On Anarchy:

i.

It seemed to Danforth that the holiday spirit had been savagely thrown into the house in no purposeful manner and with much too over-complication and might. Every corner he peered at boasted some form of figurine or seasonal fruit. The smell of overcooked ham and dismally withered vegetables floated around his body and seized his nose. Endless strings of lights zigzagged overhead the small bunch of family that had gathered; yellows, blues, multicolored (but mostly yellows), tried to make their light seen to those below, but only Danforth honored them with his eye, staring each bulb down, interrogating each hue more than the last. It was an ambience created from what? Particles? Photons? As if hauling up these tethers from the basement once a year would bring joy into the house. No, it was a time for the lights to breathe, to wipe their storage dust upon those who cared for them and pretend to be something useful in the face of duty.

“...yes, and the McKees. Peter, what do you think?” his mother’s voice came at him fast from across the room. Her tiny eyes looked straight at him in a mechanical fashion, along with her crossed legs, hand over hand arms, and modest holiday sweater.

“I’m sorry?” Danforth tore his gaze and looked at her.

“We were just thinking that we should go over and give a basket to the McKees, since they’ve just moved in. Nothing too fancy, just some peppermint sticks, some fruit, a few cookies, snickerdoodles, perhaps? How do you feel about snickerdoodles? I wouldn’t want to give them the wrong one.”

“Snickerdoodles are fine. I’m sure they wouldn’t get rejected. I can help you deliver them tomorrow, I should like to meet the new family.”

“Tomorrow? Oh, no. By all means it must be today!” his mother pounced up and fussed her way over to the kitchen, beginning her preparations for the basket. Her voice rang sharply from the kitchen. “Imagine, for a minute, that you were not so fortunate as to have this grand a family visit and accompany you on the sacred day,” her outstretched arm popped through the doorway and motioned towards the ten or so relatives seated around him. This “grand” company sat and stared dead-eyed in every direction. Little progress had been made in conversation with any of them, and Danforth felt he knew them less than when they had first appeared. “You are alone and without guidance. But, there is always hope for connection in a cold world. Perhaps your neighbors might make you feel welcome? If only they reached out immediately and no later. For what does it say when help arrives only once one feels comfortable in giving help? I’ll tell you. It means that the help never was genuine, only a trick to gain respect.” Here, she was guiding Danforth out of his chair and shoving the basket in his hands.

“I see…” he pulled on his black overcoat and wrapped a scarf around his neck. “I’ll go as fast as I can. Wouldn’t want to be late, else they see us as ingenuine!”

“Quit your mocking!” Then, in a hushed tone, “There’s family over. Imagine they heard all this squabbling. What would they think? That a mother cannot properly love a son, and he to her? Go, go!”

He was let out into the cold. He looked at the basket, then quickly began walking down the sidewalk. His gloves were thin and his worn down shoes let in small batches of gray slush. Only his head was warm from the scarf. Quickening his pace, he looked again at the basket. Pah! Like a few peppermint sticks and snickerdoodles will save Christmas! No, quite the opposite. He’ll ring the bell like a beggar, see that they were just in the middle of some important discussion that had waited a year to be had until everyone was present, and just then, when the news was to be shared, would he blunder in and disrupt it all. For what? Some snickerdoodles? He could already envision the sneer on the man’s face when he said his thanks and took the basket. Worse yet, his mother would think she had done something profitable! That she had fulfilled her delusional monologue about connection. And, even worse, they would be connected with her, because he would be the odd man delivering baskets during Christmas, not mother. They would know nothing of mother! Suddenly, he could sense the sneers not only from the McKees, but from all the houses around him. “Could they live any further away?” he thought maddeningly. Only the end of the block but it felt like miles. All along the way eyes were on him, laughing at such a pathetic figure. Some scrawny man dressed in oversized and undersized clothes alone on Christmas. He could hear their voices. Does he really think he’s making a difference? Delivering snickerdoodles and disrupting ceremonies? And where’s his family? Do they not care for him, or better yet, does he not care for them? But he was doing this for them! Ah, spit on it! It didn’t matter what they thought. No, it did not affect him in the least.

Finally, he arrived at the McKees and heard their steps come to the door.

“Merry Christmas!” Both the husband and wife stood before him and two little children beneath them, from which the greeting had been blurted out with ill-taught custom.

“Indeed, merry Christmas!” followed Mr. McKee, and the wife after him.

“Yes, indeed.” Danforth held out the basket. “My…I put together a few things from my house. I just…wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood.” He cringed hard and began to turn back around when the wife took his hand.

“Well, that’s very lovely of you! We’re so sorry, with the whole moving affair, we hadn’t prepared anything for you! But please come in, I’m sure we can find something.” She began to make her way into the house but Danforth cut her short.

“No, no! Please don’t bother. I don’t expect anything from you. Please don’t think that I would demand such a high tax when you’ve just come! I didn’t even mean to bother you, I can see you’ve got many things going on.” Besides decorations, no family or friends could be seen, nor any presents. Again, he started to turn.

The husband called out to him, “Well if there’s anything else we can do for you Mr….?”

“Danforth.”

“...Danforth. Just let us know, We’d love to stay in touch.”

He gave a silent nod and started down the sidewalk. “They seemed nice enough,” he thought. Oh, who was he kidding! He saw right through their act. “You think they were grateful for peppermint sticks and snickerdoodles? Fool! They wanted such a pitiful man gone from the moment I rang. I couldn’t even do that, instead I engaged with their chatter, though they were questions! You should’ve known they were never meant to be answered, just asked, as courtesy…as strategy, even. Played right into their hand, hmm. Imagine if I had gone in and really messed up their happy day. I shudder just thinking. And how vile it was, taking credit for the basket! Now they think it was your idea for fulfilling such a useless gesture. Should’ve said it was mother’s idea. They’d mark me for a coward, anyhow, sorrowfully pinning the act on my old mother. And suppose they weren’t acting. What then? You’ve stolen the credit from mother! It was her idea all the way and you were too selfish to let her have it. And…well quit it! The act is done. Enjoy the eyes from the neighborhood, you deserve it.”

He came into his house once again. He took off his coat and watched his family in their joyous laughter and conversations. “See what happens when you're gone?” he muttered to himself. “They all naturally have a good time.”

“Peter,” his mother came up to him. “How did it go?”

“It went well.”

“That’s good to hear! Now join us, will you? Have some cookies! And we’ve saved your presents!”

“No. I must write. I am inspired.”

“Come now, you’re hosting. You won’t disappear on them, will you? You haven’t seen them in a year.”

“I’m not hosting them. I invited them to my place by your wishes. I never agreed to host anything.”

With that, he made his way upstairs to his study to write.

ii.

Danforth’s study was a curious setup. Long ago he resolved to create a space where writing could truly and unaffectedly take place. Works like Danforth’s should be wholeheartedly genuine, spawning from somewhere deep within man and not an analyzation of the world around him. As he stepped through the threshold he felt as though he were stepping into a church, for writing was his sacred act, his human privilege and meditation all in one. Almost immediately his mind began to cool, flattening placidly the turmoil of the earlier part of the day. Routinely, he took four paces towards the middle of the room, counting and measuring precisely each one as if one mistake would toss away any hopes of being productive. He slowly took a seat in a simple wooden chair and wooden desk that sat there. On the desk was a typewriter. The rest of the room was completely empty. No carpet, no wallpaper, no windows, and no distractions. Danforth sat there, alone in his chair, just staring at the wall ahead of him, hard in thought about how he should best proceed to materialize his ideas. This step was crucial. Thinking and planning is what distinguishes great minds from weak ones and Danforth was to be the best. With this work, he would bring forth the nature no one dared to acknowledge and he would change the world. Revolutions would be spurred, governments would fall, paintings and highly sought after editions would be demanded of such remarkable literature. No, he couldn’t just begin. The whole future of man was counting on this to be perfect. So he sat there for the better part of twenty minutes, generating idea after idea, until finally he had written a perfect portion of his mental genius.

Time for a break.

He took four paces out of his study and headed downstairs. For the time he had run out of motivation and he would need some for later. Or, rather, he needed somewhere to relax and be open with his ideas.

“Oh, Peter,” his mother met him at the door, just as he was trying to leave. “You’ve been in your study for a while. I’m sure you’ve had success, such an intelligent man as you?” she said it genuinely, but he only heard sarcasm.

“Ah, yes, my intelligence. What of it? It’s not like you care.” He seized his coat and stepped out the door.

“But wherever are you off to now? Your guests are still here, you know.”

“So let them remain! What am I to do with any of it? In any case, I’ll be back before long. I’m just stopping by to see my friends.”

“Lord take me! Not these friends again!”

“What? Am I not allowed to have friends like the rest of you? Comrades who willingly accept me and rejoice at my coming? It is healthy in this world. Like you say, these “relationships” are necessary and to each his own!” With that he shut the door and made his way downtown to his friends.

Hidden away from the primary attractions of the small city was a very unusual underground club of sorts. It had the character and physicalities of what one might expect of a small bar or private gambling spot, but the practices that were had were in their own right peculiar. There was no name or signs or windows, just a nondescript metal door in a certain alleyway. Danforth pulled it open and stepped inside.

Darkness consumed the low ceilinged room, flooding its silhouetted guests with murky visages. About thirty or so men were seated around tables casually talking and competitively drinking. On a scrappy stage in the back a short man was bumbling on about some rebel matter of taxes and, well what would happen if they just stopped paying altogether? Danforth continued on his way to the stage, saying his hellos to friends, and even colleagues as he liked to think of it. Danforth had established a solid reputation here in the last few months. The drunks admired him for his curious habits and mannerisms, though Danforth liked to think it was for his intelligence. Each eye reverently followed his path until he was up on the stage and he beheld full attention of the room.

“Get off the stage, boy!” he sneered at the short man, who promptly tumbled down the side and sat down on the floor staring attentively at him, but looking around every now and then to make sure he was doing the right thing.

“Brothers! Are we not sullen enough in our lives to change? Are we not enraged enough to fight? Are we not capable of bringing to fruition our hopes and dreams of a new era?” He was shouting now and so was the crowd. He took a serious tone, “But we don’t know where to put this rage. We have stored up all this energy and if we do not act quickly it will destroy us. So where do we put it? The law. We reject the law! Foremost, laws are designed to protect the rights and wellness of the citizen. So naturally, if our rights and wellnesses are impeded by them then they must go. Besides, every law is bound to be unjust. No matter what, someone will fall short of interest. And these people are us! The common man! Who are not able to escape or stretch or reconstruct as the government can. And they’ll manipulate and exploit us endlessly for we do not have the power. Rather, we vote every few years to send one of us above1. And time and time again we see these lawmakers edit the laws so that they won’t be prosecuted, but us! *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?*2But there is a way. There is a form of government where there is nothing to guard and nothing to abuse: anarchy. And isn’t this most justice? Every man will be free to act in accordance with his spirit and institute retribution in a personally acceptable manner. Why should we bow down to any man? Why should we slavishly abide by the maxims of an elite? No! We must fight! For freedom and love and justice. Justice most of all, any and all for justice!” The men were stomping and yelling and pouring their drinks all over the room, tumbling over one another in hopes of reaching the stage where their great leader stood, fist in the air, standing tall above the filth.

He had done his duty for now. Cautiously, he made his way to the metal door and slipped out into the alleyway.

At that moment he felt like a king. He felt free and eager, anxious and vengeful, as though he had escaped from Batiatus or Auld3 and was now ready to fight to the end to preserve his ideas. The cold felt invigorating and the corner of his mouth even folded a bit, as if hiding a smile.

iii.

Walking on, he saw a homeless man laying against a building. “Hah, if only this man knew what I was doing for him,” he thought.

“Excuse me, sir.” He gave him a kick and the man startled up. “Do you not know who I am or what? Pah, nevermind! What a glorious time to be alive, just wait. It is coming soon, don’t worry. In due time you will be free.” The man looked at him skeptically, as if he were crazed. “Come now, what do you think you’ll do once the government is gone?”

Surprised, the man thought for a minute, then replied in a heavy voice, “I suppose I’ll be dead.”

“Dead? Whatever do you mean?”

“Well, I get my food from the soup kitchen over there, and clothes sometimes. And there are others that help me out, too. But with no government, what will they care for me? I will most certainly rot.”

“That will be your fault anyway, not anarchy. You’re a fool for ending up where you are.” He started to walk away, but a sudden outburst of cackling wheeled back around.

“What’s this?” he leered over the laughing homeless man. “What’s so funny, hm?

In between fits of laughter, “I used to be just like you. But worse.”

“Oh, yeah? Worse than I?”

“I killed a man.” His laughter vanished and he suddenly took on a solemn tone. “I was an idealist. I envisioned the world as it ought to be and set my sights upon it mightily. However, I found resistance with my brother. He knew what I was up to, I had told him things. And he would whisper in my ear all the hours of the night, warning and damning me against my machinations. So in preservation of my ideas, I killed him.”

Danforth recoiled in disgust, “Why do you tell me such vileness?”

A grin spread across the man’s withered face, “Theories and speeches are just the beginning. You want change? You’ll have to eliminate your opposition, practice what you preach!” Uncontrollable cackling escaped his body as he fell jittering to the ground.

“Damn fool!” Danforth whispered to himself as he hurried back to his house. “What nonsense! No, no, much better to theorize for now. Careful planning is what’s needed. Actions will have to be taken, no doubt, but perhaps once I’m gone, once I’ve written it all out and my followers have risen. For I will have a great many followers! Yes, a great many indeed!” So he thought like that for the entirety of the walk. Dreaming about the days when he would be known as a legendary figure and his “followers” had amassed to carry on his ideas. He even held the image of a kind of shrine, with his texts illuminated by candles and offerings, when he entered back into his house.

“Just in time, Peter. Come open your presents,” his mother beckoned him towards the room of relatives who seemed to him, again and eternally, like stuffed carcasses damned to spend their days on Earth, from which they tried to escape. Beside them, in the middle of the room, were several small boxes tied in neat little bows.

“Thank you all for the gifts, I appreciate it.” His mother and relatives smiled and nodded, hinting at a cheer Danforth himself couldn’t sense. “Although next time save yourselves the hassle of adding bows; they’re expensive and annoying to untie, and I don’t like them anyhow.” The smiles dropped away. Danforth didn’t even notice, but began opening the first box.

“A travel book?”

“Yes, have a look through,” his mother waved him on. “I think some new views would do very well for you. It’s quite stuffy here this time of year.”

Danforth set the book down without looking at it. “Very well. Perhaps I shall read it later.” Seeing this, his mother twisted her face and let out a small sigh, falling back into her chair.

He opened the next box. It was a collection of Fuseli’s4 works.

“You seem to be into that kind of stuff,” came a deep voice from the back, probably someone he couldn’t even name.

“Sure, whatever that’s supposed to mean,” he muttered under his breath.

“It means,” began his mother, “that your cousin put a lot of time into finding out what you like.” She glared at him, then flashed her eyes in the cousin’s direction and mouthed “thank you.”

Danforth only stared at her. “And since when did I like art? Nevermind, I'm sure I can pawn it off somewhere. Anyhow, that’s enough for now. I must write.” He stood, grabbed the books (leaving all the unopened presents), and rushed up the stairs. He heard his mother’s anxious apologies down below trying to smooth his mess over, but he couldn’t care less. He paced his way into his study and sat down at the typewriter.

He had tried, he really had, to be a good host in receiving his gifts. And the one time he put effort into pleasing others it blew up in his face. Did they know how hard it was for him to willingly sit before them and dance along in their charades? No, not at all. In fact, they probably thought they were doing good for him, when in reality the dull falseness of it gnawed at his soul and drained him of vital energy. Not only that, his mother and cousin had criticized him in front of everyone, saying he should get out more and what odd interests he took in the realm of imaginations. And so what if he did? He took out Fuseli and flipped through the pages. Yes, he really did enjoy this. It inspired him, even. But his cousin could not have known. He had gotten lucky and luck shouldn’t be rewarded, especially not with praise and reverence.

He brought his mind back to the typewriter. Furiously, he pounded away at the keys, trying as he may to squeeze out his last thoughts. Months, now, he had been working on his masterpiece and he could feel the end was near.

iv.

Danforth tore the paper from the typewriter and placed it with the rest of the stack. He took a deep sigh. Finally, his manifesto was complete. His essay, *On Anarchy*, contained a brief but highly detailed analysis, conclusion, and cure for a reconstructed government, or lack thereof. He was the essay and it was him. So many days and nights spent dreaming about the final product, so many countless arguments about this word or that, yet when he had read it over fully he was proud to say that it was very much so to his liking. But would it be to others? To his mother? To his friends? To the world?

Collecting his papers, he hurried down the stairs. His relatives were now playing some card game of sorts, no doubtedly long forgotten in any modern establishment. He threw on his black overcoat and yelled, “Mother I’ve done it! It’s all written.”

She came rushing towards him. “At last! Thank God, you’ve finished! May I read?”

“Wouldn’t you like to?” he sneered sarcastically, closing the door on her.

She thinks she has the right to read my essay? Hah! They’re always eager to see the finished product but not half as much so to dirty their hands in the process. No, I will take it to my supporters, to the ones who actually care, to my Sanchos!5

Not long after, he arrived back at the club. The men were still in full laughter and boisterousness, as if they hadn’t quieted their cackles since Danforth’s earlier visit. This only irritated him further.

“Quiet you fools!” The room looked to him as he entered, falling silent. “This isn’t a matter to be met with laughter, but with harkened solemnity.”

“We were just celebrating your ideas,” muttered the short man from before. “We hold them to be quite intelligent, you know.” A quick roar was let out in appreciation of Danforth.

“Even so,” he sneered, “there are sure to be fallacies in my theories, as they are human made. But they are a good start.”

A deep voice from the back, “Oh, don’t worry, there’s plenty of errors!” This spurred another laugh from the crowd.

“Who says that? No there aren’t! You think a fool like yourself has the right to insult my work!” Danforth caught himself with a sigh. “Look, just read this. It recounts everything in perfect clarity.” He handed his essay to one of the men and they all gathered around. After a few minutes (it was short but quite dense), they began to look at him one by one. Their faces held blank expressions hinted with terror and abhorrence, a thousand winters, a thousand icicles poised to seek his doom. He looked around feverishly.

“What? You don’t…agree?” Spasmodic weakness gripped his bones, his legs quivered, and his mind shrunk. After a moment of standing there, shivering, he snatched the essay and ran out into the alley.

v.

Death gripped him tighter and warmer than his overcoat. It came from within him and now stuck itself to his exterior. He slowly slid against the rough alley wall and sat down in the wet slush. For the first time he recognized how perfectly alone he was, even from himself. His mother and relatives would never understand, they could never. And now even his kinsmen in the club shunned him as a psycho. And yet an acidic energy still sloshed in his mind. He still yearned for his kingdom, for his fortune, for anarchy. How was it possible for him to be the only one to see clearly? How was it possible? An ethereal numbness crept around his body, frosting over, or rather encasing in ice, his cloak of death until he slid down from the wall and lay on the ground.

A kick jolted him awake. He shot up in a frenzy, unsticking his eyelids from the cold until he met the gaze of the homeless man. As it would appear, the homeless man could not have found this situation any funnier and let out a mad cackle, swaying back and forth comically as he tried to calm down. Danforth merely stared. “Excuse me, sir,” mocked the homeless man, “do you not know who I am or what?” This seemed to ignite an even louder cackling, sending him nearly falling to the ground.

Danforth stood up in irritation. “Ah, get, will you? You wouldn’t understand either!” He waved him off with his hand and started to walk, very slow steps as he could not yet feel his feet.

“Oh, but it’s you who doesn’t understand,” he winked in return. “Come, come, let me take you some place to warm up.” He grabbed Danforth by the shoulders and led him inside a nearby door. Inside it was some nondescript business or warehouse building, under construction or in the midst of moving out for it was vacant and bare. The homeless man led him up a set of stairs.

Danforth wasn’t sure himself why he had followed this man. Perhaps he had nothing else worth following. He wouldn’t go home or to the club, they were inaccessible in his present condition. So he continued up the metal stairs in silence until they were let out onto the roof. The whole city was sprawled in front of them, all the skyscrapers, dazzling lights, and noises of life beheld in their private peaceful view.

“It took a government to build this. And you should know, a government is a cooperation of the people. It is not Olympus, for it was founded by men and controlled by men. Perhaps you could even have a say in all this if only you had the heart and the courage to get involved.” They both faced the industrial horizon. The homeless man glanced quickly at Danforth, and seeing his dried and dead visage, hurried on. “As to justice, it does not stand as anything on its own. Justice is a means of measuring laws and their followers. Without laws there is nothing to be deemed just or unjust for what would you measure from? And what do you care about the government anyhow? They’ve harmed me more than you’ll ever be. So concerned with social justice when you don’t even know what you’re fighting for.” They waited there for a few minutes, silent and shivering. Not even the wind dared breath. Then, with a glint in the homeless man’s eye, “I brought you up here to make a decision. At least this way you’ll act consciously, for I guessed that had I not intercepted you you may have frozen right there in your sleep or walked on infinitely as so many of our idealists do. But now it is real. A decision must be made.”

Almost immediately, as if he had actually been listening, and without showing any sign of fear or courage, Danforth stepped forth onto the ledge. “If you could…push me, sir.” To jump himself would be to recognize his failure, or even worse, to attempt to do good in the name of love. No, he must go out the way he had foreseen, even longed for, in his study.

For a second, the alley below caught his eye. Unexpectedly, he saw his mother run into the club, and in a moment run out frantically. She was searching for something as if her soul depended on it. Had she dropped her wallet? Misplaced her keys? So pathetic was she to be seen like this when he was in such dire need of assistance. Although he didn’t want to admit it, he had held onto a thin sliver of hope for his mother to come around. But the image before him was the final blow to his spirit, as if his sanity was a Prince Rupert’s drop6 and his mother had crushed the tail. He wasn’t sure if he would even make it to the ground or die midair. His heart was that decayed.

In a dry, scratchy whisper, “Drop me next to her, so she can see what’s become of me.” He closed his eyes, allowing it all to finally float away.

He felt a shove on his back.

1 Danforth is referring to government elections, the only path where the “common man” can hope to rise to a position of power.

2 “Who will guard the guards?” (Latin) From Juvenal’s Satire Vl, 1st-2nd century Roman poet.

3 Lentulus Batiatus and Thomas Auld, masters of Spartacus and Frederick Douglass, respectively.

4 Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), Swiss painter who focused on depicting supernatural experiences, such as The Nightmare.

5 Sancho Panza, fictional squire and friend of Don Quijote, from *Don Quijote* by Cervantes (1547-1616).

6 Toughened glass beads whose head is very strong, but will shatter if the delicate tail is broken.