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We_{ref}

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Artist Statement

This is a vast, hideous oversimplification, but to an extent, our common notion of physical matter is just a misinterpretation of a weird phenomenon that only occurs at macroscopic scales. In the least hippy-dippy way possible, we are, technically speaking, big sacks of energy that have coalesced into meat that can think and feel. On a much smaller scale than we experience in our day-to-day, nothing we are made of is physically connected or touching. Everything is held together by invisible fields. So, from *that* perspective, we must need some reference point we can relate back to, right? In electrical circuits, this is sometimes ground. What if we need a different reference point, though? In that case, we can use a floating reference voltage called V_{ref} if we, say, want our signal to oscillate around a set point.

Thematically, each of these works explores some aspect of companionship. Naturally, my interpersonal relationships are where I derive the most meaning in life. Some people say their family and friends keep them grounded. It's more complicated than that though, at least for me. Ground returns us to the Earth. Instead, the lives I am connected to form constellations. As I float from star to star, these people, animals, and even plants form the reference points my thoughts and feelings revolve around. I love everything corny, so for the purpose of this collection, I'm going to refer to this as my We_{ref} .

"Tame" is a free verse poem which is loosely based on one of the first hikes I went on with my dog, Bud. I was trying to get away from life on my 23rd birthday, so I took him for a hike on a four mile long loop called the *Enchanted Forest* near Golden, Colorado where I knew I wouldn't get any cell service. Bud was still pretty young at this point and, frankly, so was I, so I let him off leash for a while and he wound up chasing a hawk. What can I say? Sometimes, we live vicariously through our kids. I don't necessarily get why he makes the choices he makes, but I fully comprehend the visceral nature of his being. When I caught up to Bud, he was stuck on the other side of a gentle stream and too afraid to cross back over to me. I picked him up and carried him across. We were almost done with the loop at that point and we were both very, *very* ready to go home.

"Well-Fed" is a mish-mash of several different nights I spent working at a local restaurant. I won't name this restaurant because despite how I may have depicted certain aspects of its business, I love it dearly and continue to eat there. I was originally hired as a host, but I developed close connections with the staff and patrons which quickly led to an assistant manager position. These connections carried enormous weight in how I carried out my duties. There are strong themes of emotional and physical fullness and heaviness throughout.

"Xmas Curtain" was inspired by a song of the same name by My Morning Jacket. According to the writer, Jim James, the song is about how he and one of his bandmates used to steal from department stores and give the items away to their friends at Christmas when they were poor. The proverbial curtain in this case is the curtain of justice. In the song, Jim James argues the curtain only falls on lawbreakers. Because he feels he's morally justified, the curtain won't fall on him. My story presents a character, Trevor, who tries to make a similar argument, but his selfish actions lead to negative consequences for those around him. Compared to the version of this play that I presented for our class's workshop, the ending is completely rewritten. Out of all of my pieces, the ending of "Xmas Curtain" received by far the most criticism and mostly evoked feelings of confusion. In my opinion, this new ending is much easier to follow and much more interesting.

“Let Them Have Cake” is a small tribute to one of my favorite writers, Kurt Vonnegut. Vonnegut was adept at juxtaposing bleak science fiction narratives with blunt humor. Although deeply rooted in sci-fi, he primarily used science as a platform to navigate or expose some aspect of humankind. Even moreso, he was uniquely able to reveal deep beauty amidst utter chaos in his writing. “Let Them Have Cake” is admittedly obscure, but I don’t think it’s necessary to understand every detail to appreciate the story; the actual events of the story are less important than the sentiments expressed. The story centers around a protagonist and his robot companion as they struggle to meet their ends on a mysterious, barren planet. The title is a Frankensteining of two phrases, “let them eat cake” and “you can’t have your cake and eat it.” Where survival and purpose are at constant odds, the story questions not only how the man can both consider himself alive and living at the same time, but also whether the purpose he truly desires can even truly be found in such a desolate existence. The ending is particularly stark. I chose to edit this piece only lightly: no art is perfect, but based on the feedback I received, I feel like I was successful in portraying everything the way I intended. I’d hate to risk destroying that, so this is a piece I instead plan to return to in a grander sense where I can build on the background of the characters and the world they’ve come to inhabit.

My final piece, “On Mutts and Men: A Pontification,” is a personal essay reflecting on my experience with my dog. As my closest companion, Bud is a frequent topic of my writing. “On Mutts and Men” was originally written for EN102 at MassBay. I really like this piece and I’ve been planning to rewrite it ever since I submitted it. It was originally twice as long. This incarnation is heavily edited, although some parts are virtually untouched, such as the intro. In general, it is more concise. The second half is almost entirely rewritten. Again, this piece means a lot to me, and I hope I’ll land on a version of it that I’m happy with someday. I’m only trying to make a simple point: there is no greater purpose than that which makes us happy, and who in our lives tries as hard to make us happy as our dogs? If there’s one creature to make part of your constellation, it’s gotta be a dog.

Tame

I yearned for a walk
To be alone
I looked for a cathedral with no exit,
Some place perfect to get lost

I wandered aimlessly through the brisk weather
And soon I was ensnared by an unfamiliar forest
Walls of enchanted trees formed pockets,
With flickers of sunlight guiding me through carpets of dirt

Then, a burst of fur escaped beyond me:
Some beast beside me caught a glimpse of a hawk,
And realizing he was not dreaming,
He knew he must yield to his fantasy

A shallow barrier of water laughed in the animal's face:
It mocked his predator nature, challenging him to cross
The hawk was only a speck in the sky now,
But the thrill of hunt caused him to betray his fears
So, he leapt beyond the stream and became stuck,
Whimpering, now tamed by the whims of nature

I found him there,
Maybe a half mile downstream,
With no sense of wonder left in him
Only a desire to return home.

Well-Fed

Sophia and I stand next to each other at the host stand in silence. Tonight marks the fifth and final night of her training as a hostess. Although we are only five years apart, I can vividly remember what it felt like when I was her age, mere months away from the oblivion that is adulthood. I desperately want to relay some great wisdom about life to her, but I don't want to seem condescending.

Earlier that night while I was training Sophia, a pair of men asked if she would sit down and join them for dinner. Flabbergasted, I blurted out, "she's 17," and abruptly left to track down their server. Hours later now, I find myself apologizing to Sophia for not immediately asking the men to leave.

"It's ok," she tells me, "I'm used to it."

I have never had so much responsibility. While some promotions are earned, others come about naturally when your alcoholic boss has been spending too much time away from work due to what she claims are recurring ear infections. This job was not supposed to be mine. Grant was in hospitality school – he was going to be the assistant manager, but I have never met anyone so terrible at their job. My boss cried when she told me she had to fire him. Grant cried when he was fired. For the rest of the week, my boss could not come into work; she said it was her ear.

Even though the front doors are closed, a brutal February chill manages to sneak inside. I tell Sophia to clock out and I make my way upstairs to the second story of the restaurant. Two punishing flights separate the top and bottom floors. This is why, upon entering the restaurant, many of our guests will inquire about our elevator. On enduring nights like these, I am humbly reminded that we do not have an elevator.

I peer around the nook at the top of Olympus and notice the lights are dim. There is only one table with guests left in the entire restaurant. This group of four young adults finished their dessert and paid their check a long time ago. Even though their water glasses are empty – a polite sign service has ended – they are lounging comfortably in a booth.

A tiny kitchen is connected to the top floor and inside, I find Yulia. She is leaning against an aluminum table, scrolling aimlessly on her phone while she waits for our final guests to leave. Yulia is our best server. She has been working here for too many years and knows more about this place than anyone. I can always trust her to carry service, but I tell her I am heading to the basement in case she needs support. She nods and her eyes fall back to her phone.

I open the door to leave the kitchen and in the same moment, a shriek erupts:

"Rat!"

Mice are a natural occurrence in our beautiful, rustic brick building. We are told to stomp and make as much noise as possible at the end of the night to deter any critters from peeking out, but they pay us no mind. I apologize to our guests nonchalantly and offer to comp a sizable portion of their bill.

By now, it is gravity alone which drags me back down the stairs and into the kitchen. There, beneath a window peering into the main dining room, our food runner, Milo, huddles over a lukewarm bowl of pasta, butter, and padano. Earlier today, I caught Milo stealing money from the host stand and had to confront him. Milo has lost this job before, but he is the brother-in-law of another well-liked staff member. I know how much money he earns because I have recently been entrusted with handling payroll. I also know that Milo has a wife and a young daughter.

I ask Milo if he has seen Gabriel, our sous-chef. I know Gabriel is in the basement doing paperwork, but I am trying to avoid conversation. With a mouthful of pasta, Milo mutters

something to the effect of, “Gabriel... basement... paperwork.” I thank him and leave. The door swings behind me.

Adorned with deteriorating cement walls, the basement is the most cold and unwelcoming part of the building, and yet it is also where most of the food is prepared. Food, of course, is the heart and soul of any restaurant. In fact, our food is what makes us famous. Our clientele includes local politicians, athletes, and other wealthy figures. If even one of them were to set foot in this basement, it might ruin us, but we are endlessly proud of the work we accomplish in this tight space.

I slouch down at my boss’s desk. I am surrounded by so much clutter – boxes, papers, equipment – I can barely notice Gabriel snoring loudly on the chef’s desk across from me. I open up my laptop and within seconds, a large, brown cat descends from a loose panel in the ceiling and splays herself across the warm keyboard in front of me. Marigold is more than a cat – she is most of our Wi-Fi password. The owner of the restaurant originally brought her in to fend off mice, but she only seems to have encouraged their presence. Nevertheless, she has since become something of a mascot.

As with anyone who enters our restaurant, Marigold is never left wanting for food. Accordingly, she is one of the biggest cats I’ve ever seen. As a consequence of her encumbrance, I am unable to complete any paperwork. Oh, well. I reach into my pocket.

“Can I hit that?”

With his head still on the desk, Gabriel reaches his hand out to me. I pass him the vaporizer I’ve just taken out of my pocket.

“Congratulations, Mr. Manager,” he says to me. “How does it feel?”

“I feel heavy.”

“No, you don’t.” He looks up at me, wheezing. “You need to eat more.”

He passes the vaporizer back to me. I blow out a thin cloud of smoke and put my head down. As soon as my hair touches the desk, Marigold pushes her body against the back of my head and purrs. I close my eyes and let out a sigh.

“Come on, Gabe, we all eat plenty here.”

By the time I go back upstairs, the restaurant will be empty. I will turn off the lights, set the security alarm, and lock the doors behind me. For better or for worse, I am the guardian of this space. I may shiver waiting for the train most nights as this unforgiving winter does its best to embitter me, but at least I will feel full.

Xmas Curtain
A Ten-Minute Play
By Tyler Lash

Characters

JOEY: 17, male, beanie, baggy sweatshirt, loose jeans, all dark clothing

TREVOR: 20, male, messy hair, skinny but relatively muscular, white stained tank top, track/athletic pants, generally unkempt; thick Rhode Island accent

CASHIER

OFFICER #1

OFFICER #2

Setting

Small town outside Providence, RI

Mid 1990s, late autumn, early evening

Gas station interior

XMAS CURTAIN

[INT - Gas station. Two young men who appear to be in their late teens or early twenties are huddled next to each other in the refrigerated section in the far back of the gas station (STAGE LEFT). A young CASHIER similar age as the men is looking down at her phone by the entrance (STAGE RIGHT); the woman seems careless and remains oblivious while the men converse]

TREVOR

Make a fist, like this.

[TREVOR shows the other man his fist, lightly clenched; he furnishes a bag of powder from his pocket]

TREVOR

My buddy taught me this.

[TREVOR opens up the baggie]

TREVOR

Pour some on your knuckle here and—

[TREVOR holds his fist up to his nose and inhales the powder]

TREVOR

[wiping nose and sniffing lightly] Took me a couple tries but it's easy once you get the hang of it. Here, make a fist:

JOEY

I don't think I need any.

TREVOR

[angrily] I'm being generous! Besides, this will make things go easier.

JOEY

Whatever man.

TREVOR

So make a fist...

[JOEY holds out his fist and TREVOR pours some of the powder onto his knuckle]

TREVOR

Ok, got it? Now hold it up to your face, slowly. Be careful—

[JOEY sneezes just as he holds his hand up to his face and the small pile of powder flies off his hand]

TREVOR

Are you kidding me right now?!

[TREVOR smacks JOEY across the left side of his face; JOEY quickly steps back and holds his left hand to his cheek and looks back scornfully at TREVOR]

TREVOR

[angrily] You idiot! I'm not giving you more.

[JOEY removes hand from cheek, now mildly red where JOEY struck it]

JOEY

Fine, I don't care man.

TREVOR

What's going on with you? Get it together.

JOEY

I already told you, I think this is a dumb idea.

TREVOR

You think I'm dumb, that what you mean? Or maybe don't you think I'm smart enough to see nobody here really cares?

[TREVOR reaches in the refrigerator beside him and pulls out a sports drink; he drinks the entire beverage at once and burps loudly. The CASHIER glances over, makes sustained eye contact with TREVOR, and then looks back down at her magazine.]

TREVOR *[looking back at JOEY]*

Look at what I'm wearing, Joey.

[TREVOR tugs on his tank top to demonstrate its poor quality]

TREVOR

It's gonna be single digits next week. Nobody can survive like this. And I can't even afford a decent jacket, how am I supposed to get my girlfriend a present? People in our position, you don't think we have to do *something*?

JOEY

Christmas is a month away dude, I'm sure you can figure something out. How much money you think they even have here?

TREVOR

Doesn't matter. Life didn't give me lemons, I got piss. And when that's all life gives you, sometimes you gotta take.

[TREVOR grabs a bag of chips off the shelf and looks over the aisle to make sure the CASHIER notices him stealing again; the CASHIER only side-eyes him this time, barely turning her head before returning to her magazine]

TREVOR

I'm not gonna take the piss though, Joey. Whole world is laughing at clowns like you and me.

[TREVOR positions a nearby milk carton next to the refrigerator and sits down on it; he looks at the ground]

JOEY

You're being myopic.

TREVOR

Ha. I ain't depressed, kid.

JOEY

I'm trying to say you're *bad* at seeing the big picture.

TREVOR

[looks up at JOEY] You know what, Joey, I'm just trying to teach you a thing or two about life. You wanna live in this shitty town forever?

JOEY

It doesn't have to be like that.

TREVOR

Nah, you don't get it, see, for us it does.

[TREVOR stands up from milk carton and begins to get in JOEY's face]

TREVOR

You wanna wear the nice clothes? Get your family the good presents, put a smile on your wife's face, hear your kids say "I love you, daddy, this is the best Christmas ever?" Because that's not something anybody wants to give you, Joey.

[TREVOR pushes JOEY in the center of the chest with his index finger]

TREVOR

We're gonna take it for ourselves. When I'm freezing my ass off every winter, and I know my girlfriend is cheating on me, and *nobody is coming to help us*, Joey, you don't tell me we don't deserve better.

[JOEY leans against the glass door of the refrigerator behind him and looks up at the ceiling; several beats pass]

TREVOR

You know I love you, kid. You're like a brother to me.

JOEY

[looking down at floor] I know, man. I'm sorry, man. I know.

[TREVOR sits back down on the milk carton and the two are silent for several beats]

TREVOR

So. Do we want to do this?

JOEY

No, I really don't think we want to do this.

TREVOR

I really think we do.

JOEY

No, come on, Trev, let's not.

TREVOR

I really don't think we got a choice, kid.

JOEY

Well, I think I do though.

TREVOR

Don't say it.

JOEY

I'm gonna go to college, Trev.

TREVOR

Shut up, kid. You can't afford that.

JOEY

I get good grades, they notice that.

TREVOR

You're not going to college. Shut up, Joey.

JOEY

My guidance counselor says I'm a shoo-in, she says I probably won't have to pay a dime.

TREVOR

No, I'm not listening to this. Why'd you come with me tonight?

JOEY

[leans forward] Because I care about you too, man. I don't want to see you do something stupid tonight.

[JOEY begins to take a step toward TREVOR; TREVOR quickly rises from the milk carton and presses his chest against JOEY's so that his face is in JOEY's face]

TREVOR

There you go again, calling me *stupid*.

[TREVOR puts both of his hands on JOEY's chest and shoves JOEY into the glass door behind him; it does not shatter, but a loud thud briefly attracts the attention of the CASHIER. The CASHIER pretends to look away this time, but she is also not-so-subtly glancing over at the two men, quickly gaining interest in their dramatic situation]

JOEY

Yeah? Well what do I expect from a dropout? You LET things turn out bad for you, I'm NOT the stupid one here.

[TREVOR pulls his arm back to hit JOEY, but pauses, glaring at JOEY. He then quickly walks to the other side of the gas station with long, deliberate strides; as he closes in on the cash register, he pulls a pistol from his waistband and brandishes it]

TREVOR

OPEN THE FUCKING REGISTER NOW!

CASHIER

[looks up slowly and responds lazily] That gun real?

TREVOR

...what?

[TREVOR does a double take, looking back at JOEY across the store and then the CASHIER]

TREVOR

No, I mean, yes it's not fake! *[shaking]* OPEN the register NOW!

[TREVOR points at the register with his gun and back up at the CASHIER]

CASHIER

You know where you are?

[the CASHIER rolls her eyes, opens the register, and begins counting money]

CASHIER

Fifteen, twenty... You know, Mondays aren't real busy for us.

TREVOR

[firmly] Get OVER here, Joey.

[CASHIER finishes counting money and hands it to TREVOR]

CASHIER

Not even a hundred dollars. Lucky guy. Don't spend it all in one place.

TREVOR

Joey, let's fucking GO! What are you doing back there?!

[JOEY continues to stand in the back of the store with his mouth agape, not moving toward TREVOR]

JOEY

No, Trevor –

[TREVOR cuts off JOEY]

TREVOR

Joey, let's fucking GO! What are you doing back there?!

[POLICE SIREN rings out from STAGE RIGHT]

JOEY

I told you, man, I didn't want any part in this–

[OFFICER #1 rapidly enters from STAGE RIGHT with a gun pointed at TREVOR]

OFFICER #1

Police! Drop the weapon!

[TREVOR, shaking and confused, looks back at JOEY, then OFFICER #1, and slowly begins to comply; with one hand raised, he bends and kneels and begins to place his gun on the floor]

JOEY

I told you, man–

[OFFICER #2 enters STAGE RIGHT with gun also pointed at TREVOR]

OFFICER #2

Hands where I can see them!

TREVOR

[muttering] ...don't deserve this.

[TREVOR looks back at JOEY who is now only shaking his head]

OFFICER #1

Down on the ground!

[TREVOR quickly turns to look back at OFFICER #1, then OFFICER #2. He looks back at JOEY again]

TREVOR

No -

[TREVOR points gun at OFFICER #1]

OFFICER #2

Put down the weapon!

TREVOR

You fuckin' did this, didn't you, Joey?

JOEY

Look, man, I mean -

OFFICER #1

[to radio] Urgent assistance required! Suspect has a firearm!

OFFICER #2

Drop the weapon now!

TREVOR

You never cared about me, kid.

[TREVOR turns to leave through the back door, STAGE LEFT, while still pointing his gun at the officers. As he is turning, he jams his hand on a shelf and his gun misfires]

[CASHIER shrieks and ducks down behind register]

[JOEY covers his ears, grimacing and lurching back due to the loud noise]

OFFICER #1

[to radio, shakily] 10-71 - SHOTS FIRED!

OFFICER #2

RETURNING FIRE!

[OFFICER #2 tries to fire back, but their weapon jams]

[OFFICER #1 puts their hand on their holster, but does not remove their weapon, and does not move further]

JOEY

TREVOR, I knew you were stupid! I gave you a chance! Everyone's sick of giving you chances!

[TREVOR turns back to JOEY while hastily moving toward STAGE LEFT]

TREVOR

[emphatically] Fuck you.

[JOEY watches scornfully as TREVOR exits STAGE LEFT]

OFFICER #2

[aggressively palming the side of her malfunctioning gun] What are you doing?!

[OFFICER #1 is still frozen in position]

OFFICER #2

He's getting away, come on!

[OFFICER #2 runs after TREVOR and exits STAGE LEFT; OFFICER #1 waits a beat before quickly following and exits STAGE LEFT]

[JOEY sits on milk crate]

[CASHIER peers head out from over register and looks around the store to make sure TREVOR and both OFFICERS have left]

CASHIER

[stands up, pounds fists on register, and screams] I can't WAIT to get out of this town!

Let Them Have Cake

Deep pits littered the reddish-brown landscape.

“You know what this is, don’t you?”

The man stretched out his arm and gestured broadly to the horizon, then turned back to look at his companion. His arm plummeted back down to his side and thudded against the soft exterior of his suit.

“End of the line,” the robot replied. The wind crawled. The man clasped his temple with both hands and looked up at the cloudless, bronze sky.

“I hate this.”

What could be worse than the stillness? Not the stillness itself, as eerie as it was, but the way this peace occupied the moments between bouts of hell. All of this quiet was an illusion: the man could tell he was always outflanked by danger whether he could sense it or not. Glancing at the robot, he found that if he focused his eyes, he could just make out his reflection softly glowing in its shiny exterior. There was no imminent threat. There was no chance of life on the surface. Even then, he kept staring, like something was coming for him.

“Down there. You go first.” The man broke his trance; the robot motioned toward an adjacent pit and cocked its long, spindly neck. The man looked down into the abyss beside them with incredulity.

“Here? Really? There have gotta be hundreds of these, you want to start right here?”

“Yes.”

“If that means what I think it means, I’m not feeling optimistic,”

“That is an appropriate response.”

Layers of wet, red velvet mud caked the ground beneath the hillside. The man hopped down and skidded along the soil, stretching his left foot out and digging his heel in to slow his descent. The robot followed closely behind, rapidly plunging limb after limb into the cliff as it glided down.

They quickly approached the bottom and the ground began to level out. As they plodded forward, the man’s cleats were leaving an imprint with every step. The pattern may have seemed randomly generated as far as any external observer could be concerned, but every movement was decisive. The footprints were carving an ornate design that only the man could predict. He looked down at his legs and noticed dry rot developing in his suit; there was nothing eating away at its synthetic polymers, and yet it decayed nonetheless. *What makes these legs mine?* He lifted up his right foot. He put it back down. He lifted up the other foot. He brought it back down. It was purely reflexive, it had to be: as he moved forward, he was sure he felt intent.

The entrance was dilapidated, hastily made in its time and certainly never intended to exist as long as it had. Signs of activity were limited, but there were breadcrumbs: a rope, bits of plastic.

“What do you know – this might actually be a good one. Whoever was here, they didn’t stick around long.”

“The ore in this mine alone could provide enough raw material to power my battery for centuries.”

“Do you want me to go in first?”

“Are you not afraid?”

“Yes, but I don’t have a choice,”

“I could give you a choice.”

The man turned to look at the robot. The robot continued to stare at the entrance. Whether or not this was a genuine offer, the man found it was oftentimes easier not to resist. He grunted, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a glowstick, then smashed it on a rock beside the entrance and shook it. It glowed a faint blue under the crushing sun.

“Let’s go, robot.”

The mine was utterly silent. No water dripping, no chirps from any insects or animals. The robot’s light emitting diodes cast shadows across what was visible of the interior. Thick layers of mud and dust obscured broken wooden beams and other unidentifiable debris. The pair silently followed a set of old, rusting, barely visible tracks once used for mining carts. As the expeditioners followed the tracks, their formless, twisting shadows followed them like eyes in a haunted painting.

The tunnel burrowed deep into the ground. Glass from broken lights crunched beneath each step. As they ventured deeper, the air became increasingly metallic, even through the man’s respirator.

“What are the odds —”

“Lithium.”

“I can’t believe it. I truly, truly can’t believe it. Color me suspicious, I just can’t believe nobody else got here first. Am I being paranoid?”

Ahead of them, the passageway narrowed. A small doorway reinforced with timber marked the entrance to a shaft. There were more signs of activity among which included a ladder, a pair of gloves, and a discarded notebook. The elevator itself was no longer functional, but it was only a short drop to the bottom, perhaps two stories. The man peered down into the darkness and after his eyes adjusted, he could see a distorted figure sprawled at the base of the shaft. The robot scurried up next to him and peered over as well. They exchanged glances. The man quickly grabbed the ladder and the two began to make their way down the shaft.

By the time they made it down, it was already clear the other party was deceased. The body was resting on the ground in a relaxed position with one leg splayed out and both arms crossing their chest. The robot looked up and down the body.

“She fractured her leg.”

“She was left here, you mean,” the man continued.

“It was likely impossible to help her.”

The man angrily punted a large rock. It moved, barely, but produced a large cloud of dust. The man looked up and as the dust settled, he saw a large pile of boulders and debris blocking their path forward.

“Of course, of fucking course.”

“What do you want to do now?”

“What are our choices?”

“To the next mine.”

“So this was a total waste of time!”

“That does not mean we stop going.”

“No — I don’t think I can keep doing this.”

“Would you like a cigarette? The menthol might calm you,”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“Just a light-hearted joke to ease the situation.”

“What situation? How long have we been doing this? And for nothing, ever. I want to go back to the station. That’s all I want.”

“That is not an option right now. Is there anything else you would like to do?”

“No.” The man froze. He looked up to the sky and held his breath for a moment before continuing. “I’m not even sure what drives me anymore besides trying, desperately, not to break everyone around me.”

The robot slid over to his companion and stretched out a limb. The man recoiled, then relaxed. The robot began to hum. He noticed it did this whenever it struggled to deliver a response. Finally, it replied.

“I am not able to understand how that feels.”

The man stepped back. “I want to keep going, robot, but then there’s this part of me which is just exhausted, sad, tired, overwhelmed. And done. And I don’t know, honestly, this isn’t a rhetorical question, do I quash that? Or can I?”

The man backed up the rest of the way against the dark, jagged wall behind him and slumped down to the cold ground.

“I could not tell you, human. My purpose was provided for me.”

“Right. And you keep telling me the entirety of your existence is cooped up in a tiny box behind this lens of yours.” The man gently flicked the robot’s ocular lens.

“If you choose to look at it that way, yes. That is logically consistent.”

“Listen to me. We are both made of the same materials, aren’t we? Atoms, molecules. The same forces of nature that made me made you too. So hear me out: with my son, maybe I don’t always know what he’s thinking. But that energy in my head, my soul, whatever they call it – sometimes I wonder if it’s *non-local*. You know what I mean? As in, maybe my mind is somewhere else, some entirely different, unfathomable plane of existence beyond the silliest or – who knows – maybe among the most mundane possibilities you could ever imagine in this universe. I want to believe wherever it is, wherever we really are, he’s close by. Then that way, maybe we are together. Maybe we’re more connected than I can tell right now, it just isn’t tangible. Or... something.”

He looked down and shook his head.

“What about you, robot? Right here, right now, what are you feeling? Are we sentient? Are we something else?”

The robot stared back at the human for several seconds.

“You have asked me a broad question. I still need to parse your statement so that I may respond appropriately later. What I can tell you right now is that I am an amalgamation of components, many of which are interchangeable and few of which are unique.”

“Well – so am I. You put either of us in the heart of a star and we turn to dust. What makes this particular arrangement so special? How do I think, feel. Where is all that data and information getting stored? You think it’s inside us and that’s it? It’s up here...”

The man stuck out his index finger and pointed aggressively at the center of his visor, like a man robbing a bank.

“...and that’s it? Well – what happens to this up here?”

“That is the ultimate question.”

“I know you don’t have an answer, I’m just prodding you.”

Again, the robot stared back at the human and hummed for several seconds before responding.

“It’s unfortunate that we were unsuccessful. There are only 144 more deposits left to scour.”

“You had to count?”

The robot cocked its head.

“If you are ready, we can leave.”

“I was *born* ready.”

The two left silently and their shadows followed close behind. Back at the entrance of the mine, daylight was beginning to fade, but the sun was still scorching the surface of the planet.

“It’s so damn unforgiving out here. Hard to believe the Cradle of Humankind isn’t far.”

The robot began to hum. It was humming more than usual and while this concerned the man, he was visibly perturbed as well.

“Do you have something you want to say?”

The robot’s voice fizzled. “I have to tell you, there is nothing in the sky. The station vanished a long time ago.” Its lens flickered.

“Oh. I don’t like where this is going, robot.”

“This may seem out of the ordinary. But I want to thank you for your companionship.”

“Oh, I really don’t like this.”

“I hope you find a purpose beyond my needs.”

The robot suddenly began to hum, louder and louder, and just as suddenly as it began humming, it unceremoniously powered down. Emotionless, the man laid down on the ground facing the sky and spread out his arms and legs.

“If it gives you any solace, I think I got what I wanted here. The rest was just gonna be icing.”

He closed his eyes and removed his helmet. The sun was hot; radiation singed his cheeks. He held in his oxygen for as long as he could before letting out one last gasp and allowing air to fill his lungs. It was the only breath of real air he would ever take, but it felt cool and refreshing, maybe even something like the menthol cigarettes the robot used to tell him about. It was poison, there was no ignoring that, but it was a pleasant poison he would ingest a thousand times again if he could. It burned, first in his chest, then the sensation rapidly spread to his extremities. Soon, even his nails felt like they were on fire. Then he opened his eyes. His vision was fading quickly – was it the sun or something else? It was mesmerizing either way. The same world he had always known, but for the first time, it was unfiltered. His hair caught fire. The ashes crackled and glistened in front of him, catching light off the flames as they danced brightly with the stars which were so much further out. The world had never seemed livelier.

On Mutts and Men - A Pontification

On the day I adopted my dog, my mom called my brother to tell him about a dream she'd just had. My mom is the sort of person who derives too much meaning from things that don't make any sense, a trait which is not helped by occasional lucid dreams. In this particular dream, my recently-late grandmother was telling my mom that I needed to adopt a dog. My mom would ask questions like "why," and my grandmother would return: *he needs to get a dog*. To her credit, my grandmother was known to be direct in this way and rarely seemed to feel the need to explain herself. For my mom, this message was profound, an omen passed to her from the great beyond. I think my mom is crazy, but I dream about my grandmother too sometimes.

I was living in Denver, Colorado at the time in a two bedroom townhouse with my older brother. Six months had already passed since we trekked across the country from Massachusetts together and Denver was no longer strange or unfamiliar to me. When friends asked how things were going, I would tell them Denver felt like any city. In spite of this confidence, it was not my home and I was constantly reminded of this in small ways. My bandmates were deeply conservative, a shock to my east-coast liberal attitude. At the pizza bar where I worked, my coworkers called me "Boston Ty" with a mocking Southie patois even though I've never carried a regional accent myself – I grew up in the suburbs. Worse yet, no matter how much I hiked or skied, my body always seemed to hurt the next day. I was out of my element and beginning to miss the cozy intricacies of my childhood home in New England.

Prior to that morning, my brother had heard about a dog adoption event in a town thirty minutes south of Denver. When people recall seminal events in their lives, they often remark on small details like the weather, the clothes they wore, or other odd, irrelevant facts which are meant to somehow beckon significance. For me, this is not often the case. This is largely because I have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; a certain sort of tunnel vision predisposes my mind to ignore important details in my life. Nevertheless, I do remember the shirt I wore that morning: a white T-shirt with an abstract drawing of a wolf howling. This shirt was a hand-me-down from my older brother. Although I was now 22 and the shirt was too tight, I deliberately chose to wear it anyway.

Not to upset our grandmother, we drove. Denver and much of the surrounding area exists in a sort of bowl with the edges defined by seemingly endless mountains. The first time a person from the east coast rolls through the Rockies feels exhilarating, or at least it ought to. Although both mountain ranges are great in their own regard, no peak in Appalachia can compare to the towering, jagged behemoths that envelop Denver. Geologists say that the Appalachians once likely reached as tall as the Rockies, possibly even taller, but 480 million years of weathering has since softened and decapitated them. The Rockies, on the other hand, are relatively new with many of its winding paths carved by massive glaciers. Some sources suggest these may have formed during an intense ice age brought on by the very same asteroid which caused the dinosaurs to go extinct. Even though they were by now riddled with my footprints, these mountains were a colossal reminder that I was somewhere I didn't feel I could ever belong.

After thirty minutes of driving, we arrived at a modest strip mall parking lot early in the morning. Dozens of people had already gathered for the adoption event where roughly 20 dogs of all ages, shapes, and sizes roamed an otherwise vacant parking lot. I was quickly handed a bag of treats and encouraged to meet some of the dogs. Within minutes, one particular dog with exceptionally poor manners jumped on me, begging for food as if he'd never eaten anything in his life. Bentley, as he was named at the time, was roughly six months old and already entirely

full of “it.” In the nearly eight years that have since passed, I have never quite defined what “it” is in this context: life, love, or possibly just too much food. On that day, I only remember seeing a mutt who overflowed with exuberance and curiosity. There was no doubt that this was my new friend. My brother and I signed papers, paid an adoption fee, and packed up a crate full of food and toys. The newest member of our family hopped in the back of our car unceremoniously and the three of us were off to discover an uncertain future together.

I should take this moment to note that I did not grow up with any dogs. I was raised in a relatively small house with two older brothers and no space for any kind of fuzzy sibling, but I was always deeply fond of dogs. As a child, my favorite movie was *My Dog Skip*, a film based on a book of the same name. The movie came out when I was six years old and became an instant classic. The story is told by a man recalling his boyhood in the 1940s in the context of his beloved childhood pet, a Smooth Fox Terrier named Skip. I watched the movie over and over again as I fell in love with the dog. This partly speaks to the writer’s success in conveying the depth and emotion of his relationship with his dog, but in truth, I also felt a sort of parasocial kinship with Frankie Muniz – it’s important to remember I was six years old at the time. Frankie Muniz also starred as the titular character in *Malcolm in the Middle*, a TV show which premiered around the same time *My Dog Skip* was released in theaters. Like Malcolm in this TV show, I grew up in a typical suburb in a family dominated by males. In my young, developing mind, films and TV shows like these helped frame and contextualize my childhood experiences. In this way, the media I consumed reflected what was meaningful to me in life: family in the case of *Malcolm in the Middle*, dogs in the case of *My Dog Skip*.

Apropos of nothing, the mutt I adopted would come to be known as Bud. It was originally a nickname I tossed around ironically whenever he would ignore me: “Alright, *Bud*.” Although thoroughly a mutt, genetic testing has confirmed that Bud has predominantly Australian Cattle Dog ancestry. In general, this is going to be a medium-sized, highly intelligent breed with an intense, unwavering work ethic, and Bud indeed exemplifies these traits. Many owners speak to their Cattle Dogs in full sentences because it is simply the most effective way to communicate. Cattle Dogs are also highly rambunctious, each more resembling a velociraptor than a canine until about the age of three, at which point they settle into life as a velociraptor with slightly duller teeth. As the name would suggest, Cattle Dogs were bred roughly two centuries ago to herd cattle. Also known as Blue or Red Heelers depending on coat color, these dogs are infamous for nipping at the heels of cows to drive them along pastures.

Bud certainly knew how to take care of himself; he was discovered wandering the streets of Southeast Missouri after an especially formidable flood season displaced many dogs in the region only weeks earlier. Beyond this, though, his background has always been murky. A certain Cattle Dog pastiche on the center of his forehead known as a *Bentley mark* was the only clue we could muster to figure out his breed. His age was estimated by the wear on his teeth – six months old, give or take a couple months. At the time of the adoption event, he had only spent 15 days with his foster in Denver and it was impossible to determine what his true personality was like.

Bud is what we in the dog training community call *reactive*. It’s a polite way of saying he’s aggressive in certain circumstances. Dogs struggle with anxiety much like humans and with fewer effective methods of communication at their disposal, anxious dogs are prone to lashing out. Dogs are not exceptional in this regard, however. Humans are perhaps even more rash when overwhelmed with strong emotions. As much as we want to believe our actions are profound in some way, a lot of behavior comes down to basic psychology. It’s probably not a coincidence

that so much research on classical and operant conditioning has involved dogs historically. This is the most meaningful part of this to me: I learned to adapt to Bud. He learned to adapt to me. As he got better, so did I.

When we first moved out to Denver together, my brother and I listened to *Welcome to Night Vale*, a ludicrous, fictional podcast about a fictional town. In an early episode, a member of the (again, fictional) radio station finds a cat hanging out in the men's bathroom and the station decides to adopt it. The cat appears stuck hovering next to the sink, but the presenter notes the cat is happy nonetheless and that "...no pet is perfect. It becomes perfect when you learn to accept it for what it is." So I ask myself often: does it matter if I know I'm telling myself a lie when I say my dog is perfect? No – he's perfect *because* I think he is.

Because the histories of dogs and humans are so closely intertwined, it's impossible to distinguish the influence we've had on each other's evolutions. As an average, modern human myself, Bud reflects so much of what is important to me: life, love, food. At the same time, there is nothing special about our friendship and I believe this is one of the greatest beauties of animals. Whatever emotions I feel because of him, countless others will attest they have felt the same. There are arguments that humans developed non-verbal communication as a means to command canines. It's even been suggested that wolves domesticated humans and not the other way around: features of a domesticated species include reduced aggression, a more predictable nature, and retaining baby-like features into adulthood such as big eyes. In all likelihood, humanity as we know it wouldn't exist without dogs.

There is no powerful message here, just a formidable cliché. My dog has made me so happy. Sometimes, I worry if he's happy too. The other morning, he was lying next to me in bed, half awake and waiting for me to feed him breakfast while I lazily read the morning's news on my phone. For a moment, he drifted to sleep and began grumbling at what I can only assume was some mysterious figure in his dreams. As quickly as he drifted off, his eyes shot open and he looked directly at me. His tail began wagging. *Thwap*. What am I thinking? *Thwap*. Of course he's happy.