* 21) all day. His wife, Becca, however, is a professor at the local community college where she teaches geology. These roles characterize a traditional expectation of gender roles within heterosexual couples typical in Hemingway short stories; Kevin uses his body and Becca uses her brain. Although they are initially “pretty happy” (*Refresh, Refresh* 28), Becca experiences a miscarriage that changes the nature of their relationship and her personality as she now “always [seems] angry” (*Refresh, Refresh* 22). The story begins with more literal loss when Percy describes the couple’s unique home, positioned directly above a lava tube, a tunnel that once carried molten rock. Due to this threatening and unstable natural environment, Kevin and Becca experience a loss of literal power at their home "because of the cave…[as] sometimes the caves collapse" due to a truck or car that drives over an unstable portion, and the vehicle "will vanish, crashing down into an unknown darkness[,…leaving] a gaping hole" (*Refresh, Refresh* 25) below it, similar to the crater in “Refresh, Refresh.” Thus, the story exhibits various types of loss: loss of literal and figurative power, the loss of their baby, the loss of their relationship and who they used to be, and a loss of control. The cave is similar to the function of the meteorite in “Refresh, Refresh”: an unpredictable and uncontrollable natural space that has the capacity to destroy their existence. Percy develops the cave as a symbol for uncertainty. The literal instability of the cave renders them anxious, “not [even] trusting the ground beneath their feet” (*Refresh, Refresh* 26). And yet, similar to Josh in “Refresh, Refresh,” Kevin and Becca paradoxically fear and enjoy the cave's uncertainty. “The cave” to Becca “was

cool" (*Refresh, Refresh* 26) given that the origin of her passion and profession are rooted in geology. Becca in particular initially enjoys exploring the uncertainty of the caves early in their relationship, the frightening sounds like a "far-off moaning," or the shapes in the darkness resembling "a bundle of bones" as it once instilled "a happy sort of terror" in them, "[b]ut that was before" the miscarriage (*Refresh, Refresh* 31); Becca now believes the miscarriage was caused by a bat that entered their home from the cave. Since then, she "doesn't like to go down in the cave anymore[,]" and she and Kevin "haven't had sex...since the miscarriage" (*Refresh, Refresh* 35). Thus, the ambiguous setting, the cave, is paradoxically presented as both the bedrock of the nascent excitement in their relationship and Becca's identity, and it is also the origin of their fear associated with the uncertainty of the death of their child and their future existence since they live directly above a cave that has the potential to collapse at any moment. In fact, their house is literally "built over the mouth of the cave" (*Refresh, Refresh* 26) as if to symbolically indicate that their relationship and the beginning of their life together originate from ambiguity. This also parallels the beginning of the trauma and disintegration of their marriage originating from the symbolic empty cavern of Becca's womb and the ambiguous origins of the miscarriage.

Percy juxtaposes behavioral differences between Kevin and Becca even before her miscarriage as a means to both contrast their personalities and yet imply the way in which Kevin could eventually complement his partner through the natural space. Becca is consistently uncomfortable with ambiguity as seen when her period does not arrive. Instead of waiting any longer, Becca wants "to be certain...some bit of proof that she could point to and say, "'There'" (*Refresh, Refresh* 28). She depends upon things, like her

pregnancy test, to be “very reliable” (*Refresh, Refresh* 28), which she shakes “like an undeveloped Polaroid” (*Refresh, Refresh* 29) after peeing on the stick to confirm her pregnancy. Like the Polaroid, she desires a full and clear picture for proof, and yet even while waiting for the results, she shakes the pregnancy test in an absurd effort as if this will somehow control the speed of the results, like a Polaroid (*Refresh, Refresh* 29). Becca's need for control and certainty is most likely one of the reasons that attracts her to Kevin, whom, ironically, Becca thinks “is capable of so much more [than]…the mindless repetition” of his job (*Refresh, Refresh* 30); yet she married him, an underachiever, according to her. The very repetitive nature of his job is the exact quality about Kevin that Becca unconsciously loves: certainty, reliability, and stability. As expected, when Becca miscarries the baby, Becca blames the bats that flew into the home with no evidence that the bats scratched or bit her. The doctor, consequently, says instead that her miscarriage is “just one of those things” that happens, unfortunately. Becca cannot accept when the doctor's “answers...are always changing” (*Refresh, Refresh* 34) because of her fear of the unknown and her need to blame some external object for the death: namely the bat, a part of the natural environment.

The expectation of a stereotypically heterosexual man during times of crisis is Hemingwayesque stoicism. Percy, however, depicts the 21st Century ideal heterosexual male as one who cares deeply about the death of his unborn child and the psychoemotional state of his wife; he simply copes and expresses his grief in different ways than his wife. Kevin and Becca seem adequately matched, but they cope with tragedy in radically different ways. Becca's mode of grieving is typically a kind of “mute...fury” (*Refresh, Refresh* 23), symbolically similar to the cave that once harbored

lava underneath their house, but her fury often surfaces in the form of wrath, expressing how much she "hate[s] this house…[as if] a switch goes off inside her that sends blue electricity sizzling through her veins" (*Refresh, Refresh* 23, 22). Even in the environmental metaphors, as seen in his other stories, Percy draws parallels between humans, Becca in this case, and nature, electricity, as if to imply rage as a type of natural experience generated from loss. Becca "keeps her lips pursed around the edge of a pain...she cannot seem to forget" as if the answer to her pain originates "somewhere underground" (*Refresh, Refresh* 37). Quite literally, to her, it does as she blames the cave. Here again, her womb in which the baby dies serves as a symbolic parallel to the cave as it is a cavity of uncertainty in which human life may live or die. Ironically, both her womb and her passion for geology are both parts of who she is, her body and her personality/profession. She blames herself for the miscarriage. Kevin, too, initially "thought a lot about the baby, the little girl they never named" (*Refresh, Refresh* 37) until he "drank himself to the very pitch of drunkenness, and that was enough" (*Refresh, Refresh* 37). In contrast to Becca's coping mechanism, Kevin's mechanism is much more physical. He is also able to cope with the grief by losing "himself in the rhythm of his hammer" at work while he drinks a jug of water and sweats it out, which to him, is a "little like crying" (*Refresh, Refresh* 37). The obvious difference in their abilities to grieve, however, is in their role in the birth. Becca had carried the child for months; to her, a part of her had failed, "her own body...turn[ed] on her" (*Refresh, Refresh* 34). Even Kevin recognizes this as "[s]ometimes he imagines a rotten spot inside her, like a bruised bit of peach he wants to carve away with a knife" (*Refresh, Refresh* 34). Kevin's only way of empathizing with his wife at this point in the story is through metaphorically

imagining objects, not people; but in this metaphor, he doesn't blame her; he blames a part of her of which she is out of control. This subtle characteristic of Kevin's is the sensitivity of 21st Century males that Percy encourages. What is also refreshing about the depiction of this heterosexual male in Percy's fiction is the patience and compassion Kevin maintains throughout Becca's grieving process through a situation he cannot possibly understand, especially toward the end.

Kevin does not always embody the ideal masculine figure Percy encourages. He lets Becca grow "furious...and...hit[] him" (*Refresh, Refresh* 36) a few times because he assumes that, like him, Becca simply needs to lose "[her]self in the rhythm" (*Refresh, Refresh* 37) of hitting something like he did at work with his hammer. Therefore, the continuance of Becca's pain and her coping mechanisms are uncertain to Kevin, and thus, he is unable to initially help her overcome the grief, but he still attempts to do what he can with the information he has to help her to cope with the grieving process. During another moment of anger, Becca's rage transforms into heated passion as they "tear the clothes off each other…[and] los[e] control" (*Refresh, Refresh* 36), but just as Kevin begins to "feel himself losing control…[as] the heat rising...through the tunnels of him...near[] eruption" (*Refresh, Refresh* 36), Becca stops him and says, "'That's enough'" (*Refresh, Refresh* 36). The description of the heat and passion moving through Kevin's body resembles the descriptions of the lava tube caves with Percy's use of the words "tunnels" and "eruption" in his effort to expose Becca's desire to use Kevin as a means to overcome the grief by imposing the qualities of the cave onto him. According to her, the cave is a source of uncertain danger, a danger that she blames on the death of her child. So by terminating Kevin's ability to sexually climax, she vicariously gains control over

his internal “lava tubes” and, subsequently, her body and the death of her child. She also prevents a pregnancy, which would only exacerbate her fears and anxiety. Percy is not implying that women are sadistic or cruel, but instead, that the heterosexual male may be unaware of the depths of pain and, in general, emotion in romantic partners. However, Percy concludes the story by offering a heterosexual male central character that does not simply fear and avoid the ambiguous pains and conflicts within his female counterpart. Instead, Kevin experiences an awakening as he begins to discover and embrace the uncertainty together with his wife through the very natural setting that has been the source of Becca's fear.

Percy finally forces Kevin and Becca to confront the figurative threshold of uncertainty as a means to explore the way in which men respond to ambiguous territory. Kevin literally awakens to the absence of his wife in their bed during the night, “the shape of her head still imprinted on her pillow” (*Refresh, Refresh* 37). Even when he attempts to “call[] out her name[,]...she doesn't answer” (*Refresh, Refresh* 37). Instead of going back to sleep and remaining ignorant, he acknowledges the image of an ambiguous absence, the “imprint[] on her pillow[,]” as a call to explore the uncertainty instead of resisting or ignoring it. And so he exits the bed and follows the sparkle of moonlight on the quartz in his house (*Refresh, Refresh* 38), like an ironically lit path, toward the “palpable...strange and horrible...darkness” (*Refresh, Refresh* 38) of the opening of the cave where his wife stands — at the threshold of uncertainty, like Josh at The Hole in “Refresh, Refresh.” The darkness of the entrance of the cave, a symbolic manifestation of what Timothy Morton would call the mesh barrier between human and natural space, serves a similar paradoxical function as the meteoric abyss in “Refresh, Refresh.” At first,

Kevin helps her back to their room, “cradles her in his arms” (*Refresh, Refresh* 38), as if to imply that this stereotypical masculine comfort Kevin provides for his wife and his desire to protect her from the painful memories associated with the cave is what Kevin thinks she needs, but Becca has a sudden change of heart and wishes instead to return to and finally confront the dark uncertainty. It is in this moment especially, when Becca asks Kevin “whether he is coming or not” (*Refresh, Refresh* 38) back to the cave, in which Percy offers an alternate model for heterosexual male behavior, and human behavior as a whole, as Kevin decides to descend into the darkness of grief in Dantean fashion in an act of love, compassion, and understanding to help find and retrieve Becca's former self. However, unlike Dante, Becca does the work to reclaim herself, and Kevin accompanies our heroine. Kevin even relinquishes control by trusting Becca to “lead[] the way” (*Refresh, Refresh* 38) into the obscurity. Together, they traverse through “narrow[]...passage[s]” and “utterly black” tunnels in which “red eyes” seem to occasionally “materialize” (*Refresh, Refresh* 38). At any moment, the cave could collapse on them. Uncertainty and danger encircle them. Finally, the two enter a large, open space in the cave where roots hang “like capillaries” (*Refresh, Refresh* 39). Suddenly, Becca “has a small smile on her face when she walks [into] the room, touching the walls and looking all around her, as if committing the space to memory” (*Refresh, Refresh* 39). Percy's description of the dark cavity is reminiscent of a womb as it is the only open space they have found. Furthermore, Percy's employment of amniotic diction, comparing the roots to “capillaries” around the dark cavity and describing the darkness as “black liquid” that “oozes” (*Refresh, Refresh* 40), coupled with Becca's “small smile” insinuates

that Becca and Kevin have finally reached and are willing to confront the origin of Becca's grief: the figurative space where their child died.

The darkness of the natural space becomes the vehicle through which Kevin gains empathy for and understanding of Becca. They turn off their lights and linger in the darkness until Becca begins a game of Marco Polo with Kevin, "with her always eluding him" (*Refresh, Refresh* 39). Kevin plays along and allows himself to become emotionally vulnerable as well when Becca "finds him" in the dark by following his "screams" (*Refresh, Refresh* 40) when he is startled by a root. Then they turn on their flashlights. Slowly, in the light of "a few filaments of red…[their] world takes form[,]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 40) like the beginning of human growth in a womb, and "as if something has been decided" (*Refresh, Refresh* 40), they have sexual intercourse in the middle of the cavity, the ironic potential for impregnation in the dark origin of grief. When they finish, Kevin uses his belt as a "sort of leash" (*Refresh, Refresh* 40), indicating that they are now bound, tethered, and trusting of one another. This time, it is Becca who "follows him as they continue back the way they came…[b]ut they aren't afraid" anymore; "they are [instead] resigned to making it home" (*Refresh, Refresh* 40), embracing the darkness, its uncertainty, the "cave walls fall[ing] away" (*Refresh, Refresh* 40) around them. In this way, the natural space is the crucible for change, producing a new heterosexual male through the character of Kevin, a male who learns from his mistakes, seeks to empathize with his partner, recognizes his shortcomings, explores the depths of his and his partner's fears and insecurities, and embraces all types of ambiguity.

Becca and Kevin are figuratively reborn as a couple and as individuals when they finally exit the cave and "close the [symbolic] steel door behind them" (*Refresh, Refresh*

41). Becca enters the kitchen and "pulls out a gallon of milk" (*Refresh, Refresh* 41). She does not drink juice, or water, or any other liquid. Percy chooses milk perhaps because he is keenly aware of the maternal post-birth nourishment. Yet the final lines of the story do not present total clarity. While Becca looks at Kevin, Kevin wonders "in mystery, how they found their way back" (*Refresh, Refresh* 41) home, to each other, to happiness, and to their former and new selves. What is more interesting is that Becca is the real hero, willing to become vulnerable through facing her deepest fear. Kevin takes a less stereotypically masculine role, out of control, supporting, and accompanying. And although Kevin may still wonder how this happened and what Becca is thinking, after Kevin's willingness to risk his vulnerability throughout the story for his courageous wife, it is implied that he will continue to seek ways to embrace the ambiguity of life despite the implications it may raise concerning Kevin's own heterosexual masculine identity.

Reconciling Relationships through Cryptoecology: "The Woods"

The vulnerability that Kevin in "The Caves in Oregon" is willing to exhibit as a result of his exposure to the natural setting is one of the many common themes presented in his short stories. Pete from "The Language of Elk" moves to a more vulnerable state after relinquishing control, Josh approaches the edge, literally, of vulnerability, and now in Percy's fourth short story, "The Woods," he explores the complex uncertainties that exist between a father and son and the subsequent emotional vulnerability as a result of the immersion into a threatening rural environment. In Bend, Oregon, Justin, now a twenty-seven-year-old software developer, reflects on a core memory when he was twelve-years-old, a formative age for Justin as he is at the precipice of change as he was "old enough to shoot a gun[, and yet] young enough to fear the dark" (*Refresh, Refresh*

43). Like Justin's age, the time of day is described as the "in-between time of day, not quite afternoon and not quite night" (*Refresh, Refresh* 44). Thus, his age and time of day defies boundaries, complicates literal clarity, and symbolizes a transitional moment in the narrative. His father cryptically tells him that he wishes to "show [him] something[,]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 43) but he does not tell him the specifics. He just directs him to bring his gun. At the threshold of Justin's teenage years, entering the dark woods of which he is scared, and wanting to please his father are details of the story that immediately immerse it in multiple levels and forms of uncertainty. The moment only grows more frightening and uncertain for Justin when he hears what sounds "like a woman crying[,]" and he questions "[w]hat the hell" it is (Refresh, Refresh 43), to which his father calls him "a pantywaist" (*Refresh, Refresh* 43). The father's challenge to his son's manhood by calling him a "pantywaist," a person who is weak and/or effeminate, clarifies the father's expectations of Justin and establishes the father's ignorant, sexist, and stereotypical standards he holds for his son. And when they reach "the place where the grass me[ets] the trees" (*Refresh, Refresh* 43), and they cross the threshold into the woods, the noise that resembles screaming now sounds more like "a siren signaling the end of the world" (*Refresh, Refresh* 44), only increasing Justin's anxieties and motivates him to want to "silence[,]...hate[,]...and fear[the screaming]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 44) because of the fear it instills within him. His father eventually leads Justin from a conceptual and literal place of uncertainty to clarity when he shows Justin the "four-prong mule deer…tangled in [their] barbed-wire fence[,]" which he now directs Justin "to kill" as if he were telling him to throw "a knuckleball[,]...fix[] a carburetor[,]...or [tie] a necktie" (*Refresh, Refresh* 45). All of these activities he lists in the simile are activities that society and his father

typically deem as stereotypically masculine, rites of passages in manhood. His father, however, now equates these masculine, mundane experiences with the mercy killing of a deer. In an effort to groom his son to be comfortable with death and killing, he begins introducing it to Justin at a young age. But suddenly, the memory stops and the narrative skips ahead fifteen years when Justin is twenty seven, and he notices that, since that moment when he was twelve, he has "dislike[d] the woods...hunting…[and his] father" (*Refresh, Refresh* 45). Unlike Josh's desire in "Refresh, Refresh" to follow in his father's footsteps, Justin's father's effort to condition his son to kill at a young age has backfired and traumatized his son, and now, it is this fear and hatred of the woods and his father that becomes a central motivating conflict throughout the story.

Justin's childhood masculine fears resurface when his father unexpectedly calls him to go camping as if Percy intends to imply the timelessness of masculine trauma. Justin's mother "thinks…[s]ome guy time would definitely be healthy" (*Refresh, Refresh* 45). Even as his father speaks with Justin on the phone, his voice rises "to a manly pitch reserved for taverns and locker rooms" as he tells Justin that they can "drink some beers and raise some hell" before finally admitting that he couldn't "remember the last time [they]...really *talked*" (*Refresh, Refresh* 45). What surprises Justin's father as much as Justin receiving the phone call is that Justin agrees to go camping with him. Justin's father must clarify that Justin's mother thought it would be a good idea to call him because it would be a sign of weakness to acknowledge that he wishes to spend time with his son, no less a son so different than he is. There is also a superficial, stereotypical rhetoric and tone that his father uses when speaking with his son, using phrases like "guy time," and "drink beers," and "raise…hell" as if they must do these things to justify the

desire to spend time with each other. It would be too unusual and uncomfortable for them to simply spend time together to talk; yet the subtext of his dialogue reveals a much more sensitive and regretful tone when Percy italicized how they haven't "really *talked"* in the way that he has wanted to for so long, but does not have the vocabulary to do so. Justin "surprises himself" (*Refresh, Refresh* 45) and his father by agreeing to go camping with his father because his father has never really understood Justin. For instance, Justin's father, for years, has been "trying to figure out what [a software developer] meant," (*Refresh, Refresh* 46) which is Justin's profession. In addition, his father does not "consider [Justin's profession to be]…an honest way to make money" because his father "had not gone to college" and did not even know "what the [i]nternet *was"* and "what exactly a computer *did*" (*Refresh, Refresh* 46). His father' Luddite approach to technological advancements is merely indicative of his more troglodytic beliefs that anything he "doesn't understand, he normally labels worthless and sweeps aside with his fist and a few select words" (*Refresh, Refresh* 46). As they drive to the campsite, Justin attempts to explain more of his job to his father, whose "knuckles [only] grow[] whiter at the steering wheel…[with] confusion" (*Refresh, Refresh* 46). The father begins to establish a pattern of behavior that highlights his potential fear of what he cannot understand, things that are new and foreign. It is this fear of what he does not or cannot know that parallels the son's fear of the unknown later, which culminates and contributes to the unification of father and son at the end of the story. On the car ride, Justin "change[s] the subject to one [his father] would enjoy[:]" his dog Boo, a lab/retriever his father "had been training…obsessively" and a relationship of which Justin seems to feel "something like jealousy" (*Refresh, Refresh* 48). Justin desperately seeks his father's

approval, love, and respect, but he is unwilling to change simply to become something his father can "understand[,]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 46) someone who has "obedience and hunting…[so] they…grow up right" (*Refresh, Refresh* 47), like his father's dog Boo. This quality, however, is ironically not unlike his father's unwillingness to change or compromise; Justin's fear of what lurks in the dark, in the woods, and his father's fear of what he cannot understand unknowingly begin to unite them in fears of uncertainty. They are more alike than either knows this early in the story. It is therefore appropriate that Percy begins to parallel the father and son's descent into these literal and figurative uncertainties through the natural space around them as they approach the campsite, when "the sagebrush g[i]ve[s] way to juniper and pine trees" and "the heat [dissipates], replaced by a pure cool air that ma[kes] breathing feel like drinking water" (*Refresh, Refresh* 48). This transformation of the environment surrounding the characters is executed in a similar way and for a similar reason as seen in the memory Justin had when he was twelve. There are various types of rural environmental thresholds crossed, and with each crossing, the characters move closer to transformational benchmarks both personally and interpersonally.

Justin's father asserts his masculinity through the natural environment when they arrive at the campsite, a spot to which his father claims as "his own" (*Refresh, Refresh* 48) because he is a "creature of habit" (*Refresh, Refresh* 48), they find "something else entirely" (*Refresh, Refresh* 48): a "man [who] ha[s] been dead a long time" (*Refresh, Refresh* 49). The father expects to arrive at a location in which he feels comfortable because he knows it well, so much so that he is described as a "creature" as if part of the land as well. Percy even uses the word "habit" to emphasize the father's comfort with

routine and to highlight a correlation between the father and other animals of habit rather than humans. This dehumanizing characterization of the father becomes important later in the story with the threat of an external force in the woods. The dead body is also described as a "cut[] of meat" being eaten by the "vultures and the coyotes and the flies and the worms[,]" which worry his father enough to recognize that "this is bad" (*Refresh, Refresh* 49). But not enough to call the police yet: "What's the rush?" his father says, and agrees to call the next day. The most frightening aspects of this situation for them stokes both of their fears; Justin's fear of the uncertainty in the woods since he was forced to kill a deer and his father's fear of the uncertainty of what he doesn't expect or know, like his typical camping spot having been desecrated by an unknown force. Justin and his father must contend with resisting allowing their fears of the unknown to overcome their facades of masculine stoicism so as to not appear weak. Even beneath his father's "grimace[,]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 51) the same grimace he had while riding an eighteen-speed bike Justin and his mom had given to him on his birthday that he "stripped" down to one gear to prove his strength, Justin "fe[els] as if [he has] shrunk a good five inches, as if [his] chest hair and muscles [have] receded—and [he] bec[o]me[s] seventeen all over again" (*Refresh, Refresh* 51). His father's desire to enforce and embody stereotypical heteromasculine characteristics emasculates and devolves his son into a scared and insecure teenager who simply wants to please his father, but fails.

The natural setting erodes from a familiar place for the father to a land that reminds his father of his own frailty and mortality when Boo trots over to them with a "femur bone" stuck to "a strip of denim" (*Refresh, Refresh* 52). Justin is scared and attempts to interpret his father's emotions, but his "emotions [were] masked from [him,]

hidden behind his beard…a detached expression" (*Refresh, Refresh* 52). The father's beard, a symbol of masculinity, obfuscates Justin's ability to determine his father's reaction, which continues to frustrate Justin into wanting to "shake…and hit…and hug him at once" (*Refresh, Refresh* 52). His father's detachment and Justin's inability to clarify his father's feelings encourages him to want to try even more to seek his father's approval and discover "what was going on...inside of [his father]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 53). For this reason, that night, he does not tell his father that, "in the absolute darkness[,]" Justin hears "footsteps…a sort of undersound, beneath the rain[,]" and he smells the "wet order of rabbit brush, a smell [he] will always associate with barbed-wire fences, with dying, with fear" (*Refresh, Refresh* 53). The callback to the memory of when he was twelve indicates Justin's deep-seated fear of what he cannot see in the darkness and his desire to retreat inward, literally "inside the musty the musty tent" (*Refresh, Refresh* 52) instead of going outside to confront the unknown at this juncture. This action proves to be a smart intuition; in the morning, they discover "a boot [in their campsite]…torn and discolored, as if it had passed through the digestive tract of a large animal" (*Refresh, Refresh* 53). For ambiguous reasons, Justin does not tell his father about the noises in the middle of the night. Maybe this is because he fears revealing his fear to his father. Maybe it is because he fears witnessing his father's own fear. Although he claims to want to know his father's emotions at various stages throughout the story, what may also motivate Justin to avoid sharing his own fears is knowing that his father can, in fact, be scared and what that would mean for both the illusory image he has of his father and their relationship. The environment begins to change with the increase of potential threats during their camping trip: "a small fire[,]…tree…tops like diseased fangs[,]...two dozen

crows and magpies and buzzards[,]…rusty [bird] voices[,]…buzzards…hissing…[with] claws" (*Refresh, Refresh* 55). Interestingly, many of these descriptions are also the descriptions used to develop a threatening setting in "The Cold Boy," a story explicated later in this book, and in both stories, the threatening environments are used to expose internal truths of the characters. During these threatening moments, Percy juxtaposes the two characters' reactions to the threats purposefully. On one hand, the father maintains the ability to remain "so natural and fearless…unaware or unafraid of any danger" (*Refresh, Refresh* 54, 55); on the other hand, Justin does "not feel nearly so comfortable. Add to this the [first] dead man wandering through [his] mind like a tumor…and you have a hunter who hardly [knows] which end of the rifle to point away from his body" (*Refresh, Refresh* 54-55). But the characters' reactions change when they find yet another dead body, but this body is "fresher than the other" (*Refresh, Refresh* 55). The short story is told through Justin's first person point-of-view, which reveals Justin's fears. There is no telling, at this exact moment, whether the father actually feels scared until he finally admits that he is "officially creeped" and agrees to "go home now" (*Refresh, Refresh* 56). Now both characters are both admittedly scared, exposing that the father's initial apparent grace in the face of danger, a Hemingwayesque stoicism, is simply the surface of his character. This might be one of the major differences between Percy and those other writers who are a part of a hypermasculine tradition: a willingness to be vulnerable around other males, which Percy doesn't simply exploit, but instead, uses to humanize the men and present an alternate way of responding to fear.

The natural environment finally reaches an apex of danger to their lives and masculinity when they hear "a deep groan" (*Refresh, Refresh* 56) in the woods. Suddenly,

Boo rushes after the sound and vanishes. Despite the father's pleas for him to return and the father's earlier comments about obedience, the dog does “not acknowledge him” (*Refresh, Refresh* 56), another attack upon the father's masculinity. The two guess at what it is: a “bear” or even “something else” (*Refresh, Refresh* 56, 57); but they do not ultimately know. So this uncertain conflict of ambiguous origins begins to attack both characters' subconscious insecurities:

> For a long time, over the noise of the river, [they] could hear the branches snapping, the bushes rustling, Boo barking. Then a silence set in that in this deep shadowed canyon seemed too silent. (*Refresh, Refresh* 56)

Because the threat is not concrete, it is unseeable, it is unknowable, it is as if the forest swallows Boo, and that the forest itself becomes the threat. Unable to find Boo, they agree to return to their now ransacked campsite for the time being where Justin's dad does not “want to talk about” what happened (*Refresh, Refresh* 57). Justin pleads with his dad to leave the campsite, but his father refuses to leave “without Boo” (*Refresh, Refresh* 58). It is at this moment that his father's unwillingness to leave his dog behind begins to seem as if the father has symbolically associated the dog with Justin. He has already likened taking care of the dog to “raising a child” as mentioned already. He has shown more emotion to the dog than he has his own son as if expressing his emotions to an animal is not a sign of weakness or effeminateness because it is not technically a male human. After eating, they attempt to find Boo again in the woods, but all they find is the place where “Boo's paw prints end[,]...[a]nd [where] something else takes them over” — prints that are described as “vaguely human” (*Refresh, Refresh* 59, 60). Justin is “not surprised. [He is] beyond surprised” and “imagine[s]…the ghost of a yelp still lingering in the air”

(*Refresh, Refresh* 59). Justin's uncertainty exceeds the threshold of surprise. Percy's potential ecological threat moves into cryptozoological territory, a Freudian uncanny, "vaguely human" creature from the forest that has come to kill them for potentially not being strong enough, not being man enough, to destroy their very existence and make them a part of the environment that is threatening them like all the men who has been killed before they arrived. In fact, through this perspective, the woods may be allegorical for masculinity itself, a rugged landscape in which men attempt to prove their masculinity, achieve their manhood, but fail or die trying as seen with the littered ground with vaguely male bodies. Nothing can survive, even animals that humans hold sacred. In the heat of the moment, a six-point mule deer comes crashing through the trees, alarming them more than they already were. Although they came to this place to camp and hunt, they raise their rifles, and Justin recalls the "deer tangled in barbed wire" again when he was twelve, and he considers firing, but Justin does not "have it in [his] heart" to kill the deer, "and apparently neither [does his] father" (*Refresh, Refresh* 59). Now both father and son agree to not killing the deer. It becomes less important for them to prove their masculinity and more important for them to survive: this is the paradox of masculinity. And immediately after lowering their rifles, the forest…take[s] a deep breath[,]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 60) and they hear a "tinkling noise" and find Boo's bloody "nylon collar [hanging] from a tree branch…like a grotesque Christmas ornament" hanging too high for them to grab (*Refresh, Refresh* 60). Boo's collar is compared to an ornament used on the traditional Christian family holiday that celebrates the birth of their savior, which subverts everything about the holiday. Boo is not saved or resurrected, their familial bond is aloof and rooted in resentment, and they are mourning a death instead of a birth among

many trees instead among one tree, trees that have become part of the threatening force that seeks to take their lives. Justin imagines someone finding his "blood" and "bones…in a nearby pile, broken, with all the marrow sucked from them" (*Refresh, Refresh* 60) as if the forest or beast within the forest has extracted the very life-force within him. Justin, consequently, feels "small and vulnerable[,]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 61) as he imagines horror scenarios of "humpbacked creatures covered in hair" and his father proposes "Bigfoot" (*Refresh, Refresh* 61) as possibilities. The origin of their fears at this moment seems to be from not knowing what it is that has killed Boo and the other men.

The environment moves the father and son to a place of physical vulnerability and, consequently, into emotionally vulnerable territory. In the fear of the moment, Justin consoles his father, and they are finally able to understand each other (*Refresh, Refresh* 62) before leaving the forest. Without warning, his father "explosively, wretchedly…sob[s]" (*Refresh, Refresh* 61). This is the "first time" that Justin has "seen him cry[,]" and so, Justin puts his "arm around his shoulder and dr[a]w[s his father] against him—and he [is] utterly overcome" (*Refresh, Refresh* 61). Justin's father reaches catharsis because this scenario has threatened his physical well-being through his ultimate fear: uncertainty, both with the creature that is killing people and also through the obscuring woods, woods he initially claimed as his own and knew so well. The creature also killed his dog, which he associated with the potential symbolic death of his son. From up in the canyon, "a low-throated groan, followed by another, closer by, like a strange series of vapors released from the earth" sound and incited the raising of their "rifles before [them], aiming at nothing and at everything" (*Refresh, Refresh* 62). When his father turns to look at Justin, his "hollow-eye[s]" voiced what his father could "never

voice out loud…For once [they] understood each other" (*Refresh, Refresh* 62). If the woods adopt the meaning of an allegorical masculinity, Justin and his father recognize that it is the behaviors, societal expectations, and unachievable standards of masculinity itself at which they should set their sights.

The paradoxical woods, although dangerous and threatening, is the very thing that harbors an entity that forces the father into a vulnerable territory and forces Justin into a place to better understand that the father does love him even if he cannot "voice" it in the way that he expects. Despite the woods' threatening, the natural space itself is not threatening. It is instead the creature in it, unlike anything Justin's father remembers. His father considers it "his" camping and hunting spot as if he possesses is, so the story also raises questions concerning the preservation of rural fantasies instilled in civilization. There is a fetishizing of the rural landscapes, hunting, finishing, and living a rugged life among males. Consequently, instead of using the woods merely as a backdrop to the story, Percy personifies a part of the setting as a means to disillusion the central male characters regarding their rugged, rural fantasies, to force them into uncomfortable circumstances that challenge their very manhood, and to offer commentary on the very nature and effects of heteromasculinity.

Ecospecters of Preservation: "The Cold Boy"

In Benjamin Percy's next story "The Cold Boy" from his most recent book of short stories titled *Suicide Woods* (2019) pushes the development of the threatening landscape like "The Woods" in that the entire setting—the pond, the snow, the crows—want to harm Ray, the central male character. His solitary existence is complicated when he reluctantly agrees to help his sister Helen watch her "seven…or…six" (*Suicide Woods*

4) year old child, who remains unnamed throughout the story, while she enjoys a cruise with a new love interest. Superficially, the natural environment is threatening, as established in the very first paragraph of the story. Aside from the unforgiving cold and ice, “hundreds” of omnipresent crows “make…strange music” with their “rusty voices” as they “claw at bark[,]” and “last year's cornstalks fang through the snow” as the personified cold “rises through [Ray's] soles[,]...creeping up his legs, into his chest, so that his heart feels frosted with tiny white crystals” (*Suicide Woods* 3). However, as the story progresses, it becomes apparent that the threatening environment is not simply acting as a deterring force against Ray's efforts, but also as a model for personal, environmental, and self-preservation.

Ray is first depicted as literally and figuratively frigid, initially standing on a frozen pond in the cold at the end of two sets of footprints in the snow leading from his house to his current location; “yet he is alone on the ice” (*Suicide Woods* 3). He has lived alone in the “ranch [that]...sits fifty yards away” from the partially frozen pond (*Suicide Woods* 3), and so the imprint of a second set of footprints not only foreshadows the tragic drowning of his nephew, but it also initially indicates an ominous reminder of the absence of meaningful relationships Ray's life, which, like the cold, has left his heart “frosted with tiny white crystals.” He is isolated in a location in which he “runs his taxidermy business” (*Suicide Woods* 3). Similar to “The Language of Elk” in which Pete is also a taxidermist, Ray merges both the natural—wild animals and pets—with the unnatural—artificial parts he orders online (*Suicide Woods* 11) in order to create the illusion of life and animation. Later in the story, Percy reveals that Ray experienced a series of losses and rejections:

> [W]hen his father died of a stroke…when he sent his mother to the nursing home after she lost her mind and ability to cook and clean…when his girlfriend of ten years—Tanya—said to hell with him if he didn't want kids, didn't want to get married, didn't really want to spend time with her except the occasional buffet dinner followed by a quick and dirty screw. His sister had always called him cold. (*Suicide Woods* 11-12)

After the death of the only other male mentioned in Ray's life, there is a series of women listed after this whom he seems to fail in various ways—fails to live up to the expectations of what a son, man, and brother should do or be. He resists caring for his mother in the final stages of her life. The descriptions of his relationship with his ex-girlfriend do not include any type of intimacy, only physical and superficial connections, despite the ten years they were together. His sister labels him as cold because she does not understand why her brother maintains aloof relationships both emotionally and physically. It, therefore, becomes clear why he may live in a more geographically remote and cold location: to avoid rejection, disappointment, and vulnerability. Thus, Ray is a character who seeks to preserve a childlike vulnerability and innocence, a validation-seeking part of himself that Ray inevitably fails to preserve throughout this story.

Keenly aware of global warming and climate concerns in the 21st century, Percy develops a setting that not only symbolizes Ray's own struggles toward self preservation, but also a social and global effort toward preserving the environment:

> The pond is big, close to two acres, with three holes melted into its ice from the warm springs beneath. The holes are big enough to drive a car through, the ice at their rims gradually thinning into a gray sliver that gives way to the dark water at

> their centers. (*Suicide Woods* 3)

The pond's thinning," the "holes" in the ice, and the "warm springs" beneath the ice all point to an ecological transformation that ultimately impacts Ray while babysitting his sister's child. His nephew was "supposed to be watching cartoons" while Ray was working toward inserting a "glass eye into [a] deer's empty socket" for his client, Jacob Henderson. Instead of preserving the life of his nephew, Ray decides to focus on preserving the dead because taxidermy does not require vulnerability or forming relationships with living people. Had Ray "only looked up from his work[,]" (*Suicide Woods* 4) he may have been able to save his nephew from falling through the ice. There are many gazes in this scene: Ray not "looking" up from his work, the boy who was supposed to be "watching" cartoons, the deer's "eye" being placed in an "empty socket." As Ray attempts to futilely restore false sight into a dead animal, he negligently assumes his nephew is "watching" what he should be, and ironically, Ray fails to see what is most important. In addition, Ray's nephew's eyes are described as the "blue-black color of the dirty snow piled at the edges of the highway" (*Suicide Woods* 4) in an effort to establish the parallel between the child and the environment, and the description is not indicating a pure, uncorrupted environment. Through the child's eyes, nature is relegated to the margins for infrastructure, literally pushed to "the edges of a highway[,]" and made "dirty." If the child and the natural space surrounding him are linked symbolically, this description may imply that the corruption of natural spaces for the sake of industrialization impacts the youth, the future generation, more than any other group of people. In fact, the warming and thinning of the ice may arguably be the factor that

causes Ray's nephew to get “trapped beneath the ice, his tiny body floating there, turning around and around” (*Suicide Woods* 4) in the pond.

Ray would rather sacrifice his own life than experience familial confrontation, indicative of his tendency to avoid relationships in general as seen when his nephew falls into the pond. Ray approaches the edge of the water and senses that there is no rush to call the police or his sister as he suspects by now his nephew “is dead—has to be” (*Suicide Woods* 4). Ray has some unusual initial responses to the emergency. Instead of rushing to call the police, Ray reflects on how his sister will react. He would rather dive into the cold water below and have the personified water “squeeze the breath from him” rather than confront “his sister” and the “hate he imagines twisting in her face” (*Suicide Woods* 4), which indicates a concerning family dynamic that motivates Ray to avoid moments of confrontation. Subsequently, he feels “mixed-up with anger and regret and sadness”: anger for failing to save the boy, regret for not having protected the boy, and sadness for the loss of the child's life. Each one of these emotions also reflects his own feelings as displayed through his past familial and romantic relationships. In the moment, Ray even wishes he “could trade places with the boy” and “turn back time” (*Suicide Woods* 4) so that he could do things differently. If the boy, therefore, allegorically represents Ray as a child or the repressed childlike part of Ray's identity, the drowning of the boy in the lake offers Ray the gift of both trading places with the boy, because he is and was the boy, and also a way of turning back time as in the next moment, “as if summoned” (*Suicide Woods* 5), his nephew “appears below him…his face a white smear rising out of the darkness” (*Suicide Woods* 5). Suddenly, “his joints feel rusted” like the crows voices in the beginning, his boots feel “rooted to the ice[,]” and the “ice

moans…[and] threatens to open up and swallow him" (*Suicide Woods* 5) during the rescue of the boy. Although the personified setting, moaning and swallowing, attempts to teach Ray lessons about various types of preservation, it must arguably also be dangerous in order to teach such lessons. Percy forces Ray to face his deepest fears to recognize them and ironically utilize his greatest strengths. For Ray, he is now in a physically precarious and vulnerable position. Later, the setting will also require Ray to face emotional vulnerability, his most challenging obstacle. And based upon the widening ice cracks below Ray, the danger of attempting to symbolically rescue himself as an adult jeopardizes both his childhood vulnerability and his current adult self. Right when he "reaches out blindly" for the boy as the "slushy perimeter crumbles" (*Suicide Woods* 5), the boy's "small white hand clamp[s] onto his" (*Suicide Woods* 5), and he miraculously pulls his nephew out of the pond, whose clothes are now "bleeding water[,]" (*Suicide Woods* 6) and he "strangles [the boy] into a hug" (*Suicide Woods* 6). The near death experience has rendered the boy a part of the landscape, and vice versa. His face is a "white smear" similar to the snow, his body is no longer bleeding blood but instead "bleeding water," and Ray's ironic strangling of his nephew into a hug indicates a violence associated with the love and vulnerability that Ray fears when forming relationships. This was Ray's "chance to get to know his nephew, to be a good uncle" (*Suicide Woods* 7). But love demands vulnerability, and vulnerability always precedes grief and pain. After performing CPR and "calling down favors from a god he doesn't believe in," (*Suicide Woods* 6) his nephew awakens, coughs up water, and doesn't speak a word to Ray. The boy is now forever changed, forever cold, and forever a part of the icy landscape, unable to communicate.

Ray's nephew is metaphorically linked to the natural environment when described "as still as a sculpture…[and his] skin [is] white, blue around the edges, like some tidewater mollusk scraped from its shell…A smell comes off his—the smell of the pond, of mud and algae and fish" (*Suicide Woods* 7). Now that his nephew has essentially transformed into a part of the environment, Ray takes an interest and grows more concerned for him as if Percy implies that the environment is as important as or more important than our children and family, and this idea should encourage humans to begin to grow more concerned about the preservation of the natural world in order to ensure the preservation of human life. Ray cares more than before, and yet, he still refuses to bring the nephew to the hospital because "he imagines all the problems that will follow[,]" (*Suicide Woods* 7) and worries what his sister will say. Therefore, Ray still acts negligently for the sheer fear of what he might discover, who "they" might blame, and what he'll be required to do as a result. So in this way, Percy criticizes society for not acting for fear of the consequences. Ray may also be concerned about what he may discover about himself if he allows the professionals to examine the boy, requiring Ray to be open and honest about his past and insecurities. But at this juncture in the story, Ray is unwilling to take this step. The only food that the boy will eat is food that is cold, like ice cream. Ray also creates snow cones using snow and maple syrup. When Ray exits the house to acquire more snow, the "cold greets him…[and] shape[s] the snow into drifts, like the sluggish waves of some frozen ocean…[while] the crows…overhead…circl[e]" (*Suicide Woods* 8-9). The crows are motifs throughout the story, acting as harbingers of a failed attempt to reconcile ecological corruption and self destruction. They are omnipresent, even when the boy begins to eat his snowcone and Ray must stop him

because he spots a black crow feather on “the spoon” that is “inches from the boy's mouth” (*Suicide Woods* 9). In response, the boy “tightens his face into a hateful expression, hissing” (*Suicide Woods* 9) as Ray had taken food away from a starved animal. In the middle of the night, Ray finds “every window in the house open” with a “sense that something might escape him, the boy” (*Suicide Woods* 9). And in the morning, Ray finds that his nephew seems to have peed the bed, but upon closer scrutiny, he finds that the wetness isn't urine; it's “pondwater” (*Suicide Woods* 10). The boy's characteristics and behaviors—the opening of windows, the hissing, and the substitution of urine for pondwater—are beginning to redefine and blur the boundaries between human and nonhuman, outside and inside, and natural and unnatural. Ray's nephew becomes the queer ecological threshold like Sonora in “The Langauge of Elk” through which Ray learns and transforms. This is the reason why Ray fears the boy and that he may escape Ray, because the boy already appears to belong to the natural environment, an ecological specter.

Ray’s job as a taxidermist symbolically parallels the boy's identity. Both are types of transitions between two realms. Taxidermy bridges the gap between life and death, natural and artificial. Even the materials he uses exist in both of these spaces. He receives the pets from their owners and stores them in a walk-in freezer. He orders some parts from online stores: “claws and jawsets and tongues[,]” and the chemicals he orders from a specialty store, especially the formaldehyde (*Suicide Woods* 11). It's the formaldehyde that helps preserve the animals. It is the formaldehyde that “hangs like an ammonia cloud in [his] house and…pole barn,...his clothes,...his hands and hair. He doesn't notice it, but others do” (*Suicide Woods* 11). It seems especially symbolic that Ray's central conflict is

being unable to preserve his vulnerability, and he also smells of a chemical used to preserve things and uses it to preserve dead animals. He seems to find satisfaction in preserving things that have already died. Like Pete from "The Language of Elk," he makes a living off of creating the illusion of the preservation of life. But as he is working on preserving a dog for a client, he finds a crow in the walk-in freezer that he did not put there (*Suicide Woods* 12). Immediately after finding it, he turns around to find the "boy sit[ting] on a folding chair" (*Suicide Woods* 13). The crow diverts his attention away from preserving death and instead toward preserving life as seen when the boy startles him. At this point, he still would "prefer to lock him in a bedroom or plant him in front of the television" (*Suicide Woods* 13), like he has done before in order to avoid risking vulnerability, but now, Ray appears to be transforming because he decides instead he "must keep him close" (*Suicide Woods* 13). Ray is willing to risk his emotional stability, but only at this point because it is something he feels he "must" do for the well being of him and his sister. However, it is still something Ray had not done before this experience. In this particular moment, too, his discussion and effort to complete his taxidermy work on his client's dog ends, and instead, the conversation moves to discussing the boy and that "Helen will be home soon" (*Suicide Woods* 13). This indicates a clear transformational movement for Ray from the reanimation of death to the responsibility as a human being to contribute to and protect life.

Through Percy's careful use of ecological diction and metaphors, Ray's nephew becomes a figurative specter of ecological preservation. Ray is concerned that his nephew will be unable to function properly in front of his mother when she comes to get him after her trip because he drowned due to Ray's neglect. Actually, Ray is almost certain that the

boy "seems capable of nothing, seems to belong to another world" entirely (*Suicide Woods* 13):

> [T]he boy appears to cry constantly, though not out of pain or sadness…It is as though he is leaking. Maybe melting. Spilling over as if some secret spring inside him has been tapped…The damp impressions of his fingertips can be found throughout the house…[H]e leaves behind footprints, the carpet damp and decorated with half-moon designs…He won't eat anymore…The boy sleeps most of the day...his features seeming smeared over, as if seen through a rainy window. (*Suicide Woods* 14)

Each description of the boy is associated with a word that is also used to describe the elements of nature or weather, or associated with something ecological: "leaking," "melting," "spilling," "damp," "tapped," "half-moon," "smeared," "rainy." Beyond the boy's personality and behavior, his very essence appears to be transforming as well as seeping into the natural environment, becoming the natural space. After grooming himself before his sister arrives, Ray exits the bathroom, his "damp hair instantly freezes[,]" (*Suicide Woods* 15) only to find the front door open and the boy missing. The mention of his hair freezing is a subtle indication that Ray, too, is beginning to also transform, literally assimilating, like the boy, into the weather. With only a little time before his sister arrives, he slips on his boots and runs outside into the cold without a jacket. The sun is bright, and "[t]he sun shines…its…blurred…light...[w]ith the lunar quality of winter light" as if he were "on the moon"(*Suicide Woods* 15). The familiar natural space is suddenly described as if a foreign location not in this world, similar to the description of the boy mentioned above: who also "seems to belong to another world."

Consequently, either Ray has changed, the environment has changed, or Ray's perspective on the environment.

In the next paragraph, the word "blur" is used yet again to describe the "blur of color" the boy appears to be as he runs toward the pond in the "blown snow that swirls all around him" (*Suicide Woods* 15). Percy intentionally blurs images, lines, and thresholds, especially separating Man from his environment. During his effort to reach the boy, Ray follows a line of "[d]ead crows…[h]is boot crunches over" them (*Suicide Woods* 15). They "litter the yard—killed by the cold[;]" more and more, they fall, "crashing painfully against his shoulder, where [they] will leave…bruise[s] as if [their] color was contagious" (*Suicide Woods* 15). The crows are falling from the sky as if an ecological apocalypse has begun. The line of dead crows leads directly to the child on the pond as if to imply that this catastrophe begins with the child. Either Ray must return to his childhood and confront his vulnerable and innocent self as a boy, or the boy is representative of every child of the generation on which the fate of the environment depends. Numb from the cold, unable to feel his face, Ray reaches the pond, barely able to see the boy who is now "ghosting in and out of view…[until t]he boy is gone[, s]wallowed by the pond or erased by the wind" (*Suicide Woods* 16). As expected, the boy becomes lost to the treacherous environment around him, the pond or the wind or both. Earlier in the story, Ray mentions that the only time he cries is when "the fumes" of the formaldehyde "make him weep" when he opens the bucket (*Suicide Woods* 11). After the boy vanishes, Ray finally allows himself as an adult to become vulnerable when he "hugs his arms around his chest" and his "eyes water, the tear trails freezing on his cheeks"

(*Suicide Woods* 16), leading to his eyes, like the crows on the ground leading to the holes in the ice on the pond.

The parallel between the environment and the man emphasizes that he must mourn the loss of his childhood vulnerability, and that he recognizes he must not allow himself to grow cold and detached from others in the snow around him that creates a "white void" in which he feels "lost and overwhelmed in its changelessness. He knows he will vanish…if he doesn't depart this place[,]" and attempts once again to form meaningful relationships. The only way he can save himself is by returning to the place he began, by following "the trail of footprints," unlike the footprints from the beginning of the story which he now knows is his own, as they are the "only indication[s] that the boy ever existed" in the "endlessly cold" environment (*Suicide Woods* 16). To save himself, Ray accepts that he cannot preserve the past, his lost childhood innocence and vulnerability, but he can preserve the relationships around him instead of attempting to resurrect and artificially reincarnate the ghosts of the past. In this way, Percy constructs a natural environment that, unlike the rural setting in "The Woods," is entirely threatening, but only as a means to caution the central male against isolating himself from those who are most important: "[n]o man is an island," wrote Donne.

CHAPTER 4: BLURRING BOUNDARIES FOR A REIMAGINED FUTURE

The 21st Century social milieu is divisive and increasingly partisan. Tell a liberal friend that you are a supporter of the armed forces and the police, and you may be labeled a fascist or a racist. Explain to your conservative neighbor that Black Lives Matter, that the globe is warming, and that you support a woman's right to control her own body; you may be labeled an anti-American snowflake with no moral compass. It seems abundantly clear that the gap between people is ever widening so far that we may fail to see those on the other side as clearly as we once did.

For this reason, Benjamin Percy is intriguing both personally and literarily. He paradoxically embodies both philosophical sides. I had the pleasure of learning from and speaking with Ben over the course of the NM Writers Conference. He enjoys the rugged outdoors, whiskey and beer, and the horror genre. He is also a great listener, an environmental advocate, and a sensitive human who respects the needs of others and discourages the mistreatment of all groups of people. He has even written a script for a coming-of-age film about a group of girls, in films August 12th of 2022. Therefore, his writing reflects the very principle his own life embodies: balance. It is novel to read contemporary short fiction that includes the masculine qualities of the 20th century and the progressive sensitivity to topics like gender, race, class, and identity politics in the 21st century. Percy, himself, is Timothy Morton's mesh barrier incarnate for the 21st Century.

Percy's short fiction is a type of theory, a body of work that offers a new way of thinking about heterosexual masculinity in the 21st Century in an ever polarizing America. His stories are proof of the "powerful ways in which understandings of nature

inform discourses of sexuality, and also the ways in which understandings of sex inform discourses on nature" (Mortimer-Sandilands 2-3). Natural spaces and the wilderness have historically been linked to heterosexual masculinity, but Percy is changing this relationship from "a site for the enactment of…heteromasculinity" (Mortimer-Sandilands 3) to an ambiguous space where men learn instead of perform. This type of fiction thus "calls into question heteronormativity itself as part of its advocacy around issues of nature and environment" (Mortimer-Sandilands 5). Benjamin Percy develops nuanced, less anthropomorphic depictions of the landscape while maintaining a deep understanding of the various ways in which white, male heterosexuality is changing and must change.

I hope that this book sparks debate in both the creative and academic realms regarding what we deem as "natural," relationships between humans and the environment, the identity of the short story, the boundaries between academic and creative, how writers write stories, and how we think about stories. Percy is a white, heterosexual male writer who is constructing narratives that many critics have been attempting to subtextually find in Hemingway's work. He proves that there is an intermediary space, there is overlap, and there are ways to maintain the cherished rugged characteristics of the past with the culturally sensitive and progressive ways of the future.

One definitive result I have gleaned from my research and examinations is that we ought to read more writers, different writers of varied backgrounds, races, religions, identities with different geographical and cultural origins who challenge boundaries. However, we cannot entirely exclude writers like Percy who, although through an ignorant and superficial examination, seems to embody the very system that seeks to impose rigid structures and categories. Instead, Percy offers an unflinching, honest,

nuanced, and sensitive portrayal of white heterosexual men, and he further presents models of behavior through a mutually important object: the environment. In fact, Percy's short stories may be an appropriate, figurative acclimation to the foreign waters of literary genres, an ideal "transition" for readers, "a halfway house in between" (Mentz 294) conceptual and literary landscapes: between novel and poem, between myth and reality, between the ambiguous and the concrete. Through the ambiguous form of the short story, Percy develops characters that learn through the fictional environments, ideally paralleling the reader's own transformation through the short story that acts as a type of generic literary landscape housing a rhetorical territory.

One of the more interesting parts of Benjamin Percy's life is that he has written in almost every genre imaginable: novels, non-fiction craft books, film scripts, short fiction, horror, suspense, literary, adventure, and more. This is a quality that I, too, have emulated in my academic and creative experiences. As an MFA graduate and a PhD. student, I have be required to both appraise and construct fiction. In my life, I have attempted to bridge the gap between the creative and academic spaces, and I believe that I have found the permeable threshold in this book of both academic and creative work. Consequently, in Chapter 5, I will include both published and new short fiction that I have written in which I attempted to continue certain characteristics and elements of Hemingway and Percy and yet, like Percy, contribute my own perspective and style to the tradition.

So let us take a lesson from the intersection of literature, ecology, gender, Hemingway, and Percy. To recontextualize the end of Benjamin Percy's short story "Refresh, Refresh," let us finally "answer the fierce alarm[,]…put our pens to paper[,]

and make our" (*Refresh, Refresh* 20) past, present, and future generations proud by finding a middle ground.

CHAPTER 5: SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

As mentioned in the last chapter, I have bifurcated literary interests. I write about stories and write stories. This chapter attempts to bridge the gap between academic and creative realms in the spirit of blurring boundaries and merging seemingly mutually exclusive poles of a binary. This chapter also attempts to continue old traditions of writing about men and the environment while contributing something new to the discourse on fiction. Following this brief introduction are four stories that I have personally written, workshopped, polished, and (two) published. I have included these specific stories for many reasons. First, each story, like Hemingway's and Percy's stories, contains a central heterosexual male character wrestling, in some way, with what it means to be a man. The second characteristic each story has is a setting that is important to the transformation of the central male character. However, within each story, I attempt to deviate from the typical ways in which the environment and humans interact and coexist. There are also clear differences between Percy's plot-driven narratives and my character driven stories. I hope, like Hemingway's and Percy's fiction, that they offer new ways of thinking about heterosexual men, the environment, and the relationship between the two.

Introduction to "It's All Fun and Games"

In my first short story "It's All Fun and Games," I wrote about two heterosexual brothers who have always been emotionally close, but not too close. There are perceived threats and dangers in becoming too emotionally vulnerable as men, even as brothers. This story explores one of the ways in which men attempt to conceal this vulnerability: humor. One brother, Mikey, has used jokes as a defense mechanism his whole life for

every uncomfortable situation: protecting his brother, shirking responsibilities, failing academically, and more. Mikey asks his brother in the middle of the night to come help him pack his personal belongings at college many hours away in upstate New York. While they take a literal journey together to the college, there is a figurative journey that their relationship takes and an emotional journey that both Mikey and his brother experience emotionally. Additionally, I began the story with references and metaphors to ice and snow and continued this trend until the end when the ice begins to thaw and crack from the son, a symbolic indication of the transformation taking place within the relationship. Like Percy, the setting is not simply symbolic but also the crucible for change. Unlike Percy, I choose to ground this story in the suburban middle class East instead of the rural Midwest. This is one of the major ways in which my fiction will deviate from Percy's, and I believe there are different masculine anxieties that motivate and paralyze these male characters than Percy's male characters.

"It's All Fun and Games": ***Edited by Benjamin Percy***

One time, while my dad and I were arguing in the cold December air, trying to re-stake the double-life-sized inflatable fallen Santa Claus after an ice storm, my brother Mikey grabbed Santa's plump arm and mimicked a very merry masturbatory act right there on the front lawn while shouting, "Ride this sleigh, baby." Mikey and I fell back into a pile of ice and snow, laughing until we cried. Dad concealed his smile by turning into the wind. Mom, from the second story frosted window of our home, slapped the glass with her fingertips and cranked the window open, yelling her usual, "It's all fun and games, Mikey," because to Mikey, it *was* all fun and games.

So when he arrived home from college in the middle of the night and asked me to take a road trip with him, I agreed. Although we had always been close, there had existed an opaque layer between us, like a pane of fogged glass. I could only see the shadows and shapes of an indefinite, hermetically sealed world, leaving me guessing at what they might mean and who they might be.

“Be quiet,” Mikey whispered. “We have to leave tonight.” He was holding the front door open with the toe of his boot. “We have to leave now.”

“I'm still typing a final paper. It's one in the morning. And it's a six-hour drive,” I said, rubbing my strained eyes.

His jeep growled behind him, spewing smoke that veiled the driveway, the headlamps silhouetting his body in the doorway like a mythical creature from beyond. He was about three inches taller than I was, nearing almost six feet, but the ten to fifteen pounds of weight he had clearly lost over the last semester somehow made him look as if he were standing on stilts. The depths of the hallows of his face and concave cheeks seemed to swallow any suspended light around him. His frenetic black hair appeared unusually sharper, reminiscent of the Czech hedgehogs on the beaches of Normandy, preparing for an assault.

“Don't you still have another week of classes? I know I do.”

“I finished early. And — “ He paused and listened to the sounds in the house, then lowered his voice as if hearing the creak of a bedspring. “I can't carry all my shit back home myself.”

The only other time I had taken a road trip with my brother was when we took a family vacation to Aruba. We had rented an SUV to explore goldmine ruins, but we got

lost and found ourselves at a house with chicken bones hanging from rusted metal clotheslines and an open front door. Mikey suggested going inside to see if there was anything to eat. Luckily, I was driving, but for the rest of the ride, Mikey couldn't stop talking about wishing he had stolen one of those chicken bones for what he called a "memento mori." I didn't have the heart to correct his faux pas.

"I have to finish my essay on Murakami's *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* for my Contemporary Surrealism class."

"God bless you," he said with a raised eyebrow. "Now speak English, get dressed, and let's go."

He turned to leave, but before he did, he paused and stared at Mom's recent home improvement: framed photos of various holidays, birthdays, and events hung on the wall to the right of the front door. Mikey gazed at each photo as if he were a stranger attempting to understand the family dynamics. Almost all of the photos were spaced evenly apart, arranged to form neat rows, except the one photo of the entire family standing in front of the Christmas tree in which Mikey was the only one not smiling. This photo hung slightly too close to another picture of our parents on the beach in Aruba in order to hide one of many spots on the wall where Mikey had punched through the sheetrock. The picture frame was also askew. Before leaving the house, Mikey carefully leveled the frame and said, "Let Mom and Dad sleep. I'll call them later."

When I opened the jeep's passenger door, Mikey was moving wrappers, empty soda bottles, and clothes off the seat and into the back of his car. He cleared just enough

space for my body to sit among the layers of junk, and then he jumped into the driver's seat.

“Hop in,” he said. Only then did I notice Mikey's raw, shredded knuckles wrapped around the steering wheel under the jeep's jaundiced dome light.

“What the hell happened to your hands?” I said.

He took his hands off the steering wheel, held them under the light, and inspected them as if he had forgotten that he'd lost a layer of skin.

“I fell off my skateboard. Took a nasty spill,” he said. “Hurry up and get in.”

“You fell on your knuckles?”

“Would you just get in?”

I sat and settled into the seat with a crunch. “You ever think about cleaning this car?”

“What do you think I just did?” he said. “Now shut up and buckle up, if you can find the belt.”

When we arrived at the Long Island Expressway, he blasted Bob Marley’s 'Everything's Gonna Be Alright.'

“It’s a little loud,” I said.

“You need the volume at the same number of years you've lived.”

It was difficult to sleep with Mikey's singing along to 'No Woman No Cry,' and he replayed it five times before I asked him to turn it off. And he did turn it off. And he stopped singing. Immediately. He was sarcastic and funny, but he wasn't malicious. But even after Mikey turned the music off, it was almost impossible to rest. He used the brakes like morse code. The trip was mostly highway from Long Island to upstate New

York, a straight shot with the exception of a few tolls, and no traffic at one in the morning. But Mikey's brake—gas—brake—gas technique made me want to puke into his empty Funyuns bag. Not to mention the car had the distinct stench of Mikey's spoiled-cabbage-scented farts. My nose adjusted after the first hour, as it always did.

I dozed at some point after the Hutch until I rolled onto something with a crunch, a paper stuffed between the armrest and the seat. It was an essay Mikey had written on "The Wife of Bath" for his Medieval Literature class. The first few pages were littered with red corrections, but no grade. My high school physics teacher used to write the grade on the last page so as to not embarrass students, but we always flipped to the last page anyway. Before I could find the grade, Mikey pulled it out of my hands.

"Give me that," he said, throwing it into the back seat.

"How did you do?" I said.

"That was just a draft. Didn't count."

"How did you do on the final paper?"

"Aced it."

"What's your GPA?"

"Maybe a sixteen, carry the four and a half?"

In middle and high school, Mikey struggled academically. One humid day at the end of his ninth grade year, our parents and his teachers had a meeting. I remember the day because Dad took off from his construction job. It was a big deal when that happened because, as Dad had told us, "There is no such thing as a day off for ironworkers. That's what Tylenol is for." When I asked Dad why he didn't just take Tylenol today, he said, "There isn't enough Tylenol in the world." Mom even made Dad dress in a collared shirt

and tie for the meeting. When I arrived home from school that day, Mom, Dad, and Mikey were in the kitchen. Dad's tie was loosened and thrown over his shoulder. Mom, red-faced, repeated, “It's all fun and games.” Mikey stood, kicked the kitchen chair over, stomped on one of the chair's legs, and cracked it in two sharp halves. “Is this what they want?” he yelled, picking up the stake and turning it on himself as if preparing to drive it through his own diseased heart. “This is all I'm good at, right?” he yelled, while laughing maniacally.

After Mikey had cooled off, I asked him what had happened. He told me that they wanted to give him a lifetime achievement award.

While passing through Watertown, Mikey narrowed his eyes and elongated his neck to look out my window like a starved turtle reaching his head out of his shell for a crumb.

“I met Corin there.”

“Where?” I said, looking out my window.

“At the Apollo. A diner with kick ass sweet potato fries.”

“You two still together?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“She can't take a joke. She likes intellectuals.”

We finally reached the Lattice, N.Y. town line, a small town a half hour away from the Canadian border with a sub-par liberal arts college at the heart of it. The town was so small that some of the buildings on the campus could be seen from its border. It

was the only college to which Mikey had applied. He didn't want to “do the community college thing” that his guidance counselor had suggested. It was considered thirteenth grade at our high school where, Mikey had said, “only drug dealers go for connections and special kids go for interactions.” So Mikey announced that he would leave his future to fate. He went into school, stood in front of the New York State college map outside of his guidance counselor's office, blindfolded himself with a gym towel, spun around four times, and slammed his finger onto the map. After eight or nine attempts of his finger landing on places like NYU and Vassar, it finally landed on Lattice, and he accepted his fate.

“Can we grab something to eat?” I said.

He looked over at me with wide eyes, as if I had asked him to drive the car through a shop window. “I was kind of hoping we could just get my stuff and get out.”

“Don't you think that we — “

“I know, I know. You haven't eaten breakfast, it's 7AM, you've gotten about an hour of sleep because I have a bipolar foot, and you have black lung disease from breathing in my gas chamber of a car.”

“I was going to say I think you should call Mom soon. Tell her where I am. But, yes, all those other things, too.”

He smiled, but didn't laugh. He just slowed the car down and gazed through the windshield as if searching for an address.

“Everything okay?”

He didn't respond. He drove and searched.

“Mikey?”

“We'll stop. Quickly. Let's eat and get out of here. I want to beat the traffic going home.”

We drove over a short concrete bridge wrapped in white Christmas lights and pulled into Kelsey's Pizza where, Mikey said, they made “orgasmic pizza rolls.” They were open twenty three hours a day, seven days a week. Like most college students, Mikey and I could eat pizza at any hour of the day. We stepped inside and sat down at one of the four tables.

“Small place,” I said.

“Most kids take out,” Mikey whispered, ducking his head.

“What's wrong?”

“I don't want to talk to Marco. He doesn't shut up.”

Just then, a tan, middle-aged man from the back of the visible kitchen yelled, “Mikey, how are things?”

Without turning to look at him, Mikey waved his hand in the air and rolled his eyes. “I'm alive, Marco.”

“Mikey, tell me a joke, funny man. Tell me one of your knock-knock jokes. What about the one with the cannibal on the island of missionaries?” Marco guffawed. Then he looked at me and said, “He's the funniest motherfucker I've ever met.”

For some reason, the profanity from a stranger so early in the morning made me wince.

Mikey shook his head. “I can't go anywhere without being recognized.”

Marco approached our table and slapped Mikey on his back. “Mikey's a legend around here.” He quickly looked down at his watch. “Mikey, don't you have class soon?”

“No, Marco, I'm off today.”

“I could have sworn you had an 8AM class. Every time I see you, you complain about how early it is. Am I right?” When the ache of awkward silence was too much to bear, Marco shrugged. “But what do I know, Mikey. I make pizza,” he said, and returned to the kitchen.

That's when Mikey leaned into me and whispered, “I hate when people call me Mikey. Did you know that? Makes me feel like a stupid kid.”

I had only seen this vulnerable version of Mikey a few times before, like the day we euthanized our black lab, Granite, about five years ago. His organs were shutting down. They couldn't find the cause. “Probably cancer,” the vet guessed. Mom couldn't bear to do it. Dad couldn't take a day off from work, so Mikey and I accepted the burden of walking Granite to the vet and placing him on the cold, metal table in the room where pets go to die. “Your dog should see *you* as the last thing he'll see in this world,” the pale vet tech said, moving his dreadlocks from one shoulder to the other. The veterinarian shook his head and said, “One of you should hold his body. He'll collapse after the injection.” I didn't want to look Granite in the eyes when they did it, so Mikey agreed to be the last thing Granite ever saw. I held Granite's warm body and looked away. “Ready?” the vet said. I nodded. Then the injection. Granite exhaled one last groan and sunk into my arms as I pressed his body tightly against mine as if draining all of the remaining air out of an inflatable mattress.

“At least he's not in pain anymore,” the vet tech said.

Mikey didn't move. He sat in silence, staring at Granite's eyes that remained open well after his death.

We ordered pizza rolls and sat back down at the table in silence once again until I said, “Why don't you call Mom to let her know I'm with you?”

Mikey paused for a moment and scratched his chin. “Fine.” He stood, walked outside into the early morning twilight, and pressed the phone to his ear. He stared back at me, then spoke quickly, his breath a wavering veil visible in the cold air.

Marco came to the table and asked if I needed anything.

“No, thanks.”

“Mikey's the funniest guy I know,” he said, walking back to the kitchen.

“I know. He's my brother,” I said under my breath. When I looked toward Mikey, he was gone. Instead, three girls walked in, laughing.

“Marco's Angels! Good to see you, girls,” Marco yelled from the kitchen.

They greeted Marco with half-smiles and a “hello” that sounded more like a “goodbye.” They took a seat in the booth next to mine, glancing over at me, whispering something to each other and laughing.

I was the type of guy who required a more gregarious counterpart at parties, bars, and other social gatherings to blend in, to feel like someone who had something worth saying. I spoke jokes too softly for people to hear. I emphasized the wrong words and rushed punchlines. I forced uncomfortable laughs at others' jokes or laughed at what others didn't find funny. But Mikey always made me feel like someone others wouldn't want to party without. Our whole family knew of my awkwardness. One time, when I was in seventh grade, our entire extended family convened for our annual Christmas dinner, and in the middle of the main course, our alcoholic Uncle Dom pointed at me and slurred, “I hear you have a little fear of public speaking,” but the slur made the word

“public” sound like “pubic.” Everyone erupted into laughter, but Uncle Dom shushed us with a sharp “Shut up, I'm talking.” He continued to point at me with the mashed potato serving spoon and a glass of scotch in the other hand. “I'll break you of that little fear,” he said. “Recite The Lord's Prayer. Do it now!” Mom and Dad didn't say anything. Neither did any of my cousins or grandparents. So I looked at Mikey who was sitting next to Grandma. As soon as he saw my face, he smiled and nodded. And then, he farted. It was loud. It was wet. And it rattled the antique chair's plastic cover under him. In no time, Uncle Dom and the rest of the family scattered from the table with napkins pressed to their noses. Grandpa went to the hall closet to dust off the summer fan to push the rotten cabbage stench out of the living room. Mikey and I stayed in the stench together and laughed until we cried.

After nearly twenty minutes, Mikey was still nowhere to be found. Marco brought the pizza rolls to the table and said, “Enjoy,” with a raised eyebrow at the empty space where Mikey had been sitting. I began to eat. Marco turned to the three girls next to me and said, “It's a rare occasion. You girls never stay to eat.”

“Had we known you'd be working, we would have ordered to go,” one of the girls said with a constrained laugh. She had curly red hair. But it wasn't an orange or strawberry red. It was actually red, the kind only generated in a factory. One of the other girls took off her winter jacket, revealing a tattoo near her clavicle: *Esse quam videri.* The third girl remained bundled and buried in her jacket. Then they began talking about a professor who was an excessively stringent grader, a woman by the name of Dr. Gerber. The name sounded familiar, and then I remembered seeing it on Mikey's marked-up essay in the car, the Medieval Literature instructor.

I walked to the door and peeked outside. Mikey wasn't anywhere to be found. His jeep was still in the parking lot next to the girls' Ford. I sat back down at the table and continued eating.

“You looking for someone?” the tattooed girl said to me, smiling. Her friends were staring and smiling at me too.

My heart pumped so hard I could see it pulse in my eyes. “Aren't we all?” I said, and immediately regretted it because it sounded desperate and hackneyed.

She widened her eyes to the rest of her friends who laughed awkwardly. They returned to their virtual world of likes, swipes, and tweets. The absence of words was filled with the clicking of nails on phone screens, and from the kitchen, the sound of sizzles and steam, and the metal scraping of a brush on a stove top, over, and over. It was enough to drive a man mad with insecurity. But then Mikey returned out of breath. The girls looked up from their phones and began whispering to each other.

“What took you so long?” I said.

“You know Mom. Always worrying. Let's get out of here.”

“But you didn't even eat your pizza roll.”

“I'll take it to go,” he said, glancing over at the girls. “We're leaving.”

They were staring at him. Then the reticent girl who had been bundled in her jacket unburied her mouth and said, “Hey, Mikey,” in a voice like a toe dipping into water to test its temperature.

Mikey didn't respond. He only gave a half-smile without looking at her. I had never seen Mikey half-smile, especially at a girl. It made the smile seem more like a twitch.

When we arrived on campus, the quad was abandoned. Everyone was tucked into heated classrooms and dorms. The rising winter sun filtered through clouds and frosted the benches, stone steps, and grass in a gray gloss that looked more like ash — a scene from a post-apocalyptic film. Mikey was silent while staring up at all of the buildings. He even stopped a few times to simply look around and gently rub the cuts on his knuckles. His breath was barely visible in the air now.

"Are you sure you aren't going to get in trouble for not attending class?"

He turned sharply and stared straight into my eyes. "I told you already." Then he looked down at the ground. "Let's just go to my dorm and get my stuff. My roommate should be at class. Maybe I'll even let you bare-ass his pillow." He half-smiled again. So did I.

We entered Brass Hall and climbed three flights of stairs that reeked of pot and sweat. When we arrived at his room, Mikey quickly erased something with his hoodie sleeve that was written on the mini-whiteboard nailed to his door. "Asshole," he mumbled while entering his room. His roommate's bed was made, his books arranged in alphabetical order on shelves, and all of his clothes were neatly hung in the closet. Mikey's side was bare. Everything was already packed. The bed was stripped. He had three boxes and two suitcases resting next to the bed. The room smelled of artificial lavender, a scent used to cover up something else, something subtle but slightly sour. The only thing not yet packed away was Mikey's laptop on the desk.

"I need your help," Mikey said, pointing to the computer.

This may have been the first moment I had ever heard the word "help" exit his mouth. "What did you say?"

“I realize this is unexpected. And I know you have your own final papers to write. But I need your help. I need you to write a paper for me to prove — “ He wasn't even looking at me while asking. He was staring at the laptop. Then he opened it and turned it on. “You're good at this stuff, writing and reading. You've always been great at it. I'm kind of pressed for time. I need it written. Now. Actually, I needed it written a few days ago. All the directions are online. Here, I'll even show you —”

“Wait, I don't understand. You want me to help you by writing a paper for you that was due days ago? Is this a final exam? You said you finished early.”

“It's easy. I'll show you what she wants. You just need to — “

“If it's so easy, then why don't you just do it yourself?”

“Because this teacher hates me. Anything I write, she fails.”

“I thought you were doing alright in your classes?”

“I'm doing fine.”

“You can't be doing fine if you've been failing her class and need me to write your paper.”

“For Christ's sake, I'm asking for help. When have I ever asked you for a damn thing? I just need you to write this paper. Do it. Please.”

He was right. He had never asked me for anything. Not once in our relationship. In fact, I had never had to ask him for anything. He always just did it. He always knew when I needed him. And he always helped me, without question. And now, here he was, asking me for help, for the first time in our relationship, and I had to tell him, “No.”

“Are you fucking serious? No? You can't write one paper for me? Do you know what this means?”

“No, I don't. In fact, you never tell me anything. Why don't you just tell me why this paper is so important? What the hell is really going on here?”

He paused. Took a deep breath. Checked his watch. Then grabbed his laptop and power cord and shoved them into a box. “Forget it.”

“Is this what happened with Corin? Did she say no, too?”

He walked so close to me that I felt the warmth of his stale breath on my eyes. “Just shut up and carry my shit to the car. Can you at least do that, or do you have a problem with manual labor too?”

“Is this all you're taking?” I said.

“Yes,” he said, stacking the boxes on top of one another and then picking them up. “Just grab the suitcases and bring them down to the car.” He checked his watch again. “Hurry up.”

“What about the bookshelf? What about all your books? Don't you have more than this?”

“I'm leaving the bookshelf. It's shit IKEA furniture.” His voice was matter-of-fact, like he had decided this on his first day of classes.

“Didn't Mom and Dad get you that? Remember the time you jumped off — “

“Can you please just stop talking and grab my shit?” he said, softly.

Mikey wasn't funny anymore.

He left the room, balancing the boxes against his chest, as I tried grabbing the suitcases. But they were heavier than I had thought and more than I could handle. I couldn't even imagine what he had packed — soda, snacks, jokes? This was all I could

think of, all I knew of him, and his jokes weighed more now than ever. After minutes of trying to find the best way to carry both — shoving, pulling, fumbling — Mikey returned.

"What are you doing? I can't even count on you to bring down the suitcases?"

"They're heavy. I can't carry both."

Mikey grabbed one, and I grabbed the other. I stood in the hallway as Mikey looked back inside the room one last time, then he let go of the hinged door with the toe of his boot. The sound of voices and footsteps slowly began to fill the hallway like someone slowly raising the volume of life, and in moments, before we could reach the stairwell, dozens of students crowded the corridor. Everyone slowed and stared at my brother and me, but mostly at Mikey. Some whispered. Some laughed. Some just stared, blank-faced. A tall kid wearing a Knicks jersey yelled, "So close, Mikey!" followed by laughter. A stocky kid with a manbun, a gash on his forehead, and a black eye yelled, "Not laughin' now, you fucking asshole." I turned with a clenched fist, but there were too many students separating us, and the suitcase was growing heavier with each second. A girl scolded the ones who were laughing, and as we approached the stairwell, that same girl who was wearing a Lattice sweatshirt and who resembled the Corin that Mikey had dated and posted on Facebook laid her hand on Mikey's shoulder and mouthed a soft "Michael," but he shook her hand off and barreled ahead of me through the crowd. I couldn't see his face, but from behind him, it felt as if I were holding a part of Mikey's agony in that suitcase. An agony I remembered from so many years ago when Mom had tried to help him with his writing at the dining room table, and Mikey cried and kept me awake all night. It made my stomach ache to hear my brother sob. Even with my head under the pillow, his cries were like distant sirens that left me guessing what had

happened, and to whom. And Mom had always told Mikey and me that, if you hear a siren, you should say a prayer. And so, during those nights, I prayed for my brother, or the boy I knew as my brother, and his invisible wound.

We arrived at the jeep, loaded the suitcases silently, and drove off. The entire time while driving through the parking lot, down the narrow side streets of the town, and past Kelsey's Pizza shop, I only wondered which jokes Mikey planned to tell Mom and Dad to mitigate the news that he had apparently been expelled from college for failing and fighting. When we approached the bridge we crossed coming into the town, Mikey pulled to the side of the road and shut the engine off. We sat there in silence for a long time. I couldn't recall ever being in a space with my brother with this much silence. My stomach felt like a soaked towel being wrung dry.

"Want to hear a joke?" he whispered.

I didn't respond.

"Knock knock,"

I remained silent.

"Knock knock," he repeated, louder than before, looking out the windshield.

I didn't feel like joking. I didn't feel like laughing. I could have gone a lifetime without hearing laughter. And it was only now that I understood Mom's frustrations — not anger, but sadness. Each joke, each laugh the two of us had shared over the years had not been shared. Instead, the very breath from our laughter had been only further fogging the glass between us.

"Knock fucking knock. What the fuck is wrong with you?" he yelled, grabbing the steering wheel and slamming his clenched fists down over and over onto the

dashboard. “It's a joke. You have to answer the fucking door to get the joke, asshole. Answer the fucking door,” he yelled, now turned toward me with his red, clenched fist as if ready to throw it at my head, but he only stared at me with wet eyes.

In the silence, the cracking of the frost and ice on the windshield in the morning sun was barely audible. Mikey unclenched his lacerated fist. We looked each other square in the eyes. He inhaled deeply. He exhaled slowly. The exhale never ended, as if he were purging all of the air in his lungs so he might never speak again, exhausted from years of too much laughter.

Introduction to “Inflammation”

In this next short story “Inflammation,” the central character is wrestling with grief before his friend Nikki dies of an unspecified illness. I purposefully wrote Nikki as a character who could be alive and dying or dead and existing in the story as a projection of the central character’s unresolved and manifested grief. If read with the former interpretation, the story presents a different type of grief as grief is typically depicted after the death of a loved one. I wrote Nikki as an ambiguous character as a way to think about how men cope with grief before and after. I paired this conflict with another wintery setting. After attempting both conventional and homeopathic remedies that fail, the central character must be literally buried in the ice and snow to try abate the “inflammation,” or the grief. Through the fictional elements, I blurred the lines between temperature and emotional responses for this reason. The unique choice I made was to offer Nikki, the dying or dead character, as the method that helps the main character confront the grief. Finally, What the main character learns at the end is that there is no

easy method of coping with grief, and that grief left unresolved and buried will only resurface.

"Inflammation": ***Published in Flash Fiction Magazine***

"Grief is emotional inflammation," Nikki theorized in her best Dr. Freud voice. She scratched an imaginary beard and coughed so hard into her black, fingerless glove that I expected a grotesque organ to appear in her hand. It didn't. She simply wiped the glove across her Saves the Day hoodie, the one I bought her three Christmases ago.

"How the hell do I fix emotional inflammation?" I sat atop the picnic table in her backyard. My breath was visible in the winter air, but her breath wasn't. As usual, her parents were gone.

She picked off a chunk of snow from a birdhouse hanging from an ice-clogged gutter.

"Advil?" She laughed.

I didn't. "Does Advil work for grief?"

"Maybe off-label." She shrugged. "I've never lost anyone I've loved."

"Can I take it before the loss? Like now?"

"Prophylactically, my doctor says. Wait here." She entered her house through the rusty sliding door that made a metallic scraping sound, which only worsened my three-day-old headache. She reappeared almost instantly like a specter and revealed two transparent blue pills in one hand, and a glass of water in the other.

We waited, through the cold, through the crescendo and decrescendo of nearby traffic, for The ibuprofen to take effect. Her limo tinted sunglasses concealed her eyes, but I felt as if

she were examining my head. Not my face, but my actual skull, to see if it, even infinitesimally, had shrunk.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Not that different. What else you got?”

“My mom’s friend is an acupuncturist. She used to visit in the beginning. She left some needles still in the packages. Wait here.” She entered her house again through the same rusty sliding door. This time, the sound didn’t bother me. My headache was gone. The Advil had worked. But the grief was a tumor, still in there somewhere, growing only larger with time in close proximity to Nikki—like radiation poisoning.

She returned and ripped open a needle like a skilled surgeon. “Lie back on the picnic table.”

I did as she asked, shivering from either the cold or fear. I had never liked needles. Not because of the pain. Mainly because I lacked control. Needles and suffocation were my two greatest fears. But I knew I needed this. And I knew she wanted this.

“Where does grief live in the body?” She typed something on her phone. “That makes sense.”

“Where are you sticking me? I need to know before you do it.”

She grabbed my hand and squeezed gently. “Please trust me. Can you at least give me that?”

It was all too much to bear, so I closed my eyes and began to recite a Hail Mary like my

mother had taught me during childhood vaccinations.

“Take a deep breath,” she said.

I attempted to inhale, but with the combination of scar tissue from chronic asthma and frigid air, my lungs seemed to be filled with a colony of hornets.

She pulled my shirt up to my neck, and her hand grazed my stomach. I shivered again, yet this time from neither the cold nor fear. She stuck me. Too deep. Straight in the center of my chest. Hitting something hard.

I let out a yelp and opened my eyes. Air entered my lungs for the first time in decades, like in movies when someone’s trachea collapses and a good Samaritan stabs the victim in the soft flesh of the throat with a hollow pen. “I can breathe.”

“Lie still for a few minutes.” She started to sing “The Lass of Aughrim,” a song Mr. McGuire, our English teacher, sang in class years ago with tear-brimmed eyes after summarizing James Joyce’s “The Dead.” That was when Nikki was still permitted to attend school. She had loved the song ever since.

“How do you feel?” she said, furrowing her brow.

“I can breathe, but I’m still sad. I feel heavy. Got anything else?” I pulled out the needle and rubbed the bruise already forming in the center of my chest.

“Ice. Ice showers. Ice baths.” She pointed behind her. “There. I’ll bury you. This is my last effort. My final prescription.”

We clambered through the recently fallen snow and ice to the back of her yard near a

rusted BBQ grill. We knelt and dug through the snow to form the hole. The traffic was no longer audible.

“Are you scared?” she said.

“I was going to ask you the same.”

Nikki coughed again, but this time, tiny, brown spittle stained some of the snow in and around the hole we had dug.

I climbed into the ice hole and gave her a salute.

She began to bury me from the feet up. When she reached my head, she left for a moment and returned with a snorkel. “Breathe through this.”

I accepted it because I had to. I’d already promised that I would trust her, and I did. I was willing to try anything.

“My doctor used to say, ‘It will get worse before it gets better.’”

She buried my head, and the gray light of winter was eclipsed by the darkness of snow. The hole wasn’t that deep. I could have easily punched through the snow. My body vibrated with anxiety, and my face and feet felt swollen from the ice and snow. Funny how the cold feels a lot like inflammation.

I considered crawling out to make sure she was still there for my sake, for hers. But I didn’t. I only took wheezy breaths through the rubber mouthpiece of the snorkel long enough for the headache to return, for my lungs to swell, and for my grief to inflame beyond where the threshold used to be.

Introduction to "Wasabi River"

Of all my fiction, this story is most like Benjamin Percy's in that the river is personified and central to the entire narrative, as indicated in the title of the story. In this story, you'll see the influence of Percy's rural life as well more than the other stories I have included in this collection. I wanted to create a natural space that was as alive as the human characters to both reflect the palpable grief Cedron feels and the power of the natural world. This is achieved, like Percy's settings, through environmental metaphors and a personified setting. Cedron, the central male character, is wrestling with the grief stemming from the drowning of his younger brother years ago in Wasabi River. Now living in the house across the street from Wasabi, Cedron is reminded of the loss every day. Also similar to Percy's fiction are elements of horror, like the mysterious and ambiguous character of Bruce, a distant neighbor who knocks on Cedron's door, eerily wanting to sell him random items in the middle of the night. What influenced me the most about Percy's fiction in this story is that he oftentimes uses some of the perceived environmental threats, like the creature in "The Woods" or the setting in "The Cold Boy," to be the very element that ironically helps the male characters, and I tried to accomplish this through Bruce and Wasabi River in this story.

"Wasabi River"

The sun's light shattered and spread across the silent Wasabi River. Dylan was leaning over the edge of the river when he turned his head toward Cedron and shielded his eyes with one hand and sniffed the air. "Come and smell Wasabi," he said to Cedron. Mom was in the garden pulling weeds — this memory during a time when she still believed things could grow. She, too, shaded her eyes with a fist full of grass and earth.

“Watch your brother,” she said to Cedron, throwing weeds into a black garbage bag. Half of Dad’s body was buried in the hood of his car in the driveway. “Come, Cedron. Come smell,” Dylan said. “It smells like summer.”

But now, from Cedron’s open living room window many years later, Wasabi smells as stale as basemented baby clothes as it rages downstream, inflamed from an impending storm.

Cedron leans forward on the couch, grabs a section of his t-shirt, and sniffs. Maybe the smell isn't Wasabi. Maybe he left a load of laundry in the washer too long again. But it isn't his shirt either. It's probably rainwater from last week's storm. There are cracks in the foundation, and his basement floods after heavy rain. He needs a pump. He needs to clean up the mold and mess. But he's too tired.

He finishes his beer and leans back into the deep groove of his sofa as he watches a blank television screen. Past the T.V. is the front door, which opens into the tiny, mustard-colored kitchen, matching the house’s siding. He and Dylan had always loved the color, the house's quirks, even as children before seeing the inside.

Wasabi *shushes* him from the open window. He crushes the beer can and throws it across the room. It hits the edge of the garbage bin and clatters onto the oak. He stands, gripping the armrest for support, lumbers to the lime green refrigerator, and grabs another beer from inside. He pulls back the curtains over the front door's half-moon window to see the now empty section of dead grass next to his Jeep. Farther in the darkness is the dirt road. He can’t see across it. The streetlamps have long been extinguished. He hasn't seen a Light and Power truck on his road since he was a teen. With or without light, he

knows what's across the road — a slight dip and then a sharp drop to the icy waters of Wasabi River, as if God had cut a giant step into the earth for himself, just in case.

Cedron has called the river “Wasabi” since he was young. One humid summer day, his father took him and Dylan fishing where he told them that the river-bottom is covered with mossy rocks, and that there is a time during the day when, if the sun hits the water at a certain angle, at a certain time of day, the rocks glow wasabi green. But no matter what time of day, or how many trips Cedron and Dylan had made to the river, neither of them had ever seen the luminous glow.

Hoping to drown the river, Cedron cracks open his fifth beer. He presses his face against the cool window, straining to see down the road, imagining the two mile walk to his parents' house. His father at the front door with tobaccoed breath. His mother in the background, grinding her teeth next to a half-smoked, still lit cigarette in an ashtray and her photo of Dylan holding a catfish. She's searching for Waldo. Or searching for words. Searching for anything to pass the time. But now she's tired. She has a headache. She needs to rest. And it's time for Cedron to leave.

Cedron collapses back into his groove on the couch. The fifth beer has helped. He can hardly hear Wasabi's black noise.

“Hello?”

Cedron doesn't move. He waits with the beer suspended in front of his mouth. Then there's a knock at the front door.

“Hello? You home?” a voice calls.

He can't remember the last time he had an unannounced visitor. He waits for the person to leave, but there are more knocks. He stands and walks to the door and pushes the curtain aside. A red Cabela hat hides the tall visitor's face.

“What do you want?” Cedron yells.

“Can you open the door?”

He envisions fighting the man in several scenarios, but the result is always the same — Cedron loses. He takes one more look through the window, grabs his rusted fillet knife out of the kitchen drawer, and holds it behind his back before cracking the door open.

“I’m your neighbor,” the man says.

Cedron doesn't initially recognize him in the dark of the night.

“Can I come in?”

“What for?”

“Can I come in?”

Cedron hesitates, then thumbs the cool knife handle behind him. He steps aside and opens the door all the way.

The tall man enters, ducking his head to avoid the doorframe. The knife doesn’t seem enough. His thick-rimmed glasses make his eyes seem as big as halved hard boiled eggs. The dim kitchen light sallows his skin. His plaid shirt and jeans are stained, and his boots track clumps of what looks like chocolate cake over the cracked linoleum.

“Is that shit?” Cedron says.

The man looks down at the mess on the floor, then back at Cedron. “I'm Bruce. I live down the road.”

Cedron carefully places the knife on the counter behind his back. He tries to think back to when he was a kid, when he had ever seen Bruce's face. Cedron feels like he remembers him, but the beer has polluted his memory, and thinking that far back hurts Cedron's head, like when Mom had pulled back his bedroom curtains in the morning after a night of drinking.

“What happened to your girl? I’ve seen a girl come and go since you moved in.”

“She doesn’t live here anymore.”

“You screw up?” Bruce says, composed and unblinking.

“What can I do for you?”

“I’m selling stuff.”

“Like what?”

“This and that. Cleaning out the basement. You need anything?” he says, appraising the inside of the kitchen.

The front door is still open, and the cool night pushes a heat-seeking mosquito inside the house. It bounces off the kitchen light and vanishes deeper into the house where it will wait until Cedron has forgotten.

Bruce lifts his head and inhales deeply as if resurfacing from water. “It wouldn't hurt you to just come and take a look.”

“No, I’m — “ Cedron gestures toward the living room, but there's only his impression in the couch cushion. “ — in the middle of something.”

Bruce nods. “Just down the road. You'll see the torches.” Then he turns and disappears into the night, leaving the door open behind him.

Crickets and frogs fidget in the darkness. Cedron grabs a newspaper from a week's worth of mail piled on the counter and rolls it into a swatter. He walks back into the living room and stands very still, waiting for movement. He can hear the blood throbbing in his ears, or maybe it's Wasabi's current. Cool air floods the room. The walls swell inward like a smoker's lung. Cedron spots the mosquito. He's on the glass of the open living room window. Maybe he came here by mistake, or maybe he's changed his mind after realizing this place isn't what he expected. Cedron moves to the window, raises the paper bat high in the air, then slams it down onto the bug. It explodes across the pane in a smear of bug-body and donor blood.

“You coming?” Bruce's voice beckons from somewhere in the night, the front door still open.

Gnats swarm the kitchen light. The couch groove. The blank television. Bug guts. Musty air. Wasabi crowds the living room. Cedron’s mouth salivates as if he might puke, so he chugs the rest of his beer and hurries outside into fresh air, gasping for breath, slamming the door closed behind him.

Flames flicker in the darkness down the road. The path is paved in dirt and gravel. The town barely considers it a street. Cedron walks farthest from the river, avoiding all its noise, its history. Dylan liked to walk barefoot alongside Wasabi. His small, calloused feet walked over the street's gravel as if he had walked on rocks in the womb. But Cedron can’t remember the last time Wasabi was this incensed, except maybe when he was little.

After a long walk, Cedron arrives at a gravel driveway outlined with citronella torches. Three rectangular tables form a U cluttered with piles of junk. Bruce sits in a lawn chair behind the tables next to a squinty-eyed old lady with curly, copper hair. The

torches' flames cast shadows across her face. Purple-bagged eyes sink into swollen lids. Her oversized, red t-shirt matches her complexion. Bruce's face has a similar glow.

"It's late," Cedron says. "I don't think you'll get many people at this hour."

"Late?" Bruce says. "You mean early?"

Cedron looks down at his watchless wrist.

"This is Nilly," Bruce says.

"Your wife?"

Bruce stares at him without a response.

"Nice to meet you," Cedron says, wiping sweat off his forehead with the sleeve of his t-shirt.

Nilly is smiling as if remembering a joke. She nods and stares past him, at something in the darkness behind him.

"Let me know if you see anything you like," Bruce says.

Machine parts, old baseball cards, cassette tapes. There is a little of everything, except Barbie dolls. There are many of them scattered throughout the piles on one particular table. Most of the dolls are headless or nude. Occasionally, Cedron finds just a head, an arm, or tiny hands. It reminds him of a Nat Geo documentary on the Talheim Death Pit. Between a hubcap and a book, he spots a hand-carved wooden sun with carefully whittled rays. In the center, the initials BN and GK are burned.

"Whose initials are these?" Cedron asks.

"Me and my wife," Bruce says.

Cedron looks at Nilly, who's still fixed on the darkness and smiling.

"You like movies?" Bruce asks. He motions with his head to the second table.

He only has one movie. *The Exorcist*. Cedron saw this. Dylan swore he wasn't scared, that he wasn't closing his eyes. And he wasn't. But during scary scenes, when the music would build, he'd look down at the bowl on his lap and say something like, "The popcorn's a little burnt." There was only one other time Cedron saw Dylan frightened — that blurry day, his small hands cut from gravel and rock, grasping, trying to take hold of something solid, something tangible in the cold waters, in the darkness below, first reaching for those slippery green, mossy rocks, then reaching for someone, for Cedron.

One of the torches huffs, claiming a winged life, and Cedron can't help but wonder if the bug was related to the one now on his newspaper back home.

"You sell beer?" Cedron says, half joking.

"I don't got beer. I got guns." Bruce moves to the last table. "This looks like your type," Bruce says, picking up a shotgun. "You hunt?"

"Not really." Even as the older child, Cedron wasn't allowed to hold a rifle after accidentally dropping his father's gun down Snake Staff Cliff within the first ten minutes of hunting together.

"A hundred. Give it to you for a hundred," Bruce says.

Cedron holds the gun, hefts the wood and metal. He stares down the barrel. One eye shut. Inhales. It smells like burning wood. He runs his finger along the barrel and places it on the surprisingly warm trigger. He takes aim at Wasabi.

"Careful. One in the chamber. Safety's on, but I'm always ready," Bruce says, grabbing the gun and placing it on the table.

"I don't need a gun," Cedron exhales. "It's getting late."

"Gotta be something you need."

“What I need is a beer. I’d pay more than I should right now for a beer.”

They stand in the flickering light for a few moments. The creases and wrinkles on Bruce’s face cast pockets of darkness across his skin like pieces of torn flesh. His cheeks are as thick as two pieces of raw meat. Bruce glances at Nilly. She nods.

“Wait here. I know what you need.” Bruce turns and walks the short gravel path back to his house and vanishes inside.

“Sit,” Nilly whispers, tapping the armrest of Bruce's chair with her finger.

Cedron sits, and she grabs his hand. He wants to pull his arm away, but then it tingles, like running warm water over a frozen limb. The last time his mother touched his hand was after the unsuccessful attempt to fish Dylan's body out of Wasabi, but that felt less like a touch and more like the release of a harbored vessel.

She squeezes Cedron's hand so hard it cracks his knuckles. It sounds like the crunch of gravel, and the sound crescendos and swells until Bruce is standing next to Cedron, holding a bulky shadow that looks like the silhouette of a small body. Nilly releases Cedron's tingling hand.

“I've had this ever since — “ he begins, but doesn't finish.

“What?” Cedron says. “What?” he says, again. “Is it — is it him?”

Wasabi now sounds less like a river and more like his mother's sobs with a pillow around his skull. Out of breath, Cedron leans closer to Bruce. His chair creaks. The torch huffs. Cedron's hand reaches for the darkness.

Bruce extends the shadow so that the torches' light can illuminate it. “A water pump. Take it. Only used it once. I even put new hoses on it.”

Cedron takes a deep breath. “How'd you know I need a pump?”

“You got a water problem. I smelled it when I walked into your house.” Bruce’s hands tremble as if the pump were too heavy for him to hold.

“Thank you.” Cedron stands and takes it from him. “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing. Just take it.” Bruce sits in his chair next to Nilly and grabs her hand. “You should get started on cleaning your basement. Mold can kill.”

On the path back home, Cedron walks along Wasabi, but this time much closer, off the road, on the grass directly next to the steep drop down to the river. The sun is clawing up the sky and peeking over the top of the forest. Cedron slows, then stops altogether. He faces the river, closes his eyes, and listens with the water pump in his arms. Something heavy splashes into the river nearby. When Cedron opens his eyes, he's blinded. Thousands of green bulbs radiate at the bottom of the river. Wasabi slows, crystallizes. As Cedron's eyes adjust, an outline takes shape in the water — a head, torso, legs, and hands — cut and bleeding, arms flailing, fingernails packed with dirt. As if God has snapped his fingers, the river rages. Cedron grips the pump and runs alongside the ledge, finding the safe path down to the edge of the turbulent water. He throws one hose into Wasabi and the other onto the dirt bank where he stands. And he pumps. He pumps so fast his arms burn. His palms bleed. His eyes sting. The sun rises too high, and now Wasabi's green bulbs are an afterglow. Cedron pumps faster, sweating and bleeding, but all that remains is a muddled mess at his feet and two bloody and blistered hands. He collapses into the puddle, out of breath.

The river is black. The bottom is murky. He dips his raw hands into the cool river and watches his blood swirl and snake downstream, vanishing into the light of the morning.

Introduction to "Boy's Night In"

The final short story that I have included in this book is "Boy's Night In." The central male character has uprooted his life and moved away from a familiar setting, family, and group of friends to be with his girlfriend Annie and her dog Rocko. This story is the most unlike Hemingway and Percy in that it is largely character driven and existing completely inside his new home after Annie tells him she is going out with her friends for the night. Superficially, there is no natural space, just the inside of his home in which he is lonely and searching for meaning and companionship. However, one primary goal I had while writing this story was to subvert ideas of inside and outside and of natural and artificial as seen through the construction of Cake Man, baked with both artificial and natural ingredients, and the waste pipe that needs to be fixed after leaking feculent water over childhood memories. And it is through the overlap of these realms that the central character is forced to confront his existential loneliness. Consistent with most of my other stories, middle class suburban life permeates the narrative. However, unlike Percy's rural masculine labor—hunting, fishing, ranching, and taxidermy, I chose to include an element of both stereotypically masculine and feminine internal suburban labor—plumbing and cooking—coupled with the technological conflicts seen in the story in an effort to accurately convey 21st Century suburban masculine anxieties.

"Boy's Night In": *Published in Typishly*

Her voice sounds like the first time we spoke on the phone—like it could belong to anyone. It surprises me, so I mute the television and lean over the edge of the couch to hear the echo of something unspoken. "Say that again," I say.

“I'm going out with the girls for the night. It's Throwback Thursday,” Annie repeats as she passes through the kitchen and into the bedroom.

“It's only four o'clock. What am I going to do?” I say.

“Why don't you grade some papers?” she says. “You're always complaining about how much grading you have, but you never take advantage of the time given to you.”

Given to me? As if she's doing me a favor, forcing herself to drink margaritas and laugh about things I could never understand because I wasn't there. But her friends were. They have always been there, since middle school, and apparently 'know her in a different way.' They know all of the selves she's ever been.

“Are they bringing their other halves?” I say.

“No.”

“You sure?”

“We talked about this,” she says, searching through her purse for something at the kitchen table.

“I thought that you'd only go out with them if I was busy.”

“I'll be back before you know it. I'll bring home leftovers. Tess is making your favorite—coconut shrimp”

Before I have a chance to tell her that I don’t like coconut, she grabs her high school scrapbook, a photo album, and something covered in tin foil. The last thing she says is, “Maybe you can finally fix that pipe? It reeks.” Then the crunch of her truck on gravel, and before I know it, I'm alone for the first time since I moved in with her one month ago. I'm over five-hundred miles away from my childhood home and any friend I've ever known—a sacrifice to be with the one I love. But now there are no more

undergraduate deadlines, only gaps of time and a school bag stuffed with newly collected tenth grade essays from a newly accepted long-term substitute high school teaching position. A bastard-brother-of-a-job from the full-time position I had imagined.

For the first hour, I wear the silence like a winter jacket in summer. I know it's true that, had Annie moved to me, she would have had far more to lose—the job, her friends and family, this house—but it doesn't feel that way, so I give Mom a call to hear something that sounds like home. Dad answers and says she's at the doctor's office getting her gallbladder checked and then she'll be getting dinner with Elaine, the neighbor. He can't talk either. He's draining the pool for the last time. They've decided to close it for good since my brother and I moved away.

"Close it?" I say. "That's a big job to do on your own."

"I have a lot of time since retiring," he says.

I haven't seen him since my brother's wedding, three months ago, where, after the prime rib and before the cake cutting, he cornered me next to the urinals reeking of cigars and scotch, and he slurred, "Move in together before you get married. I'm warning you. I told your brother, but he didn't listen. It's never what you expect." He and Mom had waited until marriage to move in together. It was "chivalrous and gentlemanly of Dad," Mom once said. But now I find myself wanting to ask him what he does now that Mom is gone. Or how he does it.

"Do you ever wish you had more friends?" I ask.

"What do I need friends for? I'm sixty-five."

"Don't you get bored? Aren't you—" I can't bring myself to say the word 'lonely.'

“I keep busy,” he says. “Doing this and that. I'm so busy I haven't even had time to replace the water filter on the refrigerator. It’s been sitting on the counter for a week.”

That was my job when I lived at home. I had the thinnest arm, so he’d ask me to reach my hand between the floor and fridge to twist and pull the old water filter out with a suck of air leaving the chamber. But imagining my father lying on the cold tiled floor of the kitchen in an empty house, struggling to grab that filter, makes me want to cry. Then there's a silence.

“I have to go,” he says. “The pump is still running. I don't want the lawn to flood.” He says goodbye and hangs up.

I call my brother.

“I'm on a new seaweed diet,” he blurts out. This is the same brother who, before meeting his wife, ate an entire Costco-sized bag of pretzels, drank a six-pack of Guinness, and tried to puke through a screen door in our parents' basement. Then he met Limber Lynn, a fitness instructor, on EHarmony. They were married after six months. My brother hangs up after she yells from somewhere in the house—something about burning kale. I text Gabby, one of my English Department colleagues. She texts me back a few minutes later: *“At a party. cant talk.”* Did she have to spare me the “I'm”, “I”, and apostrophe? I picture her balancing a drink in one hand and her phone in the other. The ache in my stomach wonders if she's at the same party as Annie, if all the women in my life have conspired against me. Rocko, Annie's eight-year-old German-Shepherd, whines from his bed as if sympathizing, but I shush him and attempt to grade an essay.

“Holden Caulfield is gay. It's that simple.
He's in love with Stradlater and doesn't get
it in with the prostitute. He's gay.”

My stomach groans. Only an hour has passed since Annie left, and I'm starving.

The kitchen is cold and dark. Tiles numb my bare feet. Annie insists on shutting off the heat and turning off lights after leaving rooms. I insist on leaving them on so that I'm not searching in a cold darkness. With outstretched hands, I reach for the switch. My fingers find the cold plastic. It's wet with something. *Click*, the lights hum. I lean into the switch and sniff. It smells like Annie's nail polish remover. I use my shirt sleeve to wipe it down.

I bought a box of brownie mix at the grocery store last week to calm a craving for sweets, but when I search through the pantry, I find only a box of expired cake mix. Cake mix expires? And then I find sprinkles. A box of Red Hots. Sugar free icing. And Twizzlers. And for some reason, I want to use all of these ingredients, I want to use more, I want cake mix to be something else, something heavy like beef or grease, something permanent like cement, something that will fill me past sixty-five years old. My stomach hurts as I stare at the ingredients, and I can't remember the last time I've eaten, or if I’ve ever eaten.

I preheat the oven, mix the batter, pour it in the pan, place it in the oven, and set the microwave timer. I grade one more essay, drain a canister of canned air until it's frosty, and watch a UFC fight that ends in thirty seconds with a kick to a head and legs collapsing like a futon. Then I shut the television off and sit quietly for a moment. The

silence reminds me that I have a phone. My phone reminds me of being a teenager—I'm staring at my phone, waiting for a girl to call or text me something sweet and earnest and clichéd like, *"I can't live without you."* But it's quiet, black, and cold in my palm. I cave and text Annie, ask her how Throwback Thursday is turning out. I want her to tell me that she's coming home, that she's bored, that her friends are pissing her off, as they sometimes do. Instead, she sends me a picture text: five girls, including Annie, holding glasses of something the color of Jamaican water, a tray of what looks like brownies with the tinfoil peeled back sitting on a table in the background. Annie's eyes are only three-quarters of the way open—she's buzzed. The caption reads, "Just like old times." Did she expect something to be different? Old times = five years ago. Relatively new times if you ask me. If you ask the history of the world. What can change in five years? Moving out of state. Moving in together. Moving too fast. Marriage? Why wait? And a baby? What—no baby yet? Everything okay between you two? Are you scared? Who said I was scared? How hard could it be?—People don't change. Things change around them. And what friend would want to hear about that? Who wants to listen to me bitch about me? He might nod, crunch on a pretzel, sip his beer out of the side of his mouth, maybe squint to seem really interested, like he's straining to listen to every word, every inflection, to understand what makes me, who made me, what makes me happy, what makes me hurt. But really, he's looking past me, through me, staring at the lacy bartender, wondering how she does it and why she won't look his way.

I open Facebook while waiting for the cake to cook and search for my best friend from high school, my first real friend, whom I haven't spoken to since he started dating my first love, Marissa, also my first break up. His page is public. His profile picture is a

photo of him on a beach, pale, lanky, reflective in the sun sitting next to Marissa who's wrapped in a SpongeBob towel. He's still with her. I shouldn't be angry after seven years, but I am. Why not? Seven years isn't so long ago.

Then I find Buddy Listin, a guy I knew from undergrad. We've been Facebook friends ever since college. He was in the Creative Writing Club with me but then was accepted into a Ph.D. program and gave up telling "silly little tales." He introduced me to Annie at a gothic-themed bar one late October night after a poetry reading. She was decked in fishnets and black flowers. Shadowed eyes and a satin skeleton t-shirt. "You fell for my dark side first," she whispered after a few Whiskey Sours. But for the rest of the night, she clung to Buddy Listin, clutching his arm so tightly I thought her nightmare stained nails would snap off in his skin. She swore they were just friends. But when Buddy found out we were dating, he never talked to me again.

I type a message on Buddy's wall:

"Hey, Bud. I read a paper by Stanley Fish on existentialism in Murakami. Thought of you. Hope all is well."

It's a complete lie. I go to the bathroom and come back to the computer. He's already commented on my message:

"What are you talking about?"

I comment back:

"The article reminded me of that story you wrote during sophomore year, the one you read at open mic-night about the wandering bum."

I refresh the page. My comments have disappeared. He's posted a new status on his wall: "Existentialism is 'Philosophical Suicide.'"

I don't know what this means because I grade high school essays for a living. Under his profile picture is his Friends List. He has four-hundred and sixty-eight friends. I scan the list of people, many of whom have honorifics like “Dr.” or “Sir.” One friend even has “Lord” before his name. I type another comment:

“We should get together for drinks soon.”

But when I hit the “Post” button, an error message appears. It recommends refreshing the page. I refresh and can no longer see Buddy's wall. A mistake. A glitch. I refresh again but see the same result. He had forgotten I was his friend. And now, he's unfriended me.

The microwave timer beeps. I slip on oven mitts and pull out the cake. After it cools, I spread the icing over its square top. The set of knives my mom bought us as a housewarming gift comes in handy. I choose a knife we haven't used yet, still wrapped in plastic and cardboard, because I don't know what it's used for, because it looks sharp and crooked, and because I want it to be used for something. I try to cut a piece of the cake, but the knife is too sharp, and I cut too far and high. It looks like a head. So I continue cutting the shape, shoulders, arms, legs. I scarf the extra expired cake, breathing heavily through my nose as I jam as much as I can into my mouth. And then a sour taste surfaces with a dizzy spell. I sip some water, take a deep breath, and return to the expired cake man cutout and use Red Hots for eyes, buttons, and a nose, sprinkles for the hair and stubbly beard, and Twizzlers for fingers and toes and clothes. It looks like the snowman I built as a child that my neighbor destroyed with his car after a night of drinking. Hello, Mr. Expired Cake Man. What are you doing tonight?

“Filling your stomach,” he says. “Cake Man is fine. No Expired necessary. It's dated. And by the way, these Red Hots are giving me hives.” He peels himself off the pan with a sound like Velcro, stands in the center, shakes off a few Red Hot buttons, and jumps to the floor. “I'm in the mood for some light reading,” he says, leaving a trail of frosting footprints into the study. I follow.

Cake Man is standing on the computer chair scanning books on the shelves when I enter the room. He opens a book from a shelf of texts I haven't looked at since college. “Camus. 'Philosophical suicide.' I knew it. Listin's an asshole. He's just angry that he can't write anything of substance. He doesn't know how to feel anymore.” He grabs The Bible and says, “We'll need this later,” then jumps off the chair. “Come on. We got a waste pipe to repair.”

I follow him down into the small, damp basement. It's unfinished, the walls exposed and the ceiling open. Two weeks ago, the waste pipe leaked from a gap that had formed where the pipe meets the coupling directly over my unpacked boxes of everything important, everything irreplaceable—photographs, my high school diary, stuffed animals from childhood—everything caked in a shit crust. For days, the stench rose from the basement and reached the front door where Annie and I turned our heads and held our noses. We took out the garbage, but the smell was still there. We cleaned up food trapped in the dishwasher, but the odor remained. It wasn't until I needed a photo of my brother for his Facebook profile that I discovered the source. The stench is still sour, despite three bottles of Febreze.

“Is that duct tape?” Cake Man asks. “Did you use duct tape to try and repair CPVC?” He stares at me with those Red Hot eyes. He grabs his nose and flicks it to the concrete with a *click*. “I don't want a nose anymore.”

I can't tell if he's joking. It's only now that I realize I never gave him a mouth, only a smear of vanilla frosting. His words come from somewhere else, some place deeper.

“Are you mad?” I ask.

“I was for a second. Just that moment I saw the duct tape on the pipe and the primer and glue and saws and extra pipe and new couplings and everything you could possibly need to fix the pipe on the floor over there. Just for that second, I was annoyed.” He places his hands on his cakey hips and shakes his head.

“I knew I needed these things. I just—

“Lost heart?” he says.

I nod. He knows me.

“Come on,” he waves. “Let me show you how to fix this. Do you have a ladder?”

“What's the matter? Too much shortening?” I laugh. He doesn't.

“I didn't tease you about Listin. Don't tease me about my height.”

“I'm sorry,” I say. “I didn't know.”

I grab the ladder and open it under the pipe. With one hand, Cake Man picks up the reciprocating saw. I grab his other spongy hand and kick a bucket under the leak. He climbs the ladder with my help. When he grabs his end of the pipe, he says, “Hold that other end.” So I hold it firm. He looks at me again with those burning eyes and that frosting-smeared expression.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Having you there,” he says. “It's nice to know you have the other end. Otherwise, I'm liable to cut my cake off.”

I smile, he cuts the pipe, and it leaks chunky water and a stench like rancid meat. He teaches me how to measure a little extra on the new pipe, to fit the coupling before cutting. He teaches me how to prime, to glue, to press firmly. He teaches me to wait, so the glue can dry. At the end of it all, the section of pipe looks like a five-year-old replaced it. But it works. It's fixed. So we clean up the mess and walk back upstairs to rinse off.

For the next hour, Cake Man helps me make napkin shoes so he won’t traipse any more frosting throughout the house and so Annie won't get mad. He even corrects a few essays with me. “You see, it goes more quickly if you focus on just a few issues instead of trying to correct everything. Then the student won't kill himself when he sees all the marks,” he says. “And don't forget the praise.”

I lean in to see his comments, but I close my eyes when I inhale his cakey smell. I've forgotten how hungry I am. My mouth salivates. I want a bite. I want to dig my teeth into his soft shoulder, let the sweet cake disintegrate in my mouth. But then the sour taste of the expired cake returns to my tongue. I pour us some Jack Daniels. We sit in the living room across from Rocko who perks up and whines at the sweet scent of baked goods.

“I'll tell you something,” Cake Man says. “When I was just a freshly packed box of mix on a shelf, I thought no one would buy me. I was stuck behind three boxes of confetti cake. Confetti cake! Can you imagine my luck? That dumbass, tree-smoking

stock boy's fault. But, one by one, the confetti boxes vanished. And more and more, I began to see the store's lights, the aisle I was in, and soon, I could see clear across to the cupcake pans. I said to myself, 'Cake, one day you'll be in a pan.' And the next day, you bought me. I still miss that shelf, and occasionally I even miss some of those confetti boxes. But I'm glad to be here with you." He takes a sip of his Jack and his body swells. "Goes straight to my Xanthan Gum."

Rocko continues to cry from his bed. My phone chimes. It's Annie. She's on her way.

"I guess she's coming home now," Cake Man says, staring at Rocko, his voice like the groan of a stomach.

Rocko's cries persist, grow louder, and I remember why. He needs to be fed. I place my glass of Jack down on a coaster and stand. The room tilts as I move into the kitchen. I've had too much number seven. Is it my first drink? My fifth? Cake Man is still on the couch. He's talking to himself and retying his paper shoes with Twizzlers. Then he takes a swig of whiskey. My vision narrows and Cake Man expands as he drinks more Jack, the icing only covering patches of his cake, unable to expand with his body. "These Red Hots are burning my eyes," he says. "They *are* my eyes!" His swollen hands rub his frosted face.

I move farther into the kitchen, holding onto the counter as I open the cabinet underneath the sink and search for dog food. The bin is empty. My stomach burns as if I had eaten the whole box of Red Hots. My conversation with Annie yesterday comes to mind. She called me on my way home from work and asked me to pick up some more dog food. I told her I would get it tomorrow—that I'd get it today. And I didn't. I haven't.

Rocko has gone two meals without eating. I'm a shitty friend to man's best friend, but he was never mine to begin with.

“What do I do? There's no more dog food,” I yell into the living room. “Annie's going to kill me. I can't drive. I had a drink. Drinks. I drank.”

Silence.

“Cake Man?” I call. No answer. I move to the entrance and peer into the spinning room. Cake Man is bloated, standing atop the living room table next to my drink of Jack. The whisky is oozing from his sugary pores. Rocko is on the floor in front of him, waiting. Cake Man opens *The Bible*, thumbs to a passage, and then raises the glass of Jack high in the air. “John 15:12-15: 'Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friend."“ He drinks the remaining Jack, places both *The Bible* and the drink down on the table, then looks at me one last time with those burning eyes. Before I can say something, before I can scream, or yell at Rocko, or say goodbye, Cake Man leaps high into the air and never lands. Rocko devours him in a few quick bites. Time expands, a deaf and mute space, and I am at its center.

Annie walks through the door with the empty container of brownies and a Tupperware filled with coconut shrimp. She freezes in the entrance of the kitchen noticing the mess, the Twizzlers and Red Hots and icing and sprinkles on the counter, the frosting across the floor, my drunken frame, Rocko's empty food bin, and the warmth from the lights, oven, and heat. She moves to the entrance of the living room and sees the Jack on the table, sees Rocko licking his paws of icing.

“What the hell happened? Did you feed my dog cake?”

I hold onto the granite counter and think of saying *"I dropped it", "It was an accident"*, or *"He's my dog too."* But instead, all I can say is, "Buddy Listin's a dickhead."

Over the next hour, Annie remains aloof as her temper cools, even after she climbs into bed and dozes to dreams. I lie awake next to her under cold sheets, freezing. My head is pounding while I wonder if Listin is warm, satisfied with one less friend, alone, awake, willing the image of a lacy bartender. I catch a whiff of something, like clothes left in the washer too long. But it's stronger. It's bitter. Has the pipe leaked again? I raise my hands to my nose, the sour scent still on my fingers. If my stomach was full, I'd probably lose it. But it's empty. Can Annie smell it too? No—she's quiet, unmoving, steeped in comforter and the familiar shadows of her past at the farthest edge of the bed as if the scent is too strong, too poignant for her, or anyone, to get close enough and stay long enough to fill the gaps and clean up the mess.

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