

/lit/ winners club
September 2025



4chan

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>>>/ic/7465710 (*Investigation*) by Anonymous

/wibac/

Writing Inspired by Art Challenge

September 2025

Entrants to this contest were tasked to write with inspiration taken from an image, shown left, over the span of three days, with a limitation of 3000 characters, the maximum length of a post on /lit/. Two judges were selected from former entrants to /lwc/. The winners are published here in ranked order from last to first, with No.X indicating the post on /lit/. Two tied for third.

No.24742448

familyoftrees

Sloped down in the bushes behind his truck stop, Dr Yuri walked between piss jugs and plastic. His flashlight roved like a wandering moon over black grass and with each step he felt the years built up between his bones. The light flicked past something white and pink. He knelt beside the bloodied old man and spoke for them both: "The American dream is alive." A surge of patriotism flooded his veins.

Truckers refused to say his name over the radio in fear of drawing attention to the man who ran this neon Garden of Eden. It was open 24 hours with all the diesel and homemade sex pills a human heart could handle. Rumor had it a trucker made it from pump 9 to the Oregon coast geeked out of his eyeballs from only 1 bag of Horny Goat-Fucker, and that really drew the rest of them in like moths to a chemical flame. They found a paradise for big boy drivers fueled up on 4,000 calorie hot dogs revolving under 24 hours of fluorescent light who go hard all night.

Where did the good Dr. come from? With his shiny glasses and white coat, he looked the part A Latvian American trucker recognized him as a chemist tortured on the Mongolian steppe by FSB. But Latvians from Latvia claimed he was a Soviet doctor juicing the Olympic team and lost 3 fingers for honor. The only agreed on fact was he arrived with all 10 in God's own country of Central Missouri and bought a rundown TruckStop off interstate 70. Within a year he built a shining city on the hill soaking up all business for hundreds of miles. The rival truck stop across the highway owned by old man Bo Saint Cotton could barely keep the lights on. Not even importing Alabama's hottest Lot Lizards won their business back. Bo shot up Dr. Yuri's signs a couple of times, fair market com-

petition and all and even paid for a failed firebombing campaign but nothing stopped their taste for his sex pills.

This evening, Dr. Yuri invoked a little bit of the invisible hand of the market himself, by first cutting the power to Bo's truck stop and then locking him inside. Dr. Yuri's customers increased tenfold, but he kept expecting his windows to get smashed in response. Around 4:00 AM he stepped out to see the rival gas station across the highway still dark and a trail of blood leading across the parking lot and down the slope. Dr. Yuri grabbed his flashlight and followed to find his rival Bo bleeding out in the bushes, body battered, bruised and cut. He cradled the old man's head, touched. Clearly his rival had thrown and beaten himself against his own locked door to get the power back on. For only a few hours, Dr. Yuri had become his boss, taken his freedom and Bo Saint Cotton fought a one-man war on a door for liberty and paid the ultimate price. A tear fell from the good Dr's eye onto the dead wrinkled forehead of a patriot. Dr. Yuri vowed to honor him in the traditional way: by lowering prices and having a sale in his honor. The customer always wins. God Bless Trucking America.

No.24736676

Homo(ousian)

When Sarah died, the Skylark family hired an exorcist. Rumours of sex ghosts haunting the family's TrukOasis franchise had been a major draw for years, rumours none of the Skylarks believed, but somehow the risk of Sarah coming back to turn tricks in spirit was too great. The donation made to the diocese was a hefty one. She was their only daughter, after all.

I hadn't believed in ghosts before she died, but I was also unable to believe she was gone. We weren't close; Sarah Skylark had been assigned as my lab partner in high school chemistry class, and I developed a slight crush on her. Once, reaching past me for our worksheet, her breasts brushed against my arm. That was enough in those days.

Several healthy measures of self-delusion were needed to justify my going to the TrukOasis. I wasn't trying to fuck the ghost of my old lab partner, just grieving the all-too-soon loss of one of my cohort. I didn't believe the ghost rumours anyway, and even if I did, the exorcist had already been through before me. I had to climb escarpment rather than drive up to the motor inn, well, because the direct approach seemed inappropriate somehow. I knew this didn't make any sense.

I reached the massive parking lot, phone flashlight in hand. I began scanning between the rows and rows of trucks and camper vans, searching for something, any sign at all. Accidentally, I shined my light into a trucker's cab, waking him. He rolled down his window, made a piercing finger-in-mouth whistle at me, and blew a raspberry. "Sorry," I replied in a hushed, feeble tone. I felt so fucking stupid.

Returning home more than slightly ashamed, I went to

bed. What was I thinking? I didn't let the question torture me too long before falling asleep. In my dreams, I saw a Sarah-shaped apparition. She floated to my side, and her chest pressed lightly against me as it had done years ago. No way. There's no way the sex ghosts were real all along. Her ethereal form went further, past my arm, and came inside me.

I saw a vision. I was Sarah, driving her gleaming white Vespa at an incredible speed. It was a beautiful day with fluffy white clouds and a sweet-smelling breeze. I took a deep breath, and closed my eyes. There was a hard snag; I opened my eyes to see the back of a UPS van. For a brief, perfect moment, Sarah Skylark took flight. I had crashed, and was rocketing head-first into the van. I closed my eyes again, and all was severed. When I woke up, there was a sticky blotch in my boxer shorts. Ectoplasm, surely.

— *Rack, Shack, and Benny* — ghidra

I see him standing over my body and I almost feel bad for him. He's fiddling with the lighter in the dark. His fingers are stubby, like stumps of slick wax leveraged against the spark wheel, slipping and slipping. Benny is looming over him, making faces. Once the spark ignites he shirks back, floats over to where I'm standing. It's past midnight and I think of what Caroline will say when she turns on the TV in the morning.

She'll have to cancel the trip to Greece, call a representative for ten minutes to explain everything. They'll probably nod and say "we're so sorry, we understand," maybe even give her a refund. And she'll repeat that little ceremony each time she picks up a piece of our life dismantled, upended by this fool fearfully hovering a lit branch over my gas-soaked cadaver.

His name is Rich, but his friends call him Rack. Benny calls him "dickface" and I'm inclined to agree. But since a kid shouldn't use that language, I told him to just call him "Richard" and he laughed in my face. He isn't laughing now, he's squinting at the fire. He asks if he can hold my hand and I say sure. I try to turn him away from the sight of my death, from the site of my bones smoldering into ash. It's silly to think I could protect his innocence, as if that hasn't already burned. When I turn away, I'm doing it for myself.

After a few minutes we hear Rack huffing and puffing. He's slowly trudging up the grassy knoll, flashlight in hand. According to Benny, he drinks a lot of soda, so he burps a lot and breathes heavy and cries. We're at the lot now and Rack's stumbling along the rows of trucks. Benny is staring at the big neon sign and pointing out how ex-

pensive gas is these days. He floats up to see it closer and the reddish-orange light strikes his small face, like napalm igniting the translucent scars across his skin. It was twenty years ago and Rack still calls it an accident.

We reach a small garage at the end of the lot and inside the truck is pristine, besides the few pathetic bumps my body left. The blood was sprayed off hours ago. Rack's in the driver's seat now, slumped over. The soda cans are glinting like small silos on the floor. Benny is next to him, asking if he's finally done. Rack shakes his head.

He says forgive forgive please forgive. He didn't know better with the fireplace and he was going to bring help. He says he joined a church and for twenty years he was good with God. He fumbles for a rosary and we don't tell him it's under the seat. We just stare and bear witness as he cries and cries.

Outside the grass bends to the wind and my burned marrow follows the breeze, floating like a second specter, an anti-me stretched lengthwise across the stars like a drifter in the dark. The sirens sound and the hum of the engine is drowned by his sobbing. It has been hours and when he lifts his hand to spark the lighter I can see his face clearly.

No.24737743

Anonymous

Ray pulled the Peterbilt down the slope behind the truck stop, tires crushing frost-brittle weeds. The lot below sat in darkness except for the barrel fire where three men stood chewing gas station hotdogs. Their breath poured out in small ghosts.

Vic stood closest to the fire, his watch catching orange light when he lifted his food. Two Kenworths sat behind him like sleeping cattle. His own rigs.

“Ray,” Vic said. Not hello, just marking him.

Ray killed the engine and climbed down. His phone buzzed. The screen’s white light hurt his eyes after the dark highway. He put it away in his shirt pocket.

“Still running solo,” Vic said. Took a bite. Grease on his fingers shone like wet silver.

“Making ends meet.”

“Surely.” Vic turned the hotdog in his hand, studying it. “Remember when you couldn’t make nothing meet nothing? When I found you at that Pilot in Laredo?”

The other two drivers looked away. One spat tobacco juice into the weeds. Of course Ray remembered. Of course Vic never let him forget it.

“Offer stands,” Vic said, squinting at him now, one eye shut as if peering through a gunsight. “Three years’ work. Truck’s yours after.”

The barrel fire popped. Sparks rose and faded in the cold air.

Vic smiled. Fed the last of his hotdog to the fire, watching it blacken. “They ain’t lepers, Ray. They’re just looking for work,” Vic said. “Same as you.”

“Yeah.” Ray held no enmity for those men, he understood their hunger. He was only worried after his own. He

had made promises to his wife.

“Surely.”

One of the other drivers threw his paper plate in the fire. “I’m headed out.” He climbed the slope, boots slipping on wet grass. The other followed.

“You helped me before,” Ray said.

He nodded. “I don’t help many people.”

“Three years?” Ray asked.

“Maybe not even. You keep your head down.”

Ray’s phone screen lit his pocket from inside like he’d swallowed something holy.

It was the ultrasound. A white smudge in black static. A white curl floating in darkness, waiting like smoke in a man’s mouth. His thumb moved across the screen. The screen light pure and cold and true.

“No,” Ray said, so soft he wasn’t sure it was him.

Vic’s eyebrows rose. First surprise Ray had ever seen on him.

“No?” Vic repeated. Amused now.

“I’m sorry,” Ray said.

“Surely.”

He climbed the slope. Vic called something after him but Ray kept walking. At the top, the truck stop’s neon blazed. The parking lot full of drivers with their seats all the way back, drivers stepping out from the showers in wet slippers, coming and going, no pause in the roar of their engines or tires. The hips of their hula dolls in eternal sway.

His phone lit again. He answered it this time.

“Hey baby,” she said. “You get my picture?”

“I got it.”

“Isn’t he perfect?”

Ray looked back once. The fire below just a red eye in the darkness.

“Yeah. He is,” said Ray. “I’ll home soon,”

/lwc/

/lit/ Writing Competition

September 2025

Entrants to this contest were required to incorporate theme and character elements. Entries were selected by popular vote, with each voter being asked to select a rank of three entries. The winners are published here in ranked order from last to first. Two tied for second.

The theme requirement:
Must explore the impermanence of memory

The character requirement:
A character must be enchanted by the mundane

*The Corner of Buck
and Stucley*

Yodo

We went to Manston, we went to Mitchum, we went to Ramsgate, we went to Canterbury, we went to Cliffsend and Cal walked and I filmed and Cal pointed at all the corners and proselytised their significance. Many times on our trips I tried to see, really see, but I saw nothing at all. They were only corners. But Cal had a lot to say about corners, both concave and convex. A corner: where two walls meet. Cal was most interested in bottom corners, the ones that stick out, or, as he described, *convex trihedral angles with a vertex at the corner point*— although, he had much to say about other types of corners, too.

'What are we looking at Cal?' 'A model of the original point of extension into 3D space. Can't you see what's radiating off it?'

We were standing on the corner of Ethelbert Road and Dale View Crescent, with Cal, pointing at the floor where two exterior walls of Benson Steel Fabricators met, and me, pointing my camera at the floor where two exterior walls of Benson Steel Fabricators met. We had walked two hours from our place in Pegwell, west along the viking trail, me, a wanderer in aimless movement, Cal, the pilgrim, in a direct and purposeful path.

Cal would later show me his notebook, pointing with his thumbnail to a passage about that moment. *Like snuffling bassets hounds, inhaling and decoding piss dashed messages, we too opened our nostrils about the Ethelbert/Dale vertex to learn the terrible tales of this neighbourhood – steroid abuse, cannabis puffing, unresolved childhood trauma manifested and calcified within stoney-rough urine.* I don't remember seeing that. Looking back at the footage all I see is a corner.

I first met Cal on a street corner. This was in the late 70's when Camden streets, soggy in smack and scratch-throat singers, heaved with unrealised dreams and doped out intellectuals. The sobered normals thought we were disgusting but the feeling was mutual. In North London gutters there we were, the last bastion of bohemes still

itching for the sublime, still growing our hair out and quoting Engels. We were all just characters in a Burroughs-esque play. Before Cal was Cal, he was the frump in a parka on the corner of Buck and Stucley Place, arguing with his watch. He was waiting for Diesel too but predictably Diesel was late. Diesel was always late. Dopeking Diesel, I swear, he made you wait to sweeten that first rush of blood so it felt like God was sucking your dick. I approached Cal and he saw me and sort of jumped a little bit thinking maybe I was a copper but then his eyes fell to my shoes and he saw them talking, and then I felt his eyes run me up, up my trouser legs, ripped on the right knee, to my flies (the zipper was broke, even when I bought them), then my belt, made of shoelace. *He's late. Again.* Cal's first words to me. *He's always late.* Cal thrusted his watch face at me. *Forty-five fucking minutes. That's why I don't wear a watch. What's the point?* Cal scrunched his face up and his thick glasses fell down his crooked nose. I thought I was about to get an ear full about time keeping, about chronological necessity, but instead, Cal, with his big wonky teeth undid the leather strap, threw his watch onto the floor and stamped the face *crunch* with his hiking boot. *I'm Cal*, he then said. *That was freeing. Thank you.* He shook my hand profusely and it was sweaty and impatient just like mine. After Diesel finally came on his rusty red chopper we found a place by the lock and shared needles.

The next time I met Cal was at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting on Primose Hill. AIDS was rife at this point and really put a downer on things. Everything had changed. That's the thing I miss most about the smack days. The camaraderie. Back then, in Camden town, you could plonk yourself in a doorway and with a belt strapped to your arm, argue Hume's position on memory and be met with Nietzsche's retort. At 3am, you could find, behind the big Sainsbury's, once all the punters had been kicked out of the music venues, a poetry recital lamenting the dope drought of '79. But after AIDS it all became suspicious, ac-

cusatory. People started smoking crack instead and this rotted tooth and brain alike. It got all sordid, the streets manic, everyone consumed with a rabid presentism. Even after - what was it, five, six years? - Cal looked exactly the same. Wore the same hiking boots, the same turtle shell glasses. His hair was slightly greyer, his curly strands the only thing that counted time. It was here I first heard him ramble on about corners.

Thanks so much for sharing your story, Isabell. Here, take a tissue. Cal, would you like to go next? Yes Brian, I would. You see, I've been gathering information – He stood up and pulled out his pocket a piece of paper he unfolded for what seemed like ten minutes. He laid out this map of Camden on the floor. It was pocked with red circles like the map itself had AIDS. Listen up everyone. Stay away from these corners. I've cross-referenced this disease with these locations. These corners, the concave ones, if you shoot up there you're thirteen times more likely to get the sickness. Something to do with how atoms behave within trihedral angles. Concave corners attract detritus, have you noticed? Old dead leaves gather in them, even when there's no trees around? Old plastic bottles, torn up crisp packets. Why? You see, if you use here you attract the scum – Cal, not again, please, you're upsetting people. What? Why? We've spoken about this. Maybe we shouldn't speculate on these matters. But I am glad you've found something to do with your time. Are you shutting me down? What happened to you people? He slung his pointed finger around the circle. This is deep work I've done here. You lot don't care though do you? Fucking junkies. He stormed out. I followed him and found him at the bus stop rolling baccy in a liquorice Rizla. Do you remember me? I said. Of course. The corner of Buck and Stucley. He said this without a hint of nostalgia, like, of course he remembered, who did I think I was to think he wouldn't? Tell me about those corners, I said and that's how we became best friends.

We both found our own little ways of dealing with

sober life. We would walk until our shins splintered. Cal had a habit of steaming ahead and lost me so many times we had to agree, look, if we can't find each other, let's meet back where we first met, the corner of Buck and Stucley, be there at midday. So that's what we did. Whenever I asked Cal how his obsession with corners began he gave a different answer every time. I was born in a cornershop, flopped out my mum onto the middle of the cold aisle, by the milk. I used to be freemason – corners focus the One's energy, didn't you know? In a past life I was a dog. Corners are like message boards for dogs, I remember sniffing one was like reading the news. He would say this with his typical toothy smile, and I would say you're lying and then his face would scrunch up and his glasses would fall down his nose as they always did when Cal got incredulous. What about you? What's your story? he asked me, only once. I don't have one, I said, but in my head I was thinking, You're my story, Cal.

Whenever I want to be with Cal again I take one of my cassettes down off the shelf and let it remember for me. Here's one, named *When Cal Saved My Life*.

I guess I must have relapsed. The tape begins with the unfamiliar picture of myself, my face gaunt and green eyes blinking slow, laying in a hospital bed. And then Cal's voice loud behind the screen *This is so you can remember how much of a fucking idiot you are, Nick. Never again, alright, never again. We're going to fix you up, mate, just follow me, all you need to do is follow me.* That was the mantra for the following adventure. *Follow me mate, all you need to do is follow me.* He took me to his house and fit me into a pair of his hiking boots. My brain was like a raisin. Everything was grey, even my tongue, the taste of it was grey. I was only in there for a minute or two, but I remember how all the corners were corniced round, there wasn't a single right angle to be seen. He lived with his mum who was in the kitchen the whole time, puckered face over steam. She tried to close the door on us but he

must have sanded the edges of his doors. He caulked up the frames. Even his books were cut, rounded things, like pebbles smoothed by changing tides, and everything was in boxes too except the corners of the boxes were taped up loads to remove the angles. *Come on mate, we're going.* Then the footage is of Cal walking and the sound is of traffic and my own heavy breath as we crossed the M25 into the Kentish edge-lands. After Dartford the land spreads marshy, and the river booms with an opening mouth. It gurgles, it rushes, it sloshes, calm to the eye but rushing really, out to sea – and then onward we went, *follow me mate*, striding and stumbling, wild men we felt like, adventuring from City to sea, from frothed up OD mouth to dry, hiking mouth, blood in my throat *just follow me mate*. Stretch after stretch, past the castles of Rochester where the Normans rested before their victorious charge, and then the Medway and the Chatham docks that supplied the capture of the globe. We slept in bus shelters, in bird watching dug outs, we stole food out of Co-op bins and apples from the orchards near Tenterden, where the air smells like Bramley's seedling. Cal loved it out in the open, loved mother natures curves, loved the fact She knew right angles were demonic. He was suspicious of the horizon though, and prayed the line wasn't an edge, that out there the earth didn't feint and juke and trap us all within a celestial corner of the universe. With this I was silent behind the camera as I my cells screamed for smack. We made it to Ramsgate after four days walk and here Cal knew of some prime corners. *Van Gogh pissed on this corner, did you know that?* I laughed because I imagined the piss coming out in pointillism and it hurt, and Cal said, *There you go, first time I heard you laugh in a long time.*

Ramsgate was cheap to be poor so we ended up moving there together into a rotting Victorian doss house – but we loved our Dickensian lives, and we loved how Dicken's actually used to live down the road and we imagined we were the characters in Dickens' imagination, it was us he

was thinking of when he sat at his crooked spruce desk – that's how imagination works, Cal said, memories of the future not yet reached, mixed in with your past to create something now, in the present. But he was wrong. Cal lived in these micro-worlds. It was as if the universe were only corners and everything in between were non-places, not for stopping, not for living – motorway-places, only to move through, only to get somewhere. In my years with Cal, he taught me to find the deeper meaning, to transcend the skinny existence of the inward-looking man, by believing in the significance of your imagination. I don't think he respected my habit of filming everything. It was too objective. He thought Hume was an idiot. *You got to forget, that's the crux of it, it's the act of creative forgetting that truly builds character, that gives form and edge to your self. Not remembering, why would you want to remember everything?*

At the time I shrugged my shoulders, but now I look back, my answer is simple. I want to remember because I can't. And with some semantic algebra I can surmise he had wanted to forget because he couldn't. He dug corners into his mind to push out the lingering stuff which led him to the needle. It worked. For a while, anyways. Ramsgate wasn't a sober place. Cal started walking alone. I'd be left in the doss house, organising my tapes which I kept under the bed because Cal didn't like their squareness. I bought him a birthday card one year, stupidly, and he immediately tore it up, no thanks or nothing. I would wait for him at home, running all my tapes, from start to finish, as he walked and strode. He'd come back, notebooks filled with manic scribble. He kept them strewn across the flat because stacks of them draw right angles. It became insufferable. One day I'd had enough. He'd been gone for a day and a night and we had nothing to eat or drink, we had tea bags but no kettle, Cal did say he'd go shopping for us, but it was twenty hours he was gone and I got pissed off. I took a red marker and drew squares all over the house, I

painted corners above his bed like they were demonic sigils and when he finally came home, to a big red SQUARE on the floor like a bloody welcome mat, he took one look at me, glasses fell down his nose, and before I could say my piece - how worried I was, how difficult living became without someone there to live it for me - he slammed the door shut. I never saw him again, not in person anyways. I've got the newspaper clipping of his face on my bathroom mirror, still to this day. *Last seen on the corner of King Street and Royal Road.* I went looking for him, of course. Round every corner. Every corner I thought I'd see him, every corner I turned maybe this one, maybe this one, I was kidding myself obviously, but there was something in the act of doing it, a feeling in my legs that felt like I was walking in Cal's footsteps. A funeral was held for him a year later, when the authorities gave up. I was in contact with what I thought was his mum by this time and she had this big Cypriot funeral with black suits and black wailing by women who didn't know him, they just thought death was sad, any death. It was when I said, I'm sorry, no one should have to bury their son, that the women told me what Id always wanted to know.

When Cal was five, the year they say memories start to stick, he lost his mum, not 'lost' like she died - although they presumed so after a year and half - no, he *lost* her on a walk. They lived in Palmer's Green and I never knew this but he was Cypriot, his Mum was anyways, and they moved into North London because they couldn't even buy bread on their little island - anyways they were out for a walk and, the way his aunt told it, he let go of her hand and that was it, poof, she was gone. Cal went looking for her round the laddered, gridded streets, short streets, loads of corners in that area, and every corner he'd turn he'd thought she'd be there, and he kept running and hoping, every time he turned, every corner was a moment of hope, every corner had the image of his mum just out of sight, if only the corner wasn't there, if only it was rounded and

gave a little more sight, then maybe, maybe he wouldn't have lost her. Cal's dad was Turkish, his aunt said, of course she blamed them. *I don't know why he never told me*, I said to her. *He never spoke about it. As he grew up, he acted like he didn't even remember it. He called me Mum, like she never existed.*

Sometimes I follow the routes Cal used to take me on and I stop at every corner and look, and try to see, really see, but I don't see what Cal saw, instead I see him, see him in my memory but it's proper real, not a wispy memory, the only thing that makes it not real is the camera doesn't pick it up.

I'm about to leave London, to head back to the coast, to blue sky thinking, to my doss house that's now above an art gallery. I check the time, it's now midday, but I think, fuck it, why not, so I make my way to Camden and it's all toffies and posh kids and teenagers with fake stretchers in their ears. There's still the smack heads, of course, and I have to stop myself from feeling high and mighty - maybe they're arguing Hume and Nietzsche, but they're not, they got phones now, and I see in between nodding off they're just scrolling, numb on numb. I make it to the corner of Buck and Stucley and think I see in the little screen the frump and frizz of Cal's silhouette but the battery on my JVC dies so I fold it back into its case and as I look up I see Cal tapping his wrist, his bald hairy wrist and I hear, *Forty-five fucking minutes.*

The Art of Losing

meteor

On a patch of mountain highway the maps call Little Nineveh, there is a gas station. Aside from gas, there are the usual assortment of snacks, tobacco, and lottery tickets on offer at the Gassy Jack™. Being remote enough from any major town, the store is also qualified as a licensed agent of the liquor control board. Newman Nguyen gets ready for the night shift.

10:15 p.m. Newman falls out of bed at the sound of his alarm, “Sex Machine (Get on Up!)” by James Brown. He waits several seconds before letting out a perfunctory “Ow.” Picking himself up off the floor, he considers a shower and gives his pits a smell. He’s fine (he’s not). Newman, having slept in his pants, throws on his Gassy Jack™ polo and shuffles towards the fridge of his studio apartment. Yogurt and a scoop of chocolate protein powder is his usual breakfast fare, but he has leftover chili that needs eating and opts for that instead. Cold.

11:00 p.m. After eating breakfast and watching many nearly-pornographic TikToks, Newman is ready to walk to work. He grabs his thermos of scotch and soda, carefully diluted to a strength of 10% ABV. He figures that he could get away with saying it’s full of tea, if anyone ever asked. No one ever had. Just outside the door, Newman performs several rounds of body percussion on his pockets, in case he forgot something.

11:27 p.m. Walking along the highway at night is a dangerous commute, at least theoretically. He’s not a native girl, so he figured there was no risk of him being spirited away. He’s still as likely as anyone to get hit by a car. Newman, as a result, made a rule of not drinking until he was at work. Once there, he needs to be judicious with the thermos, first to not appear visibly drunk at work, and then to ride the buzz through most of his shift. For these reasons, those being the careful management of his drink-

ing, he is able to resist any thoughts that he might be an alcoholic. “Asshole,” he mutters at the high beams of a pick-up truck.

1979 A.D. Newman’s parents arrive in Vancouver as “boat people.” They happen to both (and separately) arrive by plane, but “boat people” is how the wave of post-'nam refugees are remembered by history. Having fled communism out of sincere Catholic convictions, they meet during a church luncheon, where there is an instant attraction. They marry, and have a son some years later.

11:49 p.m. Entering the Gassy Jack™, Newman heads for the office. “Hey,” says Steve, the transmasc lesbian, from behind the counter. Newman grunts in reply. He’s got about ten minutes to do the thirty seconds of payroll paperwork required of him, which he spends watching more TikToks. His shift begins properly when he hears Steve, the transmasc lesbian, say “See ya later,” and exit the shop.

12:01 a.m. Things start as they usually do, with the store totally empty. Newman pours himself a cap of scotch and soda. He’s dreading checking the bathroom, which is always fucked somehow, and decides he’ll have two more caps before braving it. There’s also inventory to check, fuel lines to inspect, sweeping to do, and the weight of all this sheer tedium makes Newman severely depressed. Not a good start, but it’s how things usually start.

12:42 a.m. The first customer of the night arrives. Pygmalion “Pig” Esposito is a local white nationalist, perennial candidate for village council, and Gassy Jack™ regular. “Ni hao,” he says to Newman, before picking up a handle of vodka and several cans of beans. “Prepping, are ya?” Newman asks. “That’s classified,” replies Pig, “darkies get left in the dark. You people have no sense of self-preservation, no connection to the land.” Newman chuckles at the “classi-

fied” remark, being quite familiar with such LARPing by now. He scans the items, asking “Hey man, how come you always stop short of calling me a gook?” Pig gives a wink and taps his debit card. “See you soon, bugboy,” is Pig’s belated reply, awkwardly maneuvering his purchases into his arms. “Alright, buddy,” Newman thinks to himself a few minutes after Pygmalion has already left.

20000 y.a. The first people arrive in the interior of what is today British Columbia. They live nomadic lifestyles, hunting, fishing, and foraging up and down the forests and river valleys of this land. This continues uninterrupted for thousands of years, with developments in toolmaking, agriculture, and architecture serving mostly to augment what became finely-tuned adaptions to the local climate and availability of game. The traditions and spiritual beliefs of the vast majority of these people are lost to history, save for what is dubiously preserved in the oral tradition. There are vast differences in these accounts among the various Indigenous peoples of modern-day BC. Today, the Secwépemc are (tokenly) acknowledged as the traditional stewards of the (unceded) land where Little Nineveh sits.

1:34 a.m. After his third cap, Newman begrudgingly checks the bathroom. As expected, someone has pissed all over the floor.

1985 A.D. Newman speaks Vietnamese as his first and only language, at least until he started pre-kindergarten. His parents decide to make a concerted effort to switch to English, in the hopes of easing their child’s integration into Canadian society. A mixed success. Today, he remembers the difficulties of having learned English, but has no real recollection of speaking his mother tongue.

2:02 a.m. Someone in a semi-truck drives up for gas. Newman almost hopes that he’ll come into the store, since

coked-up truckers make for good conversation. The trucker pays at the pump and drives off. Newman marks the fuel lines as checked, given that nothing exploded. Not like he gives a fuck. He buys a \$2 scratcher to kill some time. Not a winner.

2:13 a.m. Newman loads up disc 4 from a *The Simpsons Season 2* DVD set, which he keeps stashed in the office. It makes him nostalgic. He remembers watching it as it came out, yes, and that era of the show was still kinda saccharine. He was one of the only kids in his class allowed to watch the Simpsons, mostly because his parents didn't understand that it was an adult cartoon, and that it was considered raunchy by the standards of the day. The nostalgia always turns to poison during the episode "Lisa's Substitute," however.

Something in the triangulation of Dustin Hoffman's character, his relationship to Lisa, and Lisa's relationship to Homer makes him feel sick to his stomach. It's not daddy issues, Newman thinks, at least not entirely. If he were explicit with himself, he could say that it's because he's wasted his life. If someone handed him a note of encouragement that read "You are Newman Nguyen," he's pretty sure he'd kill himself immediately. Here he is, mid-40s in a dead-end job, with a dumbass screen addiction to boot. No car, no money, no woman. Makes him fucking sick.

1998 A.D. The Nguyen family are delighted by the receipt of an acceptance letter to the engineering faculty of the University of British Columbia. Well, Newman is more shocked than delighted. He doesn't think of himself as a strong student, and is wary of the workload required. He loads up on breadth electives in his first semester, hoping to ease his way into things. Even to these, he doesn't take very well, and flunks several of them. The only thing he retains from this time is "One Art," the poem by Elizabeth Bishop.

1999 A.D. The winter semester is even worse, where he's doing actual math. He finds all the figures and formulas impossible to keep straight, no matter how much he'd studied, and they leave his mind entirely come midterm season. He decides to drop out. Newman keeps going to school for appearances' sake, but is found out at the beginning of the next fall semester when it comes time for his dad to pay tuition. His parents, as one might expect, are livid. They kick him out of the house, and disown him in so many words.

4:03 a.m. This is the point of the shift where it stops being "late" and starts being "early." Newman's DVD has finished, and he starts on inventory, slightly drunker than he meant to be at this point. He uncases a load of Monster Energy Zero Ultra, a popular beverage for reasons he can't understand (he's tried several times). As he stacks the white Monsters, a customer walks in. "With ya in a sec," Newman says.

4:10 a.m. He doesn't know the name of the guy, but Newman recognizes him. Every week or so, he comes in the early morning to buy a pound of pepperoni sticks, queso dip, and a pint of ice cream. Suffice it to say, the guy is well over 300lbs. As the guy approaches the register, something strange comes over Newman. He asks, "You like these pepperoni, huh?"

4:12 a.m. Immediately, Newman is worried that he's offended this fatass for being fat. After a pause, the guy replies "Yeah." Another, longer pause. Newman begins scanning the haul, when the guy starts up again. "I feel really lucky, you know? I get to wake up every day surrounded by beautiful nature, here in the deep mountains, but still there's a twenty-four-hour shop nearby," he says before taking a deep breath. More, "Whenever I'm having a bad night, a sleepless night, I can come to Gassy Jack™

and get my snacks. It's really incredible that I'm alive at a time when this is available, you know?"

The fatass keeps repeating "you know?" as if Newman did know that it was incredible or lucky for him to be alive. He certainly doesn't feel that way himself, and he resented the use of this phrase. The guy carries on, "I wouldn't want to work the night shift like you, you know, but at least you get to watch the sunrise over the highway. You get the quiet, you get the peace. That's special in its own way, you know?"

Newman could kill this fat fuck. He's fuming now, but only sighs "Yeah, man," and gestures towards the debit machine. "Oh, it's actually cash tonight," the guys says as he rummages for his wallet. "Piss off," Newman thinks. "Die." He tallies the guy's change and hands it back, muttering "Have a good night." The guy smiles, "You too, brother, have a good morning. Keep an eye out on the sunrise for me." Fucking hell.

2012 A.D. Newman is priced out of Vancouver. Despite the Stanley Cup Riots the previous year, gentrification continues apace. He packs his things into his beater and drives into the Interior, looking for a good place to kill himself. Never one to be satisfied, Newman keeps driving until his car breaks down in Little Nineveh. Forgetting about suicide for now, he begins work at the gas station to pay for repairs.

4:56 a.m. The last of the scotch and soda is gone, having become mostly flat anyway. Newman is still pissed off at that guy. "Where does he get off?" he asks the empty store. He begins imagining all sorts of fantasies about just how profound of a loser this guy is. He's an inbred mountain mongrel, he lives off of benefits from disability-level retardation, he literally has no cock, and so on. Newman begins his sweeping furiously (very effective), cursing the guy all the while, and then mops furiously (somehow ineffective). "Piece of shit,"

Newman whisper-shouts, throwing down the mop.

5:15 a.m. The sun begins to peek over the mountains. Newman resentfully turns to his phone, scrolling through TikTok softcore.

5:28 a.m. The commuters start filing in to get their caffeine fixes and quick breakfasts. This is the easiest time of the shift for Newman, being all action. Some of the old fellas go so far as to put their change in the tip jar, and the literate among them (having read his nametag) even say “Good morning, Newman.” This morning, it makes him cringe a little, but he couldn’t say why.

6:34 a.m. Feeling sober now, he gets a text from Steve, the transmasc lesbian. “If he wants me to cover a shift, he can kick rocks,” Newman thinks. Instead, the text reads “hly shit listen to cbc its anout pig.” He turns on the radio, tuning it from the country station to Radio One:

—eveh, police and fire services responded to an explosion early this morning at the home of Pygmalion Esposito. Police report that Esposito has ties to several far-right organizations in Canada and abroad, but they have yet to confirm whether the explosion is connected to any political motive. Fire services' initial findings suggest that the explosion was likely, quote, “an accident,” unquote. A body has been removed from the scene, but it has not been confirmed whether it belongs to Esposito. We reached Fanny Kipling, mayor of Little Nineveh, for comment:

“Of course this is very concerning when something like this happens in a town like this or anywhere. But knowing Pygmalion, something like this was bou—”

Holy shit is right.

7:00 a.m. Locals start to congregate at the Gassy Jack™, talking about the news. Some of them say that they drove by the house, saw the body, and that it was definitely Pig. Others say that if they'd actually seen the body (as these others were now claiming they had), they'd know it was burnt beyond recognition. Newman doubted that anyone had driven by in time to see a body. He was more concerned with the fact that, if it was Pig, he may have been the last person to see him alive. He may have even borne witness to his last words: "See you later, bugboy." What an asshole. What a way to go. He holds on to the possibility of this strange, private memorialization as he sells patrons of the now-buzzing Gassy Jack™ their snacks and cigarettes.

8:09 a.m. The rest of the shift goes quickly, save for the last nine minutes waiting for a late coworker. Tony, the nineteen-year-old, is the replacement. "Wild news, eh?" Tony says. "That's Pig," Newman replies, and rushes out the door without further remark. There are even more villagers outside the store, also gossiping, and the fat guy is among them. "Hey, hear the news? Wanna ride home?" the guy asks, over-familair and clearly sleep-deprived.

"Yeah no, sure," Newman says, forgetting all the vitriol he spat just hours ago. It turns out the guy has a nice car.

Palimpsest: Office Files

penisino

1

First day.

Title: data entry clerk.

Pay: 15.75/hr.

Manager: Ed.

Computer: Dell OptiPlex. Keys gummy, some letters missing.

Monitor: WELCOME.

Correction: WEL-COME.

I rub my temple. Little shock runs through eye socket.

2

Work: copy numbers from spreadsheet A to spreadsheet B.

Numbers rearrange before I finish.

Line 111: 4098.

Blink.

Now 4089.

Blink.

Now [].

Ed walks by. Says: "Looks good."

Pulse tight in my jaw.

3

Break room.

Vending machine blinks 88:88.

I press B4 for pretzels.

Correction: BB for P.

Stomach cramps like rubber band snapping inside.

Note taped to the glass: MACHINE UNDER MAINTENANCE.

Someone scribbled: MACHINE UNDERSTANDS.

I stare too long. Left hand tingles.

4

Back at desk.

Spreadsheet crawls.

Cursor floats.

Cells fade like teeth falling out one by one.
Caption at bottom: PLEASE REMEMBER.
Correction: PLEASE REMOVE.
My right eye blurs. Feels wet. I touch—dry.

5

Coworker: Maria.
She collects receipts.
CVS 2011: cough drops.
Burger King 2014: Whopper Jr.
“I don’t eat beef,” she laughs.
Receipt edges curl into claws.
She says: “They edit when I sleep.”
The overhead lights flicker in rhythm with my heartbeat.
Left arm heavier than right.

6

Lunch.
Smokers circle outside.
One says: “My wife left me last week.”
Other says: “Which week?”
He shrugs.
Ash falls on badge.
Correction across badge: NOT AUTHORIZED.
I bite cold pizza. Taste: copper.
Receipt in box: DATE: TOMORROW.
TOTAL: EVERYTHING.
Jaw stiff, chewing too slow.

7

Afternoon.
Word doc spawns.
Title: MINUTES OF MEETING.
Correction: MINUTES OF MEMORY.
Text:
ATTENDEES: ALL.
AGENDA: NOTHING.

ACTION ITEMS: FORGET.

Close.

Opens again.

I try to push screen away.

Hands don't obey. Fingers crawl like separate insects.

8

Ed's office.

Carpet sour, damp.

He says: "Your numbers don't match."

I say: "They move."

He says: "Everything moves. That's the job."

Hands me sticky note: MILK, EGGS, SOAP.

Pulse slams side of head.

Letters double.

MILK → MIIILK.

9

Maria's desk empty after lunch.

Shoebox gone.

Her monitor:

[LAST RECEIPT PROCESSED].

Correction: [LAST BREATH PROCESSED].

HR email: MARIA HAS LEFT THE COMPANY.

Correction: MARIA HAS LEFT.

Blood in gums when I swallow.

10

Printer jams.

Paper half out.

My handwriting.

I never printed.

Text: "Don't trust corrections."

Crossed out.

Underneath: "Trust corrections only."

I tug.

Paper tears.

Tear shaped like checkmark.
Neck stiff, can't turn fully.

11

Friday party.
Sheet cake: GOOD JOB TEAM.
Correction: GOODBYE TEAM.
Everyone claps.
Cake too sweet, coats throat like chalk.
Plastic cup shakes in my hand.
Liquid ripples like seismograph.
No one notices.

12

Weekend.
Dream: receipts fall from ceiling.
Ink seeps through skin.
Words crawl under ribs.
Wake gasping.
Right leg cold.
Sheets soaked.
Printout patterns on thighs.

13

Monday.
Maria's seat filled.
Badge says: NEW.
They type fast.
Cells update before keystroke.
They smile.
Smile pinches like paper cut.
Teeth = staples.
I feel a fizzing inside skull, like soda poured wrong.

14

Ed pins chart on wall.
Efficiency down.

Bars labeled A, B, C.

Correction: BRAIN, BONES, COLD.

Everyone claps.

My palms slap out of sync.

Heart lurches, misses beat.

15

Lunch again.

Receipt: DATE: TOMORROW.

ITEM: NOTHING.

TOTAL: YOUR MEMORY.

Cashier shrugs.

Bag empty.

I eat bag.

Plastic sticks to molars.

Cheek spasms.

16

Coworker collapses.

Paramedics come.

Chair still warm.

Monitor: [SESSION ENDED].

Correction: [SELF ENDED].

We watch.

Ed: "Back to work."

I grip desk.

Knuckles white, nails blue.

17

Emails.

Subject: RE: RE: RE:

No content.

Attachments: blurred receipts.

File name: RECEIPT_FINAL.

Correction: RECEIPT_FUNERAL.

Delete.

Reappear.

Inbox full.

Vision whites out, then back.

18

Bathroom.

Mirror cracked.

Reflection slow.

Forehead stamped: READ ONLY.

I scrub.

Correction: DEAD ONLY.

Smell of ozone.

Left ear ringing, won't stop.

19

Dream again.

Maria: "Burn the shoebox."

Hands me receipt:

DATE: NEVER.

ITEM: ME.

TOTAL: PAID.

Wake up.

Shoebox under bed.

It hums.

My left leg won't move right.

20

Final week.

Ed: "You're not keeping up."

I: "The files are eating me."

He: "Good. That means you're learning."

Sticky note: WORK HARD.

Correction: DIE HARD.

I stick it to my chest.

Feel heartbeat misfire under it.

21

Last day.

Monitor blank.

Correction: FULL.

All receipts on screen at once.

Unreadable.

Then clear:

EMPLOYEE SUCCESSFULLY PROCESSED.

Hands curl inward.

Chair cold.

Desk empty.

22

Break room.

Vending machine still blinking.

Note crooked: MACHINE UNDERSTANDS.

Correction: MACHINE REMEMBERS.

Light flickers.

Left eye dark.

Face heavy.

Receipt slips from pocket:

DATE: NOW.

ITEM: YOU.

TOTAL: DUE.

End file.

the end

