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**Frag[Men]ted:
Representations of Masculinity in David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club***

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ABSTRACT

Supported by a selection of original creative works, this thesis will undertake a comparative study of the ways in which masculinity is represented in David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. I will begin with an overview of the field of masculinity studies, outlining the theoretical underpinnings of this thesis and its situation within the wider scholarship. Via close textual analysis, this thesis will examine the machinations by which these texts' characters resist the oppressive forces of hegemonic masculinity and how such resistance frequently reproduces the patterns of hegemonic masculinity and thereby reinforces its dominant position. The way in which both texts make use of fragmented form and style to reflect the fractured experience of those who occupy masculine identities will also be a significant point of discussion. This fractured experience, I will argue, results from dissonant social and cultural expectations and masculinity's relationship with a complex modern world which induces a sense of dissociation, of disconnection in those who inhabit masculine identities. In concluding, I will suggest that both texts advocate the cultivation of bodily and sensory awareness as a means of combatting the dissociative effects of contemporary masculine experience, and of celebrating multiple, disseminated masculinities over hegemonic ideals.

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Insecure Men’s Support Group

INTRODUCTION

Frag[Men]ted: Representations of Masculinity in David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

This thesis will compare and contrast the representations of masculinity in two contemporary fiction works, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999) by David Foster Wallace, and *Fight Club* (1996) by Chuck Palahniuk. In particular, I will be focusing on the means by which the texts' central characters negotiate the tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities — means such as the creation of hypermasculine alter-egos, the manipulation of feminine and/or feminist rhetoric, and the subversive occupation of feminine positions to reassert a dominant masculine mode. I will argue that both texts make use of fractured form and style to depict the fragmentary nature of masculinity in contemporary society. This fractured form, I contend, also reflects a quality of dissociation which both texts suggest is a prominent feature of contemporary masculine experience; essentially, the relationship of masculinity to a contemporary society in which rapid technological advancement, expedient mass travel, rampant consumerism, and saturation of information are key characteristics promotes a dissociative mode of existence.

In analysing these two texts, I will be drawing on a variety of theoretical works from the field of Masculinity Studies. Interpreting fiction through a Masculinity Studies lens is a relatively new approach in academia and the body of theory underpinning the field is likewise relatively fresh, with many of the most influential works published in the 1980s and 1990s.¹ It is necessary, therefore, to undertake a literature review of sorts to chart the landscape of this nascent subject

and to situate this thesis within the field.

As noted, the 1980s and 1990s were a fruitful period for the publication of Masculinity Studies theory. However, the field's genesis occurred in the 1960s as a 'major reconfiguration of academic disciplines' took place.² One such reconfiguration was the adoption of deconstruction as a philosophical perspective into the academic sphere. Deconstruction and similar poststructuralist theories — put simply — question the stability and universality of identity and thereby pave the way for the reassessment of established notions of gender.³ In particular, the binary system of male and female, masculinity and femininity comes under deconstruction's microscope. Similarly influential and occurring almost in unison with the welcoming of deconstructionism into academia was feminism's shift from 'woman' to 'gender' as its core object of study. This further enabled scholarly interrogation of masculinity (along with femininity) as a social construct.⁴ While not directly employing deconstructionist theory, this thesis will nonetheless take a broadly deconstructionist approach to investigating the representations of masculinity in the aforementioned primary texts. It is useful to state at this point also that my approach to analysing the primary texts will be that of close reading and I aim to avoid speculations of authorial intent.

In the 1970s, a generation of men emerged who, as Adams and Savran note, were 'either actively involved or sympathetic to' feminism's increasing criticism of the established gender order, and these men held that the longstanding sexist system (i.e., patriarchal dominance) produced negative effects on their lives as well as the lives of women. In what might be described as the first wave of the 'men's movement,' significant numbers of men began to question just how advantageous it was to be cast as the superior sex and endeavoured to mediate their complicity in patriarchal practices while 'forg[ing] non-sexist masculinities.'⁵ It is also important to note the influence of the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s on this rising voice of male discontent. The discourses stemming from this movement viewed misogyny and homophobia as analogous and posited that the power of patriarchal masculinity depends on the feminisation of gay men as well as women. It is clear that this first wave of the men's movement sought not to turn the spotlight away from feminism or the construction of femininity. Likewise, this thesis is intended as an ally in efforts to expose the damaging effect of the binary gender system.

Not surprisingly, the first wave's deconstructionist analysis of masculinity

and its alignment with feminism and the gay liberation movement did not resonate with all men. Not all men embraced what John Beynon describes as the ‘widened range of ‘masculine scripts’ made available by the interrogation of masculinity as a construct.’⁶ Publications such as Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (1990) sought to convince men that they had been ‘emasculated by feminism and an effeminizing culture,’ implying that men had somehow been deprived of their innate or rightful power.⁷ The ‘mythopoetic men’s movement,’ for which Bly’s work served as gospel, held the notion that men could and ought to ‘recuperate their own innate masculine power.’⁸ Leaders of the movement used a ‘variety of myths, rituals, and stories’ in their efforts to ‘return men to a deep masculine archetype.’⁹ Among other problematic assertions in *Iron John* is the notion that ‘only men can initiate men’ into manhood/masculinity.¹⁰ I will argue, via analysis of the primary texts, that masculinity produced solely in conjunction with other men inevitably reproduces the damaging effects of patriarchy. While it broadly espouses what Judith Halberstam calls a ‘conservative and protectionist attitude in general towards masculinity,’ some of the sentiments of the mythopoetic men’s movement are worthy of closer inspection.¹¹ The movement’s ‘call for a return to nature, spirituality, and male bonding’ as a replacement for ‘pervasive feelings of emptiness and alienation among many men’ bear particular relevance to the narrator’s trajectory in *Fight Club*.

A theme concurrent with the mythopoetic men’s movement — largely in the public perception but also in some theoretical works — was that of masculinity in crisis.¹² Beynon, in *Masculinities and Culture*, provides a concise definition of the supposed crisis of masculinity:

Contemporary masculinity is held to be in crisis because the central tenets upon which previous masculinity was based (patriarchy, bread-winning, tasks demanding strength) have been eroded.¹³

Increased rates of male suicide, the decrease in academic achievement among male students, and rising unemployment among men are often cited as evidence for this crisis in contemporary masculinity.¹⁴ While second wave men’s movement thinking (i.e., the mythopoetic men’s movement) would attribute this to feminism’s influence and the feminisation of modern men generally, the causes of this apparent crisis in masculinity are, in reality, much more vague and dispersed. Changing labour markets, consumerism, and globalisation are among other

contributing factors.¹⁵ Similarly, precisely what is meant by the term ‘crisis’ in this context is problematic and misunderstood. R.W. Connell attempts to clarify; she writes that masculinity has ‘crisis tendencies’ and that these must be made distinct from the more common usage of the word ‘crisis.’¹⁶ She explains that these crisis tendencies are ‘dynamics which have the potential to transform the conditions of future social practice.’¹⁷ Furthermore, Connell argues that the term crisis ‘supposes a coherent system’ which is either ‘destroyed or restored by the outcome of the crisis.’¹⁸ For Connell, masculinity is not a coherent system — something, I will argue, is evident in both *Brief Interviews* and *Fight Club*. Rather, masculinity is a ‘configuration of practice’ within the more complex ‘system of gender relations.’¹⁹ Essentially, both masculine and feminine gender practice is constantly in crisis, as reconfigurations in either pattern inevitably affect the other. Connell argues that there is instability within the configuration of masculinity itself in the form of challenges from other, subordinated forms of masculinity, and that the contestability of masculine practice is what induces its tendency towards ‘crisis.’²⁰

Connell conceptualises this notion of a dominant masculine mode challenged by multiple other, subordinated versions, with her theory of hegemonic masculinity — a theory which is of prime importance to this thesis. This is a framework adopted from Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci’s earlier theory of cultural hegemony, which examines the machinations which enable a ruling class to achieve and maintain dominance in a society (in particular, democratic capitalist societies). A defining feature of this theory is its focus on the means other than force (i.e., violence real or threatened, military action) by which the dominant class achieves such status.²¹ In her 1987 work *Gender and Power*, Connell provides a useful definition of hegemony as it applies to masculinity:

In the concept of hegemonic masculinity, ‘hegemony’ means (as in Gramsci’s analyses of class relations in Italy from which the term is borrowed) a social ascendancy achieved in a place of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes. Ascendancy of one group of men over another achieved at the point of a gun is not hegemony. Ascendancy which is embedded in religious doctrine and practice,

mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare taxation policies and so forth, is.²²

Connell emphasises that hegemony ‘does not mean total cultural domination, the obliteration of alternatives.’²³ Instead, as noted, ‘other patterns and groups are subordinated rather than eliminated.’²⁴ Essentially, the dominant form of masculinity pushes alternative forms into the background; hegemony is achieved in large part by ‘preventing alternatives gaining cultural definition and recognition as alternatives.’²⁵ Indeed, as Alex Hobbs notes, hegemonic masculinity depends on a weaker, feminised counterpart for validation.²⁶ Implicit in this process of dominance and subordination is a central tenet of masculinity studies; that there exists, in Hobbs’ description, a ‘multiplicity of masculine identities.’²⁷

Connell does not specify precisely which characteristics define hegemonic masculinity (i.e., what hegemonic masculinity ‘looks’ like) — and for good reason. In her 1995 work *Masculinities*, Connell notes that:

‘Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable.’²⁸

Put simply, hegemonic masculinity is contextually specific; drawing on earlier work by Cornwall and Lindisfarne, Connell, in an article entitled *Studying Men and Masculinity*, argues that ‘different cultures, and different periods of history, construct masculinity differently.’²⁹ She notes also that multiple masculinities can be found within any single cultural or institutional setting; ‘within any workplace, neighbourhood or peer group, there are likely to be different understandings of masculinity and different ways of "doing" masculinity.’³⁰ However, Connell stresses that the multiple masculinities outside the dominant mode should not be taken as ‘alternative lifestyles, a matter of consumer choice.’³¹ Instead, Connell advocates for a relational approach, arguing that alternative masculinities exist/are positioned always in relation to the dominant form.³²

While the contingent nature of masculinity makes categorical description of the hegemonic strain challenging, Connell is able to provide some insight into how hegemonic masculinities can be identified — specifically in Western cultures, which is of particular use to this thesis as both of the primary texts I will

be studying were written by Western (i.e., American) authors and feature ostensibly Western characters, settings, and attitudes. Connell suggests that hegemonic masculinity is ‘culturally exalted’ and that the existence of ‘exemplars’ of this particular masculinity who are ‘celebrated as heroes’ plays a significant role in reinforcing the pattern’s cultural exaltation.³³ These ‘exemplary masculinities, in Western societies,’ Connell states ‘are typically defined by a specific body-reflexive practice: sport, violence, heterosexual performance, bodybuilding.’³⁴ Furthermore, Connell identifies ‘the commercial promotion of these exemplars’ as central to the maintenance of hegemony. There are clear links between these facets of Connell’s theory and, of the two primary texts, *Fight Club* in particular; Tyler Durden becomes a kind of exemplar, a celebrated hero of masculinity while, early in the novel, the narrator adheres to a commercially promoted mode of masculinity.

It is important to note that those who most exemplify hegemonic masculinity are not necessarily the most powerful figures in society; the exemplars of masculinity may be ‘fantasy figures such as film characters,’ while the ‘holders of institutional power or great wealth may be far from the hegemonic pattern.’³⁵ Similarly, the dominant strain of masculinity is not necessarily the pattern practised by the greatest number of men, ‘yet the majority of men gain from its hegemony[,] from the patriarchal dividend.’³⁶ This is a feature borne out in *Brief Interviews*; many of the interviewed men fail to meet the rigid criteria of hegemonic masculinity, yet their actions reinforce hegemony and they derive power from their complicity in maintaining its dominant position. Connell stresses that ‘hegemonic masculinity embodies a ‘currently accepted’ strategy [...] for the defence of patriarchy.’³⁷ As noted, hegemony is contestable but, equally, hegemony is adaptive — it can and does resist threats to its dominance such as those from other masculinities, women, and, indeed, feminism. This is also seen in *Brief Interviews* as many of the interviewed men co-opt feminist rhetoric and/or typically feminine traits to subversively reassert their dominance over women. ‘Feelings’ and emotion become acceptable masculine traits when wielded to serve hegemonic means — when used as camouflage for the objectification and subordination of women.

As well as undertaking a comparative study of *Brief Interviews* and *Fight Club*, this thesis includes a selection of original creative works collectively titled *Insecure Men’s Support Group*. These pieces (sixteen in total) draw on the styles

and literary techniques employed in both *Brief Interviews* and *Fight Club* — in particular fragmentary form and style — and similarly endeavour to investigate and/or reflect the nature of masculinity in contemporary society and propose ways of navigating the tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities. In creating these works I have attempted to write from the perspective of both dominant and marginalised (i.e., hegemonic and non-hegemonic) masculinities in order to champion alternate forms of masculinity as well as to explore (and, indeed, expose) the often hideous workings of those masculinities which dominate.

¹ Alex Hobbs, 'Masculinity Studies and Literature', *Literature Compass*, 10.4 (2013), p. 1 <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/10.1111/lic3.12057/pdf>> [accessed 26 April 2015].

² *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, ed. by Rachel Adams and David Savran (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002), p. 1.

³ Adams and Savran, p. 4.

⁴ Adams and Savran, p. 4.

⁵ Adams and Savran, p. 4.

⁶ John Beynon, *Masculinities and Culture* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2002), p. 96.

⁷ Adams and Savran, p. 5.

⁸ Adams and Savran, p. 5.

⁹ Michael S. Kimmel and Amy Aronson, 'Mythopoetic Men's Movement', *Men and Masculinities: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Encyclopedia* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2004), p. 559.

¹⁰ Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 16.

¹¹ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 15.

¹² Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, Third, Revised Edition (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. xviii.

¹³ Beynon, p. 159.

¹⁴ Beynon, p. 76.

¹⁵ Beynon, p. 96.

¹⁶ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1995), p. 84.

¹⁷ R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity in association with Blackwell, 1987), p. 159.

¹⁸ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 84.

¹⁹ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 84.

²⁰ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 77.

²¹ Hobbs, p. 385.

²² R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power*, p. 184.

²³ R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power*, p. 184.

²⁴ R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power*, p. 184.

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- ²⁵ R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power*, p. 186.
- ²⁶ Hobbs, p. 386.
- ²⁷ Hobbs, p. 384.
- ²⁸ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 76.
- ²⁹ R. W. Connell, 'Studying Men and Masculinity', *Resources for Feminist Research*, 29.1, p. 5
<<http://ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/194880976?accountid=17287>> [accessed 28 April 2017].
- ³⁰ R. W. Connell, 'Studying Men and Masculinity', p. 5.
- ³¹ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 76.
- ³² R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 76.
- ³³ R. W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 84.
- ³⁴ R. W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, p. 86.
- ³⁵ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 77.
- ³⁶ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 79.
- ³⁷ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, p. 77.

CHAPTER ONE

Gross and Pitiless Sameness: Masculinity in David Foster Wallace's
Brief Interviews with Hideous Men

In Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, writer David Foster Wallace makes use of fragmented form and style to depict the unstable nature of masculinity in contemporary society. Indeed, to call *Brief Interviews* a collection of ‘short stories’ is somewhat inaccurate; as the title of the work intimates, the more ‘conventional’ narratives within the volume are interspersed with transcripts of interviews with the eponymous ‘hideous men.’ It will be necessary to ruminate briefly on this notion of hideous men and its implications later, but for now we will focus on the fragmentary nature of the text. As if the recurring interview transcripts did not already lend the text multiple narrative strands (an effect which might not be so prevalent in less stylistically-varied short story collections), many of the ‘non-interview’ sections also make use of ‘experimental’ form and style to induce yet more dizzying fragmentation: *Datum Centurio* takes the form of a futuristic electronic dictionary entry, complete with its own barely decipherable, highly codified linguistic shorthand; *Adult World (II)* takes the form of a schema — a technical plan for the continuation of *Adult World (I)* to its logical narrative end — and likewise features frequent shorthand and technical writing jargon.¹ For example:

¹It should be noted that the term ‘experimental’ is somewhat outmoded in its usage as a descriptor for literature which departs from more conventional narrative form and style. However, for the sake of simplicity and in the absence of a more satisfactory term (‘innovative’ fiction is currently

3d. Narr intrusion, expo on Jeni Roberts {same flat & pedantic tone as ¶s 3, 4 of ‘A.W.(I)’ PT. 3}: While following F.L.’s teal/aqua Probe down xprsway, J. hadn’t ‘changed mind’ about having secret adulterous sex w/ F.L., rather merely ‘...realized it was unnecessary.’ Understands that she has had life changing epiphany, has ‘...bec{o}me a woman as well as a wife’ & c. & c.¹

The text features such a preponderance of styles — from the ‘quarter-page flash fiction’ of *A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life*, to the biographical tone of *Death Is Not the End*, to the aforementioned interviews, dictionary entry, and schema — that it defies structure; it is entirely fragmentary.² While the recurring elements of the book — the interviews and passages entitled *Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders* and *The Devil Is a Busy Man* — could be read as imposing a structure on the text (indeed, they are distributed throughout the book at roughly regular intervals), this is an argument easily challenged. The interviews are numbered nonconsecutively, as if taken from a much larger cache of transcripts and, while each is dated, they do not appear in chronological order. *Borders* is likewise numbered out of sequence and extracted from an assumed stockpile of similar miniature narratives existing outside or beyond the ones collected in *Brief Interviews*. Furthermore, these elements — the interviews, *Borders*, and *Devil* — are varied in and of themselves; while some of the interviews follow the conventional ‘question and answer’ format, others are entirely one-sided or comprised of overheard conversations (and therefore are not really, by the strictest definition, interviews at all):

B.I. #3 1-94

TRENTON NJ {OVERHEARD} ⁱⁱ

R——: ‘So I’m last off again and all that business like that there.’

A——: ‘Yes just wait and relax in your seat be the last off why everybody right away all the time has to get up the minute it stops and

favoured but equally problematic) with which to distinguish this mode of writing from its more traditional counterparts, I will be employing it throughout this chapter.

ⁱⁱIn order to reflect the text’s ‘experimental’ style in the quoted passages, I have endeavoured to replicate its specific formatting (e.g. sub/superscript) and use of special characters as closely as possible.

cram into the aisle so you just stand there with your bags all crammed in pouring sweat in the aisle for five minutes just to be the —’³

Despite sharing the same title, the content and style of each *Devil* story bears little resemblance to the other. The first iteration is written in a colloquial style; the narrator often disregards linguistic convention (e.g., the use of ‘an’ to avoid the glottal stop), employs phrases such as ‘jickjacking,’ and describes how his father ‘told me to go on and rake the drive’s gravel back out of the ditch before it fucked up the drainage.’⁴ Adding to the sense of fragmentation, the piece begins seemingly mid the narrator’s thought or as if extracted from a longer work:

Plus when he got something that was new or if he cleaned out the machine shed oftentimes Daddy would find he had a item he didn’t want anymore and had to get shed of and as it was a long haul to truck it to the dump or the Goodwill in town he’d call up and put a notice in the *Trading Post* paper in town to give it away for nothing.⁵

The second iteration’s narrator discusses an occasion on which ‘Three weeks ago, I did a nice thing for someone.’⁶ Once again obscuring the whole, the ‘nice thing’ is never fully revealed; the narrator only discusses the event circuitously. The language of the piece is much more formal and pedantic, with long, multi-clausal sentences:

This flood of emotion, on his part, caused me, sickeningly, too late, to realize, that what I had just done, during the call, was to not only let him know that I was the individual who was responsible for the generous gesture, but to make me do so in a subtle, sly manner that appeared to be, institutionally, euphemistic, meaning, employing the euphemism: “whoever was responsible for _____,” which, combined together with the interest I revealed in the money’s “uses” by them, could fool no one about its implying of me as ultimately responsible [...]⁷

There is a clear connection here between the text’s fragmentation and themes of masculinity. It can be gleaned from this quotation that the ‘nice thing’ involved a gift of money or, rather, as the narrator states, involved an act ‘more classifiable as “diverting” money to someone in “need.”’⁸ The narrator’s inability or reluctance

to reveal the precise nature of the nice thing — at least to those who benefitted from it — serves to highlight the contradictory nature of hegemonic masculinity which makes meeting its ideals impossible. According to Mike Donaldson, the effective performance of hegemonic masculinity is defined in large part by the achievement of particular kinds of ‘success,’ such as career, financial, or sexual success (i.e., sexual conquest — chiefly of women as hegemonic masculinity is, as noted in the introduction, heterosexual).⁹ However, financial success (or the appearance thereof in the case of this narrator) is, at least in *Brief Interviews*, not something about which the narrator is permitted to be boastful. While this may be due to a broader social convention which prohibits the discussion of salary, it seems more likely that the generosity the narrator’s financial success enables him borders on a kind of selfless, nurturing consideration for others typically considered feminine rather than masculine. Thus, in effort to avoid appearing un-masculine, the narrator does not reveal the full extent of his generosity. Compare this with the attitudes to women expressed in *B.I. #3*, in which R—— refers to the woman at the airport as the ‘hysterical girl with the tits’ and describes how she wears ‘these pink jeans and heels that say fuck me in like myriads of major world languages—’.¹⁰ Later, it is intimated that R—— has succeeded in manipulating the woman into sleeping with him by pretending to sympathise with her:

R——: I swear kid but you have never seen anything like this heartbreak on this girl with the tits, and I start telling her how she’s right the guy’s a shit and don’t even deserve and how it’s true most guys are shit and how my heart’s going out and all like that.’

A——: ‘Heh heh. So then what happened?’

R——: ‘Heh heh.’

A——: ‘Heh heh *heh*.’

R——: ‘You really got to ask?’

A——: ‘You bastard. You shitheel.’¹¹

It is evident here that R—— is, if not entirely misogynistic, at least highly disrespectful of women. His attitude and pride at the manipulative nature of his sexual conquest are not challenged by A—— but are, instead, condoned and reinforced throughout — particularly by A——’s lascivious laughter (‘heh heh’), which functions as a kind of linguistic ‘pat on the back.’ It is implied that R——’s conquest gives him not just ‘bragging rights’ but actual power over A—— whom,

during the course of their conversation, he frequently interrupts, telling him to ‘Just wait’ and even, on one occasion, telling him to ‘Just shut it for one fucking second will you.’¹² This comparison reveals the contradictory nature of hegemonic masculinity, which simultaneously condones and discourages boastfulness depending on the subject and its correlation to ‘successful’ masculinity. In both examples the characters are meeting the disparate demands of hegemonic masculinity, but it is only R—— who really gains any dividend (i.e., power) from doing so and whose behaviour is exalted (if only by A——). Indeed, by not divulging that he is the perpetrator of ‘the nice thing,’ *Devil’s* narrator is neither exalted nor able to enjoy an emotional connection with the recipients of his gift. This is not dissimilar to the experience of *Fight Club’s* narrator whose job demands that he inhabit a masculinity of ‘restrain[ed] personal feelings’ while his relationship with Marla demands cultivating a sensitive, emotionally available disposition.¹³ Ultimately, one must go neglected and, because emotion and sensitivity are incompatible with hegemonic masculinity, they are the traits more readily dropped. Both *Fight Club* and *Brief Interviews*, then, depict the tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities and their characters’ efforts to negotiate it.

In *Brief Interviews, Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders* also challenges the overall integrity of the collection. Each homonymous section constitutes a separate narrative and varies in construction; (XI) and (XXIV) make use of a similar first-person narrative style, while (VI) is written exclusively in dialogue, as if transcribed of a conversation. Indeed, the lines at the beginning of (VI) function as a sort of implied subtitle (and, in yet another departure from any kind of structural norm, it is alone in featuring a subtitle) to make this explicit:

RECONSTRUCTED TRANSCRIPT OF
MR. WALTER D. (“WALT”) DELESANDRO JR.’S
PARENTS’ MARRIAGE’S END, MAY 1956¹⁴

Furthermore, despite *Borders (XXIV)*’s implication that at least twenty-four of these ‘examples of the porousness of certain borders’ exist, the collection includes just three. The ‘yet another’ of the title likewise suggests a great number — so many as to be tiresome — but the reader is once again provided with only fragments of the whole. Similarly, Mary K. Holland observes a number of

narrative echoes throughout the text which, once again, ‘imply that they [the pieces] all participate in some larger whole.’¹⁵ Similarly, it is useful to note at this point that my own creative works which appear later in this thesis also contain recurring motifs which likewise insinuate their participation in a greater body of work. The narrators of *Church Not Made with Hands* and *Borders (XXIV)* both make reference to the same bowl haircut, while the motif of the ‘digiform cages’ made by *The Depressed Person*’s therapist’s fingers is also repeated in *Church Not Made with Hands*.¹⁶ The structure that these recurring titles and echoes suggests, then, is really limited to the contents page; it is undone by the text’s myriad forms and styles and frequent non-linearity. The potential for structure highlights the fragmented nature of the text; that is, the unstructured — the fragmented — is heightened by its contrast with the structured. The text ‘assert[s] a kind of integrity,’ Holland observes, ‘by implying echoes and connections’ but these are ‘not absolute.’¹⁷ The text shatters this integrity and ‘readerly attempts to connect and order its pieces’ by its ‘insistence on its missing parts.’¹⁸ *Brief Interviews*, Holland concludes, ‘withhold[s] coherence by comprising pieces and series of pieces that signify gaps, incompleteness, and disorder as much as meaningful presence.’¹⁹

Because of its prevalence and its occurrence within each distinct ‘story’ instead of merely ‘through’ them, as it were, this fragmentation is, I argue, not merely a stylistic choice but a *theme* of the text. In juxtaposing this theme of fragmentation with the theme of masculinity, the text draws a parallel between the two, suggesting that masculinity is fragmented or, to go further, that masculinity *is fragmentation*. To inhabit masculinity, one necessarily inhabits a fragmented identity — that is a multiple, disseminated identity rather than a fixed one. I do not contend that this is exclusive to masculinity (i.e., that fragmentation is somehow inherently *masculine*), rather that this has often been ignored or unrecognised with regard to masculinity. Instead, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, some discourses such as Robert Bly’s *Iron John* attempt to stabilise or singularise masculinity by professing that men are able or ought to, as Norah Vincent puts it, ‘reclaim their essential manhood.’²⁰ Alex Hobbs notes this reductive attitude to masculinity in her reading of Jonathan Rutherford’s *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, stating that masculinity is ‘consistently simplified’, ‘vastly generalised’, and ‘thought less complex than femininity.’²¹

Brief Interviews, then, challenges this oversimplification with its

fragmentary style which necessarily ‘creates a mechanism for eliciting and examining characters’ and readers’ understanding of their ‘beliefs, values, and selves.’²² That is, the text invites readers to consider it — and therefore to consider masculinity — from another or perhaps multiple other, unfamiliar perspectives and to likewise consider masculinity itself as *multiple*. This is most evident in the two-part *Adult World* which, as noted earlier, departs in its second section from the more fully-developed style of *Adult World (I)* (exemplified below):

Galvanic crisis notwithstanding, Jeni Roberts felt awkward and very nearly mortified with embarrassment as she and the ex-lover met and selected their meal options and sat down together in a window-side booth of molded plastic and made radically incongruous small talk.²³

Instead, *Adult World (II)* is presented as a schema, as if Wallace planned out but never got around to completing the remainder of the narrative or suffered crippling doubts about the story’s end which caused him to abandon it.ⁱⁱⁱ Alternatively, *Adult World (II)* could be read as a plan made in effort to *overcome* self-consciousness and doubt rather than one preceding it; as ever, the text discourages a singular reading. While the schema contains enough detail to satisfy readers’ desire for a conclusion to the bifurcated story, its dramatic stylistic shift forces the reader to engage with the narrative from an entirely different perspective — that of the writer, rather than the all-knowing, third-person narrator of *Adult World (I)*. This is not dissimilar to *Fight Club*’s non-linear style (as I will further elucidate in the chapter concerning that text) and frequent narrative perspective shifts which destabilise reading of the text or at least make an ordered, linear reading of the text extremely difficult. The sense that *Adult World (II)* constitutes a self-conscious writer’s plan for an abandoned work is heightened by frequent, intrusive ‘notes to self’ throughout which employ the jargon of writing and ponder the possible narrative implications of the phenomena the terms denote. For example, section 2b(1a) of *Adult World (II)* makes reference to ‘{=p.o.v. shift/narr intrusion}’ and 3b. similarly refers to an ‘{Abrupt p.o.v. change →}’, while in 4a(I) the assumed writer makes a note to ‘(N.B.: *avoid easy gags*).’²⁴

ⁱⁱⁱThis should not be read as a speculation of authorial intent; I have made it clear that this thesis aims to focus on text not author. I merely offer this description as a way of conceptualising the piece, its form/style, and function within the text as a whole.

This is not the first or only instance where the text invites the reader to assume the perspective of the writer — to experience what A.O Scott refers to as the ‘obstacles to writing’ and the ‘self-dramatizing frustrations of the creative process.’²⁵ *Octet*, which immediately precedes *Adult World* in the collection, begins with a series of ‘pop quizzes’ and, as ever, provides the reader with only fragments of an implied whole. The quizzes are nonconsecutively numbered and defy the structure their title suggests; there are just five quizzes within the piece (arguably four, if 6 and 6A are taken as one) and the last of these is numbered ‘Pop Quiz 9,’ suggesting that there exists at least one more than the titular octet.²⁶ In parallel with *Adult World*, *Octet* begins in third-person style before shifting into a second-person mode in Pop Quiz 9 which addresses the reader directly. (Although the reader is addressed directly when asked in Pop Quiz 4 ‘Which one lived.’ and instructed to ‘Evaluate.’ at the end of Pop Quiz 6A, Pop Quiz 9 is the first in which this direct address is sustained).²⁷ Again, just as in *Adult World (II)*, the reader is made to adopt the perspective of writer via this switch to second-person narration, as the direct address, ‘you,’ necessarily places the reader in the world of the story. It (i.e., Pop Quiz 9) begins:

You are, unfortunately, a fiction writer. You are attempting a cycle of very short belletristic pieces, pieces which as it happens are not *contes philosophiques* and not vignettes or scenarios or allegories or fables, exactly, though neither are they really qualifiable as ‘short stories.’²⁸

Once again, as with *Adult World (II)*, the writer whose perspective the reader is invited to inhabit is a self-conscious one; Pop Quiz 9 is highly self-reflexive — essentially a metatextual rumination on the narrative function of the entirety of *Octet* and whether it is performing said function effectively. Indeed, Pop Quiz 9 even reflects on its own self-reflexivity, wondering whether its ‘break[ing] the textual fourth wall [of] realist pretense’ ‘works’ as narrative device or whether this simply irritates readers or comes across as narcissistic:²⁹

And then you’ll have to ask the reader straight out whether she feels it, too... Meaning you’ll have to ask whether she thinks the whole jerryrigged heuristic semi-octet ‘works’ as an organically unified belletristic whole or not [...] You should *not* deploy this tactic until you’ve soberly considered what it might cost [...] It’ll be real. You’ll

be bothering her, the same way a solicitor who calls on the telephone just as you're sitting down to unwind over a good dinner is bothering you.¹⁵

¹⁵ (...Only *worse*, actually, because in this case it'd be more like if you just bought a fancy expensive take-out dinner from a restaurant and brought it home and were just sitting down to try to enjoy it when the phone rings and it's the chef or restaurateur or whoever you just bought the food from now calling and bothering you in the middle of trying to eat the dinner to ask how the dinner is and whether you're enjoying it and whether or not it works as a dinner.)³⁰

The purpose of this self-reflexivity and of forcing the reader to inhabit the role of the self-conscious writer is to throw back the curtain, as it were — to make readers vigilant of the way in which they can be manipulated by the text, can be made to empathise with characters entirely undeserving of empathy, or to despise characters unduly. This is, of course, achieved entirely via the written word, so the text really invites readers to be aware of the manipulative power of language. By encouraging readers to adopt new perspectives and challenging, via its 'experimental' style, what readers consider to be literature, the text likewise demands that readers challenge it and the way its characters appear superficially to be represented.

The self-conscious writer is evident not merely in Pop Quiz 9's thinking aloud about its own function, but also in the long, multi-clausal construction of its sentences and its heavy use of footnotes; the lengthy sentences give the impression of circuitous, hyper-anxious thought, while the footnotes function as a kind of competing voice, interrupting and fragmenting the piece with yet more anxious and often contradictory side-thoughts. The way in which the footnotes frequently second-guess the main narrative thread reflects the nature of self-conscious thought and this technique is paralleled in another piece in the collection, *The Depressed Person*. The piece details its female central character's struggle with extreme depression, though it is important to note that the title of the piece is *The Depressed Person* and not *The Depressed Woman*. There is a universality implied by the title; the narrator's experience of depression is not an exclusively feminine one or even a gendered one at all. Rather, it is a human one. Although it is narrated in third-person, *The Depressed Person* represents one of the few significant spaces in the text devoted to a female character (the other being *Adult World*, though it could be argued that Jeni Roberts' anxieties about her

husband make that story chiefly about him). This might seem a little strange in a text with such prevalent male characters and themes of masculinity — a text in which female characters are, for the most part, absent or subordinated. The most notable example of this, of course, is the silencing of the assumed female interviewer(s), whose interlocations are rendered only as ‘Q.’ (more on this later). That *The Depressed Person* should be female- rather than male-centric perhaps serves to highlight hegemonic masculine reticence to speak about mental health or to acknowledge that depression and other mental health issues even exist; either of these would constitute an expression of emotion and/or admission of vulnerability or weakness incongruent with the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. It seems that, in order to avoid going against the hegemonic grain, so to speak, the text adopts a non-hegemonic, female position; the discussion of depression can only occur when framed as a feminine ‘problem’ rather than a masculine one. This reluctance is perhaps further highlighted by the fact that many of the men in the text are willing to openly discuss other typically taboo or contentious subjects, i.e. subjects not usually approved for ‘masculine’ conversation. For example, in *B.I. #14* the interviewee discusses a particular embarrassing sexual dysfunction; at the moment of climax he spontaneously shouts ““Victory for the Forces of Democratic Freedom!””³¹ Similarly, in *Signifying Nothing*, the narrator recounts how, at the age of 19, he suddenly recalled a hitherto repressed childhood memory in which his father ‘took his dick out, and started kind of wagging it in my face.’³² That these characters should discuss their own sexual dysfunction and possible childhood sexual abuse while the issue of depression is left to a female character suggests among men a powerfully entrenched discomfort with discussing mental health. Both *Brief Interviews* and *Fight Club* approach the relationship of masculinity to mental health somewhat obliquely, then; it is intimated rather than explicitly stated that *Fight Club*’s narrator is suffering a kind of dissociative depression and, likewise, depression is made distant from masculinity in *Brief Interviews*, reflecting, as I have stated, hegemonic masculine aversion to discussions of mental health issues and their treatment.

The Depressed Person also functions as a kind of vehicle for the themes of fragmentation, multiplicity, and self-consciousness. Much like *Octet*’s Pop Quiz 9, *The Depressed Person*, as noted, employs long multi-clausal sentences and what we might usefully call highly ‘pedantic’ language:

The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror. Despairing, then, of describing the pain or expressing its utterness to those around her, the depressed person instead described circumstances, both past and ongoing, which were somehow related to the pain, to its etiology and cause, hoping at least to be able to express to others something of the pain's context, its — as it were — shape and texture.³³

These complex and, as it were, heavily parenthesised sentences make the narrative of *The Depressed Person* fragmented and multiple by way of their many component parts. Also as in *Octet*, *The Depressed Person* makes prolific use of footnotes which frequently spill across multiple pages. Although often extending or adding to the main text, the footnotes imply contradiction by the way they interrupt the narrative and, in this way, replicate on the page the fragmented thought patterns of an extreme depressive who feels miserable while simultaneously berating themselves for feeling miserable. This is not dissimilar to the 'filmic' techniques/motifs employed in *Fight Club*, where multiple threads of narrative occur in parallel, interrupting each other. This produces a kind of dissociative effect while simultaneously shaking the reader from merely passively 'observing' the story by making any single narrative thread nearly impossible to grasp; in short, the reader is kept perpetually on their toes by these numerous narrative threads. The way in which the footnotes frequently run across several pages forces the reader to decide how to read the piece — whether to read the footnotes as they occur, read to the end of the paragraph (which itself might run over the page) and then return to the footnote(s), or to read the entirety of the main text and then the footnotes as if reading two distinct but intersecting narratives. The long sentences and intensely introspective language of the piece also invite the reader to consider whether the depressed person is worthy of empathy — whether she is genuinely depressed or simply highly narcissistic. The regular occurrence of the parentheses '(i.e., the depressed person)' throughout the piece perhaps signifies this narcissism by ensuring the reader does not forget that the depressed person is the grammatical subject of the sentence — by making nearly every sentence entirely about the depressed person. Read another way,

these parentheses elicit the reader's empathy by highlighting the dissociative nature of depression; the constant refrain of '(i.e., the depressed person)' reflects the way in which the depressed person herself feels reduced, feels no longer like a person but merely a condition, and must remind herself she really exists. Ultimately, the decisions the reader faces are really a way in which they are enabled by the text to empathise with the depressed person and her own concern that her depression might really be narcissism:

The former acquaintances and roommates who composed her Support System often told the depressed person that they wished she could be a little less hard on herself, to which the depressed person often responded by bursting involuntarily into tears and telling them that she knew all too well that she was one of those dreaded types of people of everyone's grim acquaintance who call at inconvenient times and just go on and on about themselves and whom it often takes several increasingly awkward attempts to get off the telephone with.³⁴

The relentless page turning the footnotes necessitate encourages the reader to empathise with the depressed person; the tactility of turning pages and the way in which the footnotes, at times, crush and almost entirely suppress the main text ultimately serves to make *The Depressed Person* feel visceral and real. The reader empathises with the depressed person by way of the physical action the footnotes impose; depression is legitimised and made concrete by this back-and-forth page flipping, even while the story lampoons the language of mental health treatment:

[the depressed person's] therapist had strongly supported her in taking the risk of sharing with members of her Support System an important emotional breakthrough she (i.e., the depressed person) had achieved during an Inner-Child-Focused Experiential Therapy Retreat Weekend which the therapist supported her in taking the risk of enrolling in and giving herself open-mindedly over to the experience of. In the I.-C.-F.E.T. Retreat Weekend's Small-Group Drama-Therapy Room, other members of her Small Group had role-played the depressed person's parents and parents' significant others and attorneys and myriad other emotionally toxic figures from the depressed person's childhood...³⁵

The frequent capitalisation of therapeutic jargon serves to highlight and deride these terms, much like the sardonic tone in *Fight Club*'s delineation of support group therapies — of guided meditation, the 'palace of seven doors,' and power animals.³⁶ By satirising the rhetoric of psychotherapy, the text invites readers to consider that language does not produce solely unilateral effects — that language intended to help and heal might equally hinder. The text posits that therapeutic rhetoric is a method of both 'escape from and intensification of narcissism.'³⁷ Essentially, the rhetoric represents the very thing it hopes to overcome; the therapeutic language employed to help the depressed person deal with her depression and its accompanying sense of narcissism necessarily requires the depressed person to become intensely self-focussed, thereby enabling her continued feelings of narcissism and depression.

Language and the implications of its production are themes of *Brief Interviews* as a whole. As I have detailed, the text seeks to make readers aware of the way in which it uses language and language techniques to manipulate and elicit empathy in order to highlight the manipulative potential of language in general, outside the pages of fiction. The text also meditates on the linguistic manipulation which occurs in relationships — particularly the manipulation of women by men. The way in which men can and do weaponise the language and principles of feminism and/or language typically considered 'feminine' to reassert dominance over women is highlighted in a number of interviews. As with *The Depressed Person*'s sardonic capitalisation of therapeutic jargon, this weaponisation of feminist rhetoric serves to demonstrate the way that language used to liberate can be manipulated for oppressive means — to reassert a dominant order (in this case, men over women, hegemonic over non-hegemonic masculinities). This is perhaps best exemplified by *B.I. #19*, one of a handful of interviews which is less like an actual interview and more like a window into a couple's personal discussion of their relationship, what Holland describes as 'conversations with an emotionally or sexually intimately known (but structurally silenced) other.'³⁸ In it, the male interviewee responds to the female interviewer questioning why he likes her or finds her attractive. Her question is of course omitted, but the reader infers it by the subject's response:

'Why? Why. Well, it's not just that you're beautiful. Even though you are. It's that you're so darn *smart*. There. That's why. Beautiful girls

are a dime a dozen, but not — hey, let's face it, genuinely smart people are rare. Of either sex. You know that. I think for me, it's your smartness more than anything else.'³⁹

Readers could be forgiven for taking this as an honest answer. The way in which the interviewer's questions are omitted and rendered only as 'Q.' is itself a kind of manipulative technique on the part of the text; the reader is forced to decide which character to empathise with, and it seems natural to side with the one about whom the most information is provided. Indeed, the fact that the interviewer's opening question is entirely absent (as is the case with all the interviews, it is doubtful that the opening lines constitute the actual beginning of the interview at all) and not even signified with a Q. — that the first voice, silenced or otherwise, the reader encounters in *B.I. #19* is that of the male subject — is another way the piece manipulates readers into taking the subject's answers as earnest. Of course, his responses are really a kind of 'linguistic contortion' employed in effort to 'make the physical ones happen.'⁴⁰ The subject would appear to be aware of at least the central tenets of feminism — particularly the broad goal of liberating women from objectification — and employs this knowledge against the female interviewer. Conscious of her desire not to be objectified (or at least not regarded solely for her appearance), the subject praises the interviewer's intelligence. This is not out of any real respect for her, but for the precise purpose of objectifying her — to win her affections by *appearing* to respect her and thereby convincing her to have sex with him. Her implied suspicion of his nefarious purpose is assuaged by further manipulation. He argues:

'Except think about it a minute; would that possibility have even *occurred* to a girl who wasn't so darn smart? Would a dumb girl have had the sense to suspect that?' [...] So in a way you've proved my point. So you can believe I mean it and not dismiss it as just some kind of come-on. Right?'⁴¹

Indeed, the final line of the piece implies that the subject succeeds in his manipulation — that the interviewer has or is about to acquiesce to sleeping with him: 'So c'mere.'

The subject of *B.I. #40* details a similar kind of manipulation to that which occurs in *B.I. #19*, only with much more candour. He openly acknowledges the

subterfuge of his words and actions, describing how he uses his physical deformity — an arm that ‘looks like [it] changed its mind early on in the game when it was in Mama’s stomach with the rest of me’ — in order to elicit sympathy from women in the form of sex.⁴² Indeed, because his malformed arm is such a powerful manipulative tool, the interviewee has nicknamed it ‘the Asset’:

‘It’s the arm. You wouldn’t think of it as a asset like that would you. But it’s the arm. You want to see it? You won’t get disgusted? Well here it is. Here’s the arm. This is why I go by the name Johnny One-Arm. I made it up, not anybody being, like, hardhearted — me. I see how you’re trying to be polite and not look at it. Go ahead and look though. It don’t bother me. Inside my head I don’t call it the arm I call it the Asset.’⁴³

As in *B.I.*, #19, the interviewee subverts the major principles of feminism for manipulative means; knowing that the women he pursues desire not to be objectified, the subject instead expresses to them that ‘somehow I trust them and they seem real nice and if they want I’ll unpin the sleeve and let the arm out and let them look at the arm if they think they could stand it,’ framing his attraction to them as based on an emotional connection — on trust rather physical objectification.⁴⁴ This often prompts the women to describe him as ‘such a good listener and sensitive not like [his friends] Jackpot or Kenny.’⁴⁵ Indeed, he deliberately positions himself as more sensitive than his pals — thereby inhabiting a non-hegemonic form of masculinity — precisely to maintain the ruse of an emotional connection with the women. Similarly, he feigns insecurity about the way his malformed arm looks:

‘Or we’ll be hanging back at her place in the kitchenette or some such and I’ll go It’s So Hot I Feel Like Taking My Shirt Off But I Don’t Want To On Account Of I’m Shameful Of The Arm. Like that.’⁴⁶

As with the capitalised therapeutic jargon in *The Depressed Person*, the capitalisation here serves to cast these words in doubt — to highlight their duplicitous nature. The apparent expression of emotion this admission of insecurity constitutes extracts sympathy from the women, as is the interviewee’s intention:

‘They’ll get this look on their face like Oh You Poor Little Fella You’re Being Too Hard on Yourself You Shouldn’t Be Shameful of the Arm.’⁴⁷

In a sense, the interviewee is manipulating the way in which feminism has enabled the interrogation of the construction of masculinity as well as femininity. Conscious that the stoicism of hegemonic masculinity is unlikely to fulfil his purpose, he adopts a ‘feminised’ position (i.e., a position of non-hegemonic masculinity; hegemonic masculinity depends, after all, on the feminisation of other masculinities) in order to achieve his goal of sexual conquest. This is echoed in both *B.I. #2* and *B.I. #11*. The subjects of these interviews also adopt ‘feminised’ positions and wield, for manipulative purposes, the kind of self-conscious and intensely introspective language more commonly associated with femininity, with feminine speech. In *B.I. #2*, the subject initiates a conversation with the interviewer, his girlfriend/partner, about his ‘relationship record’ and its implications for their relationship.⁴⁸ The ‘interview’ begins:

‘Sweetie, we need to talk. We’ve needed to for a while. I have I mean, I feel like. Can you sit?’

Q.

Well I’d rather almost anything, but I care about you, and I’d rather anything than you getting hurt. That concerns me a lot, believe me.’⁴⁹

This ‘admission’ of a longstanding feeling of needing to talk is a means by which the subject adopts a feminised or non-hegemonic position; hegemonic masculinity would not permit this apparent expression of emotion. Rather, hegemonic masculinity exalts stoicism while the desire to hold conversation and, in particular, to discuss one’s feelings is not a prized characteristic. Likewise, the subject’s extensive discourse on his relationship history constitutes a non-hegemonic form of masculinity. He discusses at length his tendency in previous relationships to initially be very invested but later feel a strong need to back out:

‘Because then the as it were pattern seems to be that once I’ve got you, so to speak, and you’re as much into the relationship as I’ve been, then it’s as if I’m almost constitutionally unable somehow to push all the way through and follow through and make a ... what’s the right word —’⁵⁰

The subject repeats a similar statement soon after:

‘[...] it seems as if something in me goes into a sort of overdrive in the early intense part and gets me right up to the point of yes of commitment, and then but then can’t quite seem to push all the way through...’⁵¹

This repetition is intended to convince the interviewer and readers alike of the subject’s honesty. The language he employs is somewhat introspective and not dissimilar to the therapy language of *The Depressed Person*; as in the quotation above, he repeatedly refers to his commitment-phobic tendencies as ‘something in me,’ and elsewhere as ‘a history, a pattern so to speak.’⁵² Adopting language perhaps more associated with the feminine than masculine is a means by which the subject distances himself from hegemonic masculinity in order that his words seem more truthful; by daring to contravene the ideals of masculinity which encourage him to hide emotion, the subject’s words are lent more veracious weight. However, closer reading reveals the obfuscatory nature of the subject’s words; instead of being truly honest and calling his commitment-phobia precisely that, the subject is reluctant to use the word ‘commitment’ at all. Similarly, the subject’s descriptions of his phobia as merely a ‘pattern’ or ‘something in me’ has the effect of minimising the problem and making it abstract. The latter in particular is heightened by his repeated protestations that he does not fully understand the phenomenon himself and that ‘I’m not explaining it well enough.’⁵³ This ‘making abstract’ allows the subject to avoid future, real emotional honesty by providing a kind of scapegoat — a ‘clean’ way out of the relationship, in his mind. Rather than admit and face up to his commitment phobia (an admission of fear of course contrary to hegemonic masculinity), the subject can simply deny its existence and cite this unknown, unknowable ‘something in me,’ this inevitable pattern as his motivation for ending the relationship. All of this supposed emotional expression — this adopting of non-hegemonic traits — ultimately reinforces hegemonic masculinity; it reifies its values of stoic unemotion, avoidance of fear, and objectification of women.

The subject of *B.I. #11* similarly shifts the blame for the end of his and the interviewer/his partner’s relationship — an end which the interview itself charts. This time, the blame is shifted to the female interviewer, whose fear that the subject will leave is, he claims, precisely what is driving him to leave:

‘Me leaving is *not* the confirmation of all your fears about me. It is *not*. It’s *because* of them. Okay? Can you see that? It’s your fear I can’t take. It’s your distrust and fear I’ve been trying to fight. And I can’t anymore. I’m out of gas on it. If I loved you even a little less maybe I could take it. But this is killing me, this constant feeling that I’m always scaring you and never making you feel secure.’⁵⁴

As in *B.I. #2* the subject employs emotive, feminine language and thereby adopts a position of non-hegemonic masculinity in order to manipulate. By professing that his leaving is an unselfish act intended to prevent his soon-to-be-former partner experiencing ongoing emotional hurt, the subject endeavours to manipulate her into forgiving him. Thus, the act is really entirely selfish; like many of the other interviewees, the subject ‘enact[s] a mask of earnestness to work toward cruel, ironic purposes.’⁵⁵ The subjects of these interviews display an awareness of the constructed nature of gender; they recognise the manipulative potential of the increased range of emotional expression that non-hegemonic masculinity allows and wield it to serve hegemonic means, often to make a sexual conquest or ‘[to] get some pussy,’ as *B.I. #40*’s subject so crudely phrases it.⁵⁶ Indeed, the subject of *B.I. #40* describes how his manipulation of women is carried out in distinct stages, and estimates the time taken to achieve his goal: ‘Usually long about two weeks, like that.’⁵⁷ The climactic stage occurs when the subject, having built his misshapen arm up as unimaginably ugly, finally reveals it. This, combined with his affected shame, prompts the women to insist the arm cannot possibly be as awful as he makes out. To ensure maximum impact for the reveal, the interviewee paints the arm with ‘ointments or Vaseline-type jelly [...] to make it look even wetter and shinier.’⁵⁸ The subject’s arm carries obvious phallic connotations in this interview. If the phallus is an emblem of masculine power then the subject’s malformed arm represents his deficiency of such power and his manipulations are, of course, a means by which he reasserts or re-establishes power; the subject subversively employs his deformed, symbolic phallus in order to dominate. When the arm is revealed to be truly hideous, the women are ‘committed into a corner [...] if they quit hanging back with me now why they know I can go It Was Because Of The Arm.’⁵⁹ Essentially, the women concede to have sex with the interviewee to avoid hypocrisy — to avoid the implication of rejecting him on the basis of his appearance (i.e., having objectified

him) when his attraction to them, they believe, is not based on objectification.

The frankness with which the interviewee discusses his deceit — when coupled with the language he employs in boasting ‘More pussy than a toilet seat, man’ — serves to paint him as cruel and misogynistic, while his description of the ‘stages’ of manipulation and their roughly two-week duration comes across as calculating and predatory.⁶⁰ As ever, though, the text permits multiple readings; if this subject is capable of manipulating and obscuring his true purpose from women then it is entirely possible that he obscures much from the interviewer (and, therefore, the reader, whose knowledge of the subject is necessarily filtered through the interviewer) also. There is much irony at work here — irony, Holland notes ‘in its modernist meaning of saying the opposite of what one means in order to express a separate truth.’⁶¹ The mock insecurity with which the subject deceives women is meant to connote to the interviewer precisely the opposite — that he is in fact not ashamed of the arm, but merely realises the manipulative potential of pretending to be. It is a double bluff of sorts; by claiming he is simply feigning insecurity, the subject seeks to convince himself and the interviewer that he is entirely secure. The misogynist language he employs is really a kind of braggadocio meant also to obscure his fear of the potential for his deformity to inhibit him enacting masculinity ‘successfully.’ The ‘seduction’ of women is, of course, central to hegemonic masculine performance so, by manipulating women into sex, the subject endeavours to reassert or at least reaffirm his masculinity. That all this posturing is necessary to conceal his shame suggests in the interviewee a potent fear of admitting insecurity; doing so would, after all, be incongruent with masculinity. This perspective perhaps enables the reader to more readily empathise with the subject; his actions are not excused but what motivates them is made much clearer and is, therefore, easier to ‘identify’ with. This also provides a lens through which many of the interviews can be read in order to understand why these male subjects are compelled to perform such extensive linguistic manipulation. Some of them might simply be awful people — the title of the collection, *Hideous men*, certainly seems to condemn them as such. Of course, this is really another way in which readers are manipulated, are coerced into snap-judging the characters only for the text to challenge those preconceptions by opening up multiple other perspectives. Just as many of the interviews are neither brief nor really interviews, we can begin to question whether the men depicted are truly hideous — are truly ‘morally offensive’ — or

whether they are oppressed by a system of masculinity whose unrealistic, unattainable and, ultimately, unfulfilling ideals are hideous, are ultimately what enable (or at least contribute to the enabling of) hideous behaviours such as misogyny and rape.

Indeed, rape and sexual violence are prominent subjects in *Brief Interviews*, particularly in *B.I. #46* and *B.I. #20*. The latter, according to Rachel Haley Himmelheber, ‘functions as intricate portraiture of an ever morphing, cunningly adaptive rape culture’ — rape culture in the sense that ‘sexual violence [...] is normative.’⁶² It is important to note that Himmelheber views *B.I. #20* as critiquing rape culture rather than promoting it. In the interview, the subject recounts how he fell in love with a woman whom he intended as only a one-night stand when she told him the story of ‘the unbelievably horrifying incident in which she was brutally accosted and held captive and very nearly killed’ (i.e., the story of her rape).⁶³ The subject describes pursuing the woman at ‘A large outdoor concert-dash-performance-art community festival thing,’ and confesses ‘it was a pickup, plain and simple.’⁶⁴ He admits to completely objectifying the woman, stating that his ‘interest in her was almost entirely due to the fact that she was pretty. Sexually attractive, sexy,’ and that he intended to ‘give her the special false number when we exchanged numbers in the morning.’⁶⁵ He ‘acknowledge[s] parallels in the narratives’ of his pickup of the woman and the rapist’s but this is really a ‘self-aware rhetorical strategy designed to forestall the interviewer’s criticism of his motives or behaviours.’⁶⁶ Like so many of the other interviewed men, the subject of *B.I. #20* wields his apparent self-awareness to assert power over the interviewer. By openly admitting his objectifying behaviour, he guards against her criticisms by effectively defusing them; essentially, because the interviewer is unable to reveal to the subject anything about himself which he is not already aware of or has not already acknowledged, he holds the power. This trend runs throughout most of the interviews discussed here; the men manipulate their apparent self-awareness to deflect criticism or judgement which would otherwise threaten to derail their power. The ‘pseudo-straightforwardness’ the subject wields against the interviewer is of the same variety employed to manipulate the woman at the concert into sleeping with him.⁶⁷ He describes the woman, in yet more objectifying terms, as a ‘Granola Cruncher, or post-Hippie, New Ager, what have you,’ and explains that someone of her ‘typology’:

‘[...] dictated a tactic of what appeared to be a blend of embarrassed confession and brutal candor. [...] I deployed a sensitive-slash-pained expression and quote confessed that I’d in fact not just been passing her blanket and had even though we didn’t know one another felt a mysterious but overwhelming urge just to lean down and say Hi but no something about her that made it somehow impossible to deploy anything less than total honesty now forced me to confess that I [...] felt some overwhelmingly sensual energy seeming to emanate from her [...] and I wanted to] make mutually nurturing and exquisite love with her, and had been ashamed of admitting this natural desire so had fibbed at first [...]’⁶⁸

As with *B.I. #2*, these words are made to seem truthful by their contravention of hegemonic masculinity — by being so powerful as to overcome the stoic unemotion hegemonic masculinity demands. As ever, though, this simply reinforces the ‘heterosexual performance’ aspect of hegemonic masculinity; the subject still objectifies the woman, his objectification is simply shrouded in subterfuge. The subject of *B.I. #20* seeks to ‘draw a clear bright line between his behaviour and that of a rapist.’⁶⁹ He does so by making distinctions based on class, education, and ethnicity in particular, describing the woman’s rapist as ‘someone who probably didn’t finish Manual Arts High School’ and, later, a ‘mulatto.’⁷⁰ In contrast, the subject refers to himself as an ‘educated man [...] who worked himself through college and two years now of postgraduate school.’⁷¹ Indeed, the language he employs throughout the interview suggests someone highly educated. Similarly, Himmelheber keenly observes that the interview takes place ‘in New Haven, Connecticut (home to Yale [University]),’ furthering the distinctions of class and education the subject endeavours to make.⁷² In drawing these distinctions, the subject legitimises his objectification and conquest of the woman as a ‘more acceptable and *safer* brand of predatory.’⁷³ The woman’s rapist, Himmelheber notes ‘is reassuringly other,’ is so different as to distance the subject (as is his intention) from the possibility that his behaviour also constitutes sexual violence. By drawing a parallel between the subject’s (and the subjects of the majority of the interviews discussed here) objectifying behaviour and that of the rapist’s, the text suggests that sexual conquest of women by ‘linguistic contortion,’ to use Holland’s descriptor again, is itself a kind of rape — rape by manipulation

rather than by force, but rape nonetheless. This is the normative rape culture that Himmelheber refers to — a culture which mythologises rapists as ‘other,’ as ‘lurking in the dark of alleyways or ready to pick you up on the highway.’⁷⁴ This myth privileges and protects men who manipulate and extort sex from women better known to them (Himmelheber, citing Buchwold, Fletcher, and Roth, notes that ‘the majority of rapists are known to their victims’ and are of ‘the same race and socioeconomic class’) and whose behaviour is, in reality, far more pervasive.⁷⁵ The subject’s (of *B.I. #20*) efforts to distance himself from this rape culture, therefore, actually evidence his complicity in perpetuating its myths. Hegemonic masculinity bolsters this rape culture and its ‘lies [which] offer protection’ by exalting men who objectify women and manipulate them for sex.⁷⁶ Just as rape culture is ‘ever-morphing and cunningly adaptive,’ so too is hegemonic masculinity (this cunning adaptivity is, of course, how both phenomena defend their dominant positions). This is evidenced in *Brief Interviews* by the way in which the various interviewed men seek to maintain hegemonic positions by manipulating feminist language and principles (language intended, at least in part, to deconstruct hegemonic masculinity) and adopting non-hegemonic, ‘feminine’ positions or qualities — the very qualities hegemonic masculinity prohibits and derides in order to position other masculinities as subordinate and inferior.

While *B.I. #20* critiques rape culture norms, *B.I. #46* concerns itself more with critiquing what Sabine Sielke, quoted in Matthew Alexander’s essay entitled ‘Engaging with David Foster Wallace’s *Hideous Men*,’ terms ‘the rhetoric of rape.’⁷⁷ The interview subject posits the notion that sexual violence, ‘getting incested or abused or violated [...can] have their positive aspects for a human being in the long run.’⁷⁸ He connects this assertion to Victor Frankl’s Holocaust memoir, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, arguing that the physical degradation Frankl experienced in a concentration camp resulted in the ‘totally great book’ and that, ‘if there wasn’t a Holocaust, there wouldn’t be a *Man’s Search for Meaning*.’⁷⁹ He goes on to argue that:

‘taking a knee-jerk attitude about violence and degradation in the case of women [...] adds up to this very limited condescending thing of saying they’re fragile or breakable things and can be destroyed so easily.’⁸⁰

As ever, the reader is confronted with multiple ways to interpret the subject's words; they might be entirely sincere (albeit highly problematic), or they might be a manipulation by which the subject seeks to defend or legitimise rape and/or his own misogynistic views. This is made even more complicated by the subject's suggestion that he has himself been the victim of sexual violence:

‘[...] what if I said it happened to me? Would that make a difference? You that are all full of your knee-jerk politics about your ideas about victims? Does it have to be a woman? You think, maybe you think you can imagine it better if it was a woman because her external props look more like yours so it's easier to see her as a human being that's being violated so if it was somebody with a dick and no tits it wouldn't be as real to you?’⁸¹

If it is the case that the male subject is the victim of the violence he describes — of being ‘a fuck-doll or punching-dog or a hole, just a hole to shove a Jack Daniel's bottle in so far it blows out your kidneys’ — then the fact he initially obscures this by ‘feminising’ the event, by relocating it, as it were, as the experience of a woman (at one point he suggests the woman is his wife, but this is could well be a fabrication, a rhetorical strategy intended to demonstrate his close knowledge of sexual violence without revealing himself as the victim of it) is significant.⁸² In much the same way that *The Depressed Person* feminises the issue of depression in order to discuss it more openly, the subject of *B.I. #46* feminises his own violation in order to discuss it while, at the same time, deflecting the ‘condescension’ — the classification as weak, fragile, and breakable that female assault victims are subject to — which would brand him as unmasculine. Because of the shifting that occurs throughout the interview (at first, a hypothetical woman is the victim of the described assault, then the subject's wife and, finally, the subject himself) the veracity of what the subject says is highly contestable; as Matthew Alexander notes, ‘the ambiguity of [*B.I. #46*] speaks against the formation of neat conclusions.’⁸³ However, the interview does raise important questions about the ‘male perpetrator/female victim paradigm’ of rape rhetoric.⁸⁴ Alexander, quoting Kelley Anne Malinen (herself drawing on works by Sharon Marcus and Judith Butler) suggests that ‘existing theories, both academic and commonsense’ rely heavily on this paradigm and that ‘survivors who find themselves outside this framing are at an elevated risk for invisibility.’⁸⁵

Essentially, the dominant rape rhetoric largely ignores what Malinen calls ‘gender transgressive rape,’ i.e. sexual violence which is not perpetrated by men against women.⁸⁶ Sexual violence of the kind the subject of *B.I. #46* claims to have first-hand knowledge of (a gang of males sexually violating the subject, another male) is among those made invisible by this rhetoric — by the ‘knee-jerk attitude’ he refers to — and so he argues that the language used around rape ought to change. He suggests that:

‘it’s possible even the worst things that can happen to you end up being positive factors in who you are. What you are, being a full human instead of being just a — think about getting gang-raped and beaten within an inch of your life for example. Nobody’s going to say that’s a good thing, I’m not saying that, nobody’s going to say the sick bastards who did it shouldn’t go to jail. Nobody’s suggesting she was liking it while it was happening or that it should have happened. But let’s put two things into perspective here. One is, afterwards she knows something about herself she didn’t know before.’⁸⁷

The subject controversially asserts that rape can have positive, strengthening effects on its victims (i.e., women) — that ‘her idea of herself and what she can live through and survive is bigger now. Enlarged, larger, deeper. She’s stronger than she ever deep-down thought [...]’⁸⁸ Holland suggests that the subject ‘argues for the mental and physical degradation of women in the name of broader thinking.’⁸⁹ Indeed, he invites the interviewer to ‘think how much bigger her [the victim’s] view of the world is, how much more broad and deep the picture is now in her mind. She can understand suffering in a totally different way.’⁹⁰ While Holland’s is a valid reading, it is perhaps a little too categorical; the language employed by the subject — his repeated insistence that ‘[nobody] ever ought to get raped or abused’ and that the dehumanising nature of sexual violence is ‘terrible, we know how terrible it is as an idea, and that it’s wrong’ — establishes sufficient ambiguity as to make uncompromising statements about the subject’s argument problematic.⁹¹ As discussed earlier, the text resists readerly attempts to form neat conclusions. Further sully Holland’s reading of *B.I. #46* is her assertion that the subject is ‘seemingly an incarcerated rapist defending his crime,’ for which she offers no textual evidence.⁹² Certainly, many of the subject’s statements and his overall demeanour feel very threatening — particularly in the

close quarters of a one-on-one interview — and it is possible that these mark him as the incarcerated rapist Holland describes. However, there is no evidence in the text which might point to his incarceration and sufficient ambiguity surrounding his rape apologism also. Marshall Boswell, in *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, offers an alternative reading, positing that the subject and interviewer are ‘attend[ing] some sort of protest rally for violence against women,’ but, like Holland, provides no textual justification for this reading.⁹³ These are certainly possible interpretations (the text does, after all, permit almost innumerable readings) but more explanation is needed. Without evidence, it is difficult to conceive of a way in which the text might support these assertions because the context for this and the majority of the interviews is never made explicit. The reader does not know in what capacity the interviewer acts, where the interviews take place, and what their true purpose is. This absence of context is, of course, a central component of the text’s manipulation of readers’ empathy; as I noted earlier, the lack of information provided about the interviewer(s) makes empathising with them difficult, but the ‘hideousness’ the subjects soon display means they too are difficult to side with. The subject of *B.I. #46* is no exception. Although he elicits empathy by implying that the sexual violation described happened to him, this is muddled by his initial suggestions otherwise which act mostly to defend or preserve his masculinity. Indeed, it could be read that the subject’s argument to reform the rhetoric of rape is also in defence of masculinity — that, in effect, he aims to masculinise the rhetoric of rape to enable men like him to reveal their suffering without, as I intimated earlier, being branded as weak or fragile like female victims. His view that rape can strengthen positions sexual violence as a kind of conquerable obstacle and is, I argue, evidence of his efforts to masculinise rape rhetoric — to align it with hegemonic masculinity’s values of strength over weakness, stoicism over emotional expression. His assertion that the experience of sexual violation can be ‘enlarging’ is really a kind of avoidance tactic, allowing him to forgo admitting weakness — admitting to being psychologically and emotionally affected by the assault — which would be incompatible with masculinity. Unlike many of the other interviews in which the subjects adopt feminine positions to express emotion (albeit, more often than not, insincerely), the subject of *B.I. #46* endeavours to negotiate the emotions surrounding his violation — to liberate himself from silent suffering — via hegemonic means (i.e., by masculinising rape rhetoric). Although well-

intentioned, the subject's effort to masculinise the rhetoric of rape in order to enable himself and other men to discuss their violation is ultimately misplaced; instead of enabling cathartic expression, masculinising the language of rape in the way the subject describes simply reinforces hegemonic masculinity's exalted qualities of strength and stoicism. Furthermore, the subject of *B.I. #46* argues only for altering the female component of the male perpetrator/female victim paradigm, which similarly reinforces hegemonic masculinity by continuing to perpetuate the image of the aggressively dominant male. Indeed, Boswell notes the subject's 'exasperated fury at the buried pain he has just unearthed' and observes that he 'turns on the woman and sneers 'What if I did it to you? Right here? Raped you with a bottle?''⁹⁴ Having opened up about his violation and revealed himself as a victim which, in his mind, marks him as fragile and unmasculine — and having done so, at least in part, due to the questioning of the female interviewer — the subject seeks to reassert his dominance and reaffirm his masculinity with this threatening verbal display.

The subject of *B.I. #46* is not the only interviewee who negotiates the expression of emotion via hegemonic means; the subject of *B.I. #48* is similarly only willing to express emotion when entirely assured of his masculinity. In the interview, the subject describes his particular, peculiar 'courtship ritual':

'It is on the third date that I will invite them back to the apartment. It is important to understand that, for there even to be a third date, there must exist some sort of palpable affinity between us, something by which I can sense they will go along. Perhaps *go along* {flexion of upraised fingers to signify tone quotes} is not a fortuitous phrase for it. I mean, perhaps, {flexion of upraised fingers to signify tone quotes} *play*. Meaning to join me in the contract and subsequent activity.'⁹⁵

Precisely what constitutes the 'contract and subsequent activity' is made explicit a little later, when the subject reveals:

'When I sense the moment is right — on the ottoman, comfortable, with drinks, perhaps some Ligeti on the audio system — I will say, without any discernible context or lead-in that you could point to as such, "How would you feel about my tying you up?" Those nine words. Just so.'⁹⁶

Unable to explain precisely how he determines a partner who is willing to ‘play,’ the subject employs the analogy of the ‘Australian profession known as {flexion of upraised fingers} *chicken-sexing*.’⁹⁷ Essentially, it is a matter of instinct; like the chicken-sexer who apparently ‘determine[s] the sex of a newly hatched chick [...] in order to know whether to expend capital on raising it or not [...] by examining each one entirely by eye,’ the subject chalks his powers of recognition up to ‘some mysterious sixth sense.’⁹⁸ Continuing the chicken-sexing analogy, the subject describes partners willing to be tied up as ‘hens,’ while those who rebuff him are ‘cocks.’⁹⁹ ‘Hen’ connotes traits traditionally associated with femininity such as weakness and passivity, which would suggest a willingness or at least propensity to yield — to be dominated. ‘Cock,’ on the other hand, with its typically masculine connotations of strength, suggests a partner who would threaten rather than bolster the subject’s masculinity. Indeed, the subject acknowledges these connotations later:

‘Though of course the term {f.f.} chicken was often used in our subdivision — by the children with whom I played and acted out various primitive rituals of association — to describe a weak, cowardly individual, an individual whose will could easily be bent to the purposes of others. Unconsciously, I may perhaps employ poultry metaphors in describing the contractual rituals as a symbolic way of asserting my power over those who, paradoxically, autonomously agree to submit.’¹⁰⁰

The subject’s enthusiasm for tying women up is not merely a sexual fetish but, rather, a kind of compulsive need to assert power and dominance. He displays a high degree of self-awareness regarding the source of this need; it has grown out of a complicated childhood relationship with his mother. As ever, this self-awareness might simply be a manipulative tactic — a means by which he endeavours to gain power over the interviewer and his sexual partners. Indeed, at one point during the interview he inserts the interviewer into a hypothetical sexual scenario where she is the woman tied up, suggesting that he has already been, as it were, ‘sizing her up’ as a potential sexual conquest:

‘In other words, an assertion that one is secure enough in one’s concept of one’s own personal power to ritualistically give up that

power to another person — in this example, me — who will then proceed to take off your slacks and sweater and underthings and tie your wrists and ankles to my antique bedposts with satin thongs.’¹⁰¹

Almost immediately, however, the subject denies that this hypothesising is indicative of any actual desire for a sexual encounter with the interviewer:

‘I am, of course, for the purposes of this conversation, merely using you as an example. Do not think that I am actually proposing any contractual possibility with you. I scarcely know you. Not to mention the amount of context and explanation I am granting you here — this is not how I operate. {Laughter.} No, my dear, you have nothing to fear from me.’¹⁰²

The subject’s denial that he is ‘proposing any contractual possibility’ with the interviewer would seem to be a manipulative ploy; by making the denial almost immediately after describing the kind of inner security it takes to enter a bondage ‘contract,’ the subject implies that the interviewer does not possess the requisite self-security. This is assisted by the subject’s ‘mysterious sixth sense’ means of determining partners who have ‘what it takes,’ which professes expertise but the mysterious nature of which means it is almost impossible to logically challenge. Essentially, the subject is attempting to manipulate the interviewer into proving his conclusion wrong — to prove that she is secure enough in her own personal power to allow the subject to restrain and dominate her sexually. Once again, the rhetoric and/or principles of feminism are weaponised; instilled in her by feminism, the interviewer’s concept of herself as an autonomously powerful woman is now deployed as a manipulative tactic against her. As ever, the interviewer’s next question is omitted but the subject’s short response, ‘But of course you are,’ suggests she queries whether he believes she is secure enough in her power to, as in the earlier quotation, ritualistically give it up. Perhaps hoping the question will continue to play powerfully, *manipulatively* on the interviewer’s mind, the subject avoids further explanation and, instead, moves the conversation swiftly on to yet more detail of his fraught relationship with his mother.¹⁰³ He describes how his mother ‘bequeathed me certain psychological complexes having to do with power and, perhaps, trust.’¹⁰⁴ He attributes these complexes to his mother being ‘erratic in her dealings with, of her two children, most

specifically me.’¹⁰⁵ He later details how her ‘nurturing instincts ran to rather erratic extremes of as it were {f.f.} *hot and cold*’:

‘She could at one moment be very, very, very warm and maternal, and then in the flash of an instant would become angry with me over some real or imagined trifle and would completely withdraw her affection [...] sometimes sending me alone to my bedroom and refusing to let me out for some rigidly specified period while my twin sister continued to enjoy unconfined freedom of movement about the house and also continued to receive warmth and maternal affection.’¹⁰⁶

This had the effect, the subject describes, of ‘seduc[ing] me into {f.f.} *trusting* her and revering her and ceding emotional power to her, rendering me vulnerable to devastation all over again whenever she might choose again to turn cold.’¹⁰⁷ The inconsistency of his mother’s temperament and his subsequent vulnerability to devastation is, it seems, the source of the subject’s proclivity for tying women up — for his need to dominate. The bondage ‘contract’ functions as a means by which the subject is able ‘symbolically to work out certain internal complexes consequent to my rather irregular childhood relations with my mother and twin sister’; women are objectified and, essentially, used by the interviewee as tools to resolve his childhood issues.¹⁰⁸ By binding his sexual partners physically, verbally, and ‘contractually,’ the subject recreates the power dynamic of his childhood, only this time with himself in the dominant position. He is entirely in control of each ‘hen’ in the way his mother was of him; he restrains them in the way his mother confined him to his bedroom and similarly seduces them into trusting him and ceding emotional power the way his mother did of him. Furthermore he controls them in the way he could never be in control of his mother’s temperament, of her affections. The way in which the subject was, as a child, rendered powerless by his mother and her erratic moods, has a kind of emasculating effect on him which he carries into his adult life and for which he seeks redress; by continually orchestrating encounters with women whom he is almost certain will consent to being tied up (or perhaps whom he can convince or manipulate into doing so, into acquiescing), the subject seeks to reassert his masculine power. The subject’s sense of emasculation is compounded by his relationship with his sister who (with her husband) has taken on the role of caring for their now declining mother:

‘They took her in after she suffered a series of small but not life-threatening strokes, cerebral events, and simply could no longer get around well enough on her own. She refused even to consider institutional care. This was not even a possibility so far as she was concerned. My sister, of course, came immediately to the rescue.’¹⁰⁹

There is a tone of resentment in the final sentence of this quotation; unable to fulfil the role of rescuer, the subject is once again deprived of masculinity. Furthermore, the sister is described as ‘a housewife and mother [who] aspires to be nothing more.’¹¹⁰ It seems likely that this is also a source of resentment for the subject; his sister inhabits a traditional feminine role which, although not typically powerful, is at least clearly defined. The interviewee, however, has been deprived of a clear, straightforward path to masculinity (at least of the powerful, hegemonic kind) and, thus, resents his mother and sister alike — resentment which, when considered alongside the subject’s objectification of women (i.e., using them to ‘resolve’ his psychological complexes), is difficult to categorise as anything other than misogyny. It could be read that the subject also seeks to reclaim or reaffirm his own masculinity as a kind of compensation for his emasculated father who, unlike the mother, is noticeably absent from the interview. The sole description of the father is as ‘kindly but repressed and somewhat castrated.’¹¹¹ In the same part of the interview, we learn that the subject’s mother ‘was by vocation a professional clinician, a psychiatric case-worker’ and ‘possessed a *Master’s Degree in Clinical Social Work* {sustained f.f.}, one of the first conferred upon a female diagnostician in the Midwest.’¹¹² Clearly this was a woman who shirked traditional gender roles; if not solely a ‘career-woman’ she certainly balanced her career with motherhood. That she was the first woman to be conferred her particular degree suggests that she juggled work and family at a time when women did not typically undertake careers or, if they did, struggled against various patriarchal institutions to do so. This perhaps provides a lens through which to read the mother’s unevenness in her dealings with her children; the mother possesses anger towards the patriarchal institutions which made her pursuit of a career difficult and this anger manifests itself in an ‘erratic temperament’ towards her son whom, because of his maleness, she views (possibly unconsciously) as a kind of emblem of patriarchy. The description of the subject’s father as ‘repressed and somewhat castrated’ perhaps evidences that he

too has borne some of this anger. In light of this, it is difficult to read the mother's treatment of these male figures as anything other than misandry and, while this does not in any way justify the subject's misogyny, does at least contextualise it and reveal its possible origin. Here, the text ruminates on the notion of 'female complicity,' a relatively new concept in feminist/gender studies which aims to interrogate 'women's participation in patriarchal practices.'¹¹³ Essentially, the text invites the reader to consider the possibility that women are partly responsible for (i.e., complicit in) misogyny. It does so by way of the subject's mother, whose misplaced anger at the objectification implicit in patriarchy (misplaced by being directed at her son who, as a child, was surely innocent of any complicity in perpetuating patriarchal norms) has led indirectly to the objectification of women. The mother's anger and resultant erratic and uneven treatment engendered the subject with not only a resentment of women but, as noted, certain psychological complexes — in particular a 'deficiency' of masculine power — which he endeavours to resolve by repeatedly objectifying and subordinating women. This, in turn, reinforces hegemonic masculinity by implying that the path to masculine power is via objectification and sexual conquest. Again, this should not be read as an attempt to shift the responsibility for the subject's behaviour, for misogyny, but as a means by which the text explores the possibility that men *as well as women* are complicit in oppressive gender systems. It should be acknowledged, however, that the preceding is just one possible reading of this interview. The reader is provided with only the subject's account of his mother's behaviour and, as such, this account is unreliable; it is entirely possible that the subject is misrepresenting his childhood relationship with his mother and that, rather than producing in him the misogyny he displays in later life, his mother is instead retrospectively constructed by this misogyny. As ever, the text encourages more than one interpretation. Furthermore, it challenges readers by presenting a 'hideous' subject with whom they are also permitted to empathise; for example, while the interviewee's language — his cold recitation of psychological concepts such as 'Marchesani and van Slyke's theory of masochistic symbolism, [of] *proposing a contractual scenario* {no f.f.}' — might mark him as calculating, dangerous, and predatory, we cannot help but feel his pain when he recounts his mother's dehumanising gaze: '[she] look[s] at me as if I were some sort of laboratory specimen she'd never inspected before.'¹¹⁴ This is similarly exemplified in the closing stages of the interview, when the subject reveals that, after tying the

woman up and forcing her to ‘acknowledge that she is wholly in my power at this moment [... and] also say she trusts me,’ he lies down and weeps:

‘I’ve already told you. I weep. It is then that I weep. Have you been paying even the slightest attention, slouched over there? I lie down beside them and weep and explain to them the psychological origins of the game and the needs it serves me. I open my inner-most psyche to them and beg compassion. Rare is the subject who is not deeply, deeply moved.’¹¹⁵

Despite the subject’s misogyny and despite his simply using women to have his psychological needs met, it is difficult not to empathise with his apparent psychological pain and his desire to express it and have it healed. His weeping might well, of course, be another manipulative ploy — a tactic to elicit sympathy from the women in the form of sex in a way not dissimilar to the machinations of the subject of *B.I. #40*. Both characters might merely be using their deficiencies, physical and psychological, to extort sex. However, the subject of *B.I. #48* suggests that sex is not his primary goal when he states:

‘Whether or not it ends in actual intercourse depends. It is unpredictable. There is simply no way to tell.’¹¹⁶

If the subject’s true goal is to cry — to feel some kind of psychological or emotional release — he is only able to do so after reaffirming his power and, therefore, masculinity, and entirely subordinating the woman. Thus, the woman is deprived of her physical power (i.e., tied up) and made to verbally reassure the subject that she is entirely in *his* power, that he is wholly masculine. This is not dissimilar to the way in which, in *Fight Club*, the narrator unconsciously creates Tyler, a hypermasculine alter-ego, in order to negotiate his relationship with Marla; both characters, then, deal with emotion through a kind of façade of hegemonic masculinity. Once again, *Brief Interviews* invites readers to consider that the subject is not so much hideous or morally offensive as oppressed by hegemonic masculinity’s derision of emotional expression.

Power dynamics are explored not only in *B.I. #48* but in nearly all of the interviews via the consistent omission of the interview questions. The interviewers (or perhaps just a singular interviewer; it is not entirely clear) are, as I have noted on several occasions, assumed female and their questioning signified only with

‘Q.’ While this could be read as a kind of misogyny — subordinating women by consistently disallowing them a voice within the text — it could also be argued that this silence affords the interviewers a kind of power. The interviews, in a sense, subvert the trope of the male gaze; rather than men judging women, in *Brief Interviews*, men are instead judged *by* women and the women’s silence makes such scrutiny nearly impossible to challenge. Their silence is part of the text’s manipulation of readerly empathy; it encourages readers to align themselves with the male interviewees, about whom a great deal more is revealed, thus contradicting the title’s implication that the men are ‘hideous.’ Of course, this is twisted again when the men reveal themselves to be, although far from unlikeable characters in many circumstances, more than a little contemptible. It is via the interviewers that readers encounter the ‘hideous’ men; they mediate and shape the way the men are represented and are, therefore, not entirely without power in the text. Essentially, the interviewers decide how much or how little of the interview transcripts are shared with the reader. Their silence involves readers in the text; it encourages readers to fill in the blank spaces where the questions would ordinarily lie and — because one of the core aims of the text is to challenge readers’ beliefs — to consider how different questions might shape or influence their reading of the interviewed men. Holland writes that:

The interviewer creates a moral universe: not by allowing the woman to prevail over these repeated male attempts to dominate her with their verbal abuse, but by ensuring our sympathy for her, by making plain her suffering at male hands.¹¹⁷

As this quotation suggests, Holland favours a reading in which ‘Q.’ is representative of a singular female interviewer and, certainly, it is difficult not to feel sympathy for an individual woman maltreated by so many men. However, the advantage of Holland’s reading is also its downfall; as ever, Wallace’s work permits more than one reading. Treating ‘Q.’ as a singular interviewer risks depicting her as a character who repeatedly fails to learn from her interactions with these many hideous men and who thereby loses the reader’s sympathy.

Fight Club and *Brief Interviews*, then, both feature female voices subordinated by what are ostensibly male stories; like the silenced interviewers, *Fight Club*’s Marla is given relatively little page space. Of course, she too has more power than her deprivation of voice might suggest; Marla is really the

motivation for fight club and its connected social upheaval. The narrator makes this clear, stating ‘I know why Tyler had occurred. Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla.’¹¹⁸

¹ David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Little Brown, 2007), p. 186.

² Mary K. Holland, ‘Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men’, in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 108-109.

³ Wallace, p. 22.

⁴ Wallace, p. 70.

⁵ Wallace, p. 70.

⁶ Wallace, p. 190.

⁷ Wallace, p. 192.

⁸ Wallace, p. 190.

⁹ M. Donaldson, ‘What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?’, *Theory and Society, Special Issue: Masculinities*, 22.5 (1993), 643–57

<<http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1149&context=artspapers>> [accessed 23 February 2017].

¹⁰ Wallace, p. 24.

¹¹ Wallace, p. 27.

¹² Wallace, p. 22.

¹³ Donaldson, p. 654.

¹⁴ Wallace, p. 211.

¹⁵ Holland, p. 110.

¹⁶ Holland, p. 110.

¹⁷ Holland, p. 109.

¹⁸ Holland, p. 109.

¹⁹ Holland, p. 109.

²⁰ Norah Vincent, *Self-Made Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 230.

²¹ Alex Hobbs, ‘Masculinity Studies and Literature’, *Literature Compass*, 10.4 (2013), p. 384

<<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/10.1111/lic3.12057/pdf>> [accessed 25 February 2017].

²² Holland, p. 109.

²³ Wallace, p. 180.

²⁴ Wallace, pp. 185–87.

²⁵ A.O. Scott, ‘The Panic of Influence’, *The New York Review of Books*, 47.2 (10 February 2000), n.p. <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/02/10/the-panic-of-influence/>> [accessed 25 February 2017] (para. 5 of 32).

²⁶ Holland, p. 110.

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- ²⁷ Wallace, pp. 131, 145.
- ²⁸ Wallace, p. 145.
- ²⁹ Wallace, p. 147.
- ³⁰ Wallace, p. 157.
- ³¹ Wallace, p. 17.
- ³² Wallace, p. 75.
- ³³ Wallace, p. 37.
- ³⁴ Wallace, p. 41.
- ³⁵ Wallace, pp. 46–47.
- ³⁶ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 20.
- ³⁷ Holland, p. 116.
- ³⁸ Holland, p. 117.
- ³⁹ Wallace, p. 115.
- ⁴⁰ Holland, p. 108.
- ⁴¹ Wallace, p. 116.
- ⁴² Wallace, p. 82.
- ⁴³ Wallace, p. 82.
- ⁴⁴ Wallace, p. 84.
- ⁴⁵ Wallace, p. 84.
- ⁴⁶ Wallace, p. 84.
- ⁴⁷ Wallace, p. 83.
- ⁴⁸ Wallace, p. 91.
- ⁴⁹ Wallace, p. 91.
- ⁵⁰ Wallace, p. 93.
- ⁵¹ Wallace, p. 93.
- ⁵² Wallace, p. 92.
- ⁵³ Wallace, p. 98.
- ⁵⁴ Wallace, p. 21.
- ⁵⁵ Holland, p. 117.
- ⁵⁶ Wallace, p. 83.
- ⁵⁷ Wallace, p. 84.
- ⁵⁸ Wallace, p. 85.
- ⁵⁹ Wallace, p. 84.
- ⁶⁰ Wallace, p. 86.
- ⁶¹ Holland, p. 117.
- ⁶² Rachel Haley Himmelheber, “‘I Believed She Could Save Me’: Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20’”, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55.5 (2014), p. 522 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2013.829798>> [accessed 27 February 2017].
- ⁶³ Wallace, p. 287.
- ⁶⁴ Wallace, p. 288.

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- ⁶⁵ Wallace, pp. 288, 293.
- ⁶⁶ Himmelheber, p. 524.
- ⁶⁷ Himmelheber, p. 530.
- ⁶⁸ Wallace, pp. 288, 290–91.
- ⁶⁹ Himmelheber, p. 534.
- ⁷⁰ Wallace, pp. 299–300.
- ⁷¹ Wallace, p. 289.
- ⁷² Himmelheber, p. 526.
- ⁷³ Himmelheber, p. 524.
- ⁷⁴ Himmelheber, p. 524.
- ⁷⁵ Himmelheber, pp. 524, 526.
- ⁷⁶ Himmelheber, p. 534.
- ⁷⁷ Matthew Alexander, ‘Engaging with David Foster Wallace’s *Hideous Men*’, *Postgraduate English: A Journal and Forum for Postgraduates in English; No 32 (2016): Spring, 2016*, p. 5 <<http://community.dur.ac.uk/postgraduate.english/ojs/index.php/pgenglish/article/view/180/147>> [accessed 28 February 2017].
- ⁷⁸ Wallace, p. 117.
- ⁷⁹ Wallace, p. 116.
- ⁸⁰ Wallace, p. 116.
- ⁸¹ Wallace, p. 124.
- ⁸² Wallace, p. 120.
- ⁸³ Alexander, p. 14.
- ⁸⁴ Alexander, p. 14.
- ⁸⁵ Alexander, p. 14.
- ⁸⁶ Alexander, p. 14.
- ⁸⁷ Wallace, p. 118.
- ⁸⁸ Wallace, p. 118.
- ⁸⁹ Holland, p. 118.
- ⁹⁰ Wallace, p. 119.
- ⁹¹ Wallace, pp. 117, 120.
- ⁹² Holland, p. 118.
- ⁹³ Marshall Boswell, ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: Interrogations and Consolidations’, in *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 193.
- ⁹⁴ Boswell, pp. 193–94; Wallace, p. 124.
- ⁹⁵ Wallace, p. 100.
- ⁹⁶ Wallace, p. 102.
- ⁹⁷ Wallace, p. 100.
- ⁹⁸ Wallace, p. 101.
- ⁹⁹ Wallace, pp. 102–3.
- ¹⁰⁰ Wallace, p. 112.

¹⁰¹ Wallace, p. 106.

¹⁰² Wallace, p. 106.

¹⁰³ Wallace, p. 107.

¹⁰⁴ Wallace, p. 107.

¹⁰⁵ Wallace, p. 107.

¹⁰⁶ Wallace, p. 110.

¹⁰⁷ Wallace, p. 111.

¹⁰⁸ Wallace, p. 104.

¹⁰⁹ Wallace, p. 104.

¹¹⁰ Wallace, p. 111.

¹¹¹ Wallace, p. 111.

¹¹² Wallace, p. 111.

¹¹³ Giuliana Monteverde, 'Not All Feminist Ideas Are Equal: Anti-Capitalist Feminism and Female Complicity', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16.1 (2014), p. 62

<<http://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1778&context=jiws>> [accessed 5 March 2017].

¹¹⁴ Wallace, pp. 104, 111.

¹¹⁵ Wallace, p. 114.

¹¹⁶ Wallace, p. 115.

¹¹⁷ Holland, p. 119.

¹¹⁸ Palahniuk, p. 198.

CHAPTER TWO

Remaining Men Together: Masculinity in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

Readers of David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* encounter in the text a cast of multiple, arguably damaged men who manipulate women, feminine language and, indeed, the rhetoric of feminism in order to renegotiate or reassert a dominant mode of masculinity. Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club*, however, chiefly tracks the experience of just one man, the text's anonymous first-person narrator.¹ This anonymity, of course, lends the narrator an 'everyman' status: it establishes him as a kind of spokesman for a generation of men with no clear, unitary model of masculinity with which to negotiate the complexities of contemporary urban existence. Traditionally, masculinity is modelled by the father but, in both *Brief Interviews* and *Fight Club*, fathers are distinctly absent. On the few occasions fathers are present in *Brief Interviews*, they are cast in negative and often disturbing light: in *B.I. #48*, the subject describes his father as 'kindly but repressed and somewhat castrated,' and in *Signifying Nothing* the narrator recalls an occasion from his childhood on which his father 'took his dick out, and started kind of wagging it in my face.'¹ When not entirely deprived of paternal masculine role-modelling, the men in *Brief Interviews* are primarily shown models of 'damaged' or ineffectual masculinity: the subject of *B.I. #48* coerces women into sexual bondage in order to, at least in part, (re)assert the masculinity his 'castrated' father was never able to, while the

¹ This chapter will focus solely on Palahniuk's novel and not David Fincher's subsequent film adaptation.

narrator of *Signifying Nothing* simply repeats his father's cycle of repression, of refusing to acknowledge his possible childhood abuse (the story ends with a jovial family dinner where the subject of the childhood incident is never broached). In *Fight Club*, the narrator's father is simultaneously absent from his son's life and occupies a flawed, unfulfilled mode of masculinity:

Me I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything.
My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years.
This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise.²

In an article entitled *What is Hegemonic Masculinity?* Mike Donaldson suggests that, while fatherhood legitimates hegemonic masculinity, the practice of parenting actually undermines it — that 'active parenting doesn't even enter into the idea of manhood at all.'³ Donaldson goes on to suggest that 'notions of fathering that are acceptable to men' are characterised by 'emotional distance.'⁴ The narrator's father, then, gains masculine validation from having reproduced but, in order to continue to enact masculinity successfully, he must withdraw from his children emotionally. Essentially, hegemonic ideals render him obsolete beyond his reproductive potential and necessitate that he forgo the sense of purpose and fulfilment that long term investment in his children's lives would likely engender in him. The notion that the father, in perpetually relocating and reproducing, is 'setting up a franchise' reflects his involvement only in establishing each new family; like a franchiser or parent company, he provides the family with 'branding' — with, presumably, a surname — and little else. By repeatedly starting over, the father returns to the only part of the familial process in which hegemonic ideals permit him to be actively involved and is thereby able to recapture a sense of power and purpose. That this process is described in corporate terms (i.e., as a franchise) is noteworthy and suggests that masculinity and corporate structures are intimately linked — that masculinity frequently resembles or emulates the patterns of corporate models — which, as we will discover, is a recurring theme throughout *Fight Club*. Despite only ever achieving fleeting satisfaction, the narrator's father does not endeavour to forge a more fulfilling, alternative mode of masculinity; instead he simply repeats the patterns of the mode with which he is most familiar — a blueprint so engrained in him, it seems, as to be inescapable. The narrator's father, then, is largely powerless to change his own life and, as such, does not model a form of masculinity which the

narrator aspires to emulate.

In the absence of a father who can provide an adequate example, the narrator's boss perhaps represents the nearest alternative to a paternal figure from whom a useful model of masculinity might be learned. Indeed, the narrator acknowledges as much, stating:

If you're male, and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for god. And sometimes you find your father in your career.⁵

Like the narrator's father, however, the boss inhabits a mode of masculinity whose dominant feature is repetition. The narrator describes how 'My boss is wearing his gray tie so today must be a Tuesday.'⁶ That the tie is *his* gray tie rather than merely *a* gray tie — and that the narrator has come to associate it with a specific day of the week — suggests that the boss wears it routinely. In a later scene, the narrator notes 'My boss is wearing his blue tie so today must be a Thursday,' which recurrence serves to emphasise the repetitive nature of the boss's life.⁷ Indeed, the repetition of this description has further significance; the narrator's observations of his boss's ties become a means by which he marks the passing of time, signalling the monotony of his job and, as I will detail later in this chapter, the sense of dissociation he experiences. They also evidence the boss's participation in a kind of corporate, 'professional' masculinity which is, at least in part, defined by the strict adherence to routine and standards of dress. Indeed, the narrator goes on to detail his boss's rigid, habit-driven life:

Mister Boss with his midlife spread and family photo on his desk and his dreams about early retirement and winters spent at a trailer-park hookup in some Arizona desert. My boss, with his extra-starched shirts and standing appointment for a haircut every Tuesday after lunch.⁸

While it would be inaccurate to describe the boss as an entirely corrupt figure, he is at least complicit in the sinister practices of the car company for which he and the narrator both work. In his role as a 'recall campaign coordinator, the narrator is charged with applying a formula to determine whether to initiate a recall of vehicles which have been identified as potentially defective:

You take the population of vehicles in the field (*A*) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (*B*), then multiply the result by the average cost of an out-of-court settlement (*C*).⁹

In many cases the defects occur in critical components, causing the car to crash and its occupants to die violently; ‘the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside,’ the narrator describes, adding: ‘Everywhere I go, there’s the burned-up, wadded-up shell of a car waiting for me.’¹⁰ He goes on to outline further manufacturing faults which are regularly ignored by his company with often deadly results:

I know about the leather interiors that cause birth defects. I know about the counterfeit brake linings that looked good enough to pass the purchasing agent, but fail after two thousand miles.

I know about the air-conditioning rheostat that gets so hot it sets fire to the maps in your glove compartment. I know how many people burn alive because of fuel-injector flashback. I’ve seen people’s legs cut off at the knee when turbochargers start exploding and send their vanes through the firewall and into the passenger compartment. I’ve been out in the field and seen the burned-up cars and seen the reports where CAUSE OF FAILURE is recorded as “unknown.”¹¹

Typically, the company does not initiate a recall if the probable cost of an out-of-court settlement is lower than that of recalling and repairing the faulty vehicles.¹² The narrator is, of course, as complicit in these practices as his boss, but goes on via Tyler and fight club/Project Mayhem to actively resist them, while his boss continues to exemplify the greedy corporate machine which condones this dehumanisation — this reduction of human lives to cold figures, to variables in a formula — in the name of profit. There is a disapproving tone in the narrator’s descriptions of his boss’s monotonous routines — a sense of disbelief at the boss’s preoccupation with having his hair cut or ‘[explaining to] Microsoft how he chose a particular shade of pale cornflower blue for an icon’¹³ Certainly, these seem trivial when weighed against the car company’s violent and unethical practices. Of course, it is possible that the boss’s dull habits are really a means of distracting himself from his company’s crimes — crimes which, as noted, he is complicit in. By focusing on the insignificant and performing a kind of regimented, corporate

masculinity, the boss is able to bury his own desire to speak out against the company. The narrator notes the company's tacit expectation that he will keep quiet about the process for determining a recall and the occasions on which a recall was not initiated and people died: 'I'll keep the secret intact,' he remarks.¹⁴ Norah Vincent, in her observations of male interactions in *Self-Made Man*, notes how men reinforce this kind of non-expressivity via 'sour looks and disapproving shakes of the head.'¹⁵ Rather than disapprovingly shaking his head, however, the narrator's boss reinforces this expectation of silence by remaining silent himself, by actively modelling the expected behaviour. While the narrator's father is forced into a cycle of repetition by an ideal of masculinity which demands that he remains emotionally distant, the boss remains emotionally detached from his job precisely because of his tedious, repetitious routines. The implication, of course, is that the narrator also ought to suppress his emotions, his objections to the company's nefarious practices. Indeed, the boss's dreams of early retirement depend almost entirely on his ability to remain detached and stoic and execute his job thoroughly; by staying silent, the boss successfully inhabits the masculinity his job demands and this begets another kind of masculine success — the financial security which will enable him to retire comfortably. Like many of the men in *Brief Interviews*, the boss is oppressed by a system of masculinity whose ideals enable the perpetration of violence against others; his actions (or, more accurately, inaction) are not excused but the circumstances which give rise to them are made clear. Both *Brief Interviews* and *Fight Club*, then, reveal how powerfully their male characters/men feel the pressure to inhabit hegemonic masculinity — how strongly they fear being outside its privileging sphere. It is clear, too that the modes of masculinity inhabited by his father and boss are not modes the narrator strives to replicate; repeatedly re-establishing a family provides the narrator's father no fulfilment, while his boss's tedious corporate routines and fantasies of trailer-park retirement are the very opposite of aspirational. These are modes of masculinity which disengage the father and the boss from other people — the father from his children and the boss from the actual human lives affected by his company's misdeeds.

The absence or at least unflattering depiction of paternal figures in both *Brief Interviews* and *Fight Club* implies that men's initiation into masculinity depends almost entirely on a role model of 'successful' masculinity provided by a father or other 'senior' male figure. This is particularly true of *Fight Club*; the

narrator refers to the all-male attendees of fight club as ‘a generation of men raised by women,’ and describes in resentful tones his father’s inability to provide him with a sufficient model of masculinity:

My father never went to college so it was really important I go to college. After college, I called him long distance and said, now what?

My dad didn’t know.

When I got a job and turned twenty-five, long distance, I said, now what? My dad didn’t know, so he said, get married.

I’m a thirty-year-old boy, and I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer I need.¹⁶

All of this is reminiscent of Robert Bly’s highly problematic claim in *Iron John* that ‘only men can initiate men’ into masculinity.’¹⁷ Indeed, the narrator’s creation, in Tyler Durden, of an idealised hypermasculine alter-ego — as well as the overall male-centrism of fight club — further evidences the text’s implicit assertion that true masculinity can only be learned via or together with other men. Without a clear, unitary model of masculinity, the narrator is left with no concrete sense of who he is supposed to be — with no identity. While the narrator’s namelessness establishes him, as I suggested earlier, as a kind of everyman — a kind of avatar for the young ‘disenfranchised’ men who are the likely readership of the novel — it also clearly connotes his lack of identity. The narrator feels a sense of powerlessness, a lack of autonomy over his own life or, more specifically, over the construction of his identity. He describes feeling like a ‘space monkey’:

[...] the feeling you get is that you’re one of those space monkeys.

You do the little job you’re trained to do.

Pull a lever.

Push a button.

You don’t understand any of it, and then you just die.¹⁸

In the early stages of the novel, readers find the narrator practising a kind of desperate, rampant consumerism in order to regain some sense of control of his own identity; for the narrator, consumerism appears to be the most viable path to a sense of self. He describes his apartment as essentially a sealed in box — a singular place over which he has complete dominion and which he can fill with objects that ‘define’ him.

Home was a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals. The marketing brochure promised a foot of concrete floor, ceiling, and wall between me and any adjacent stereo and turned-up television. A foot of concrete and air-conditioning, you couldn't open the windows so even with maple flooring and dimmer switches, all seventeen hundred airtight feet would smell like the last meal you cooked or your last trip to the bathroom.¹⁹

The narrator's obsession with the furnishings of his apartment allows him to recapture a sense of autonomy; by controlling the way his apartment is decorated, the narrator believes that he is also in control of his life — that he can forge or at least cement some kind of identity by acquiring precisely the right kind of furniture:

You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. The perfect bed. The drapes. The rug.²⁰

Indeed, the narrator is so convinced that his possessions are vital to his formation of identity that, when his apartment and its contents are destroyed by an explosion, he behaves as if he were himself annihilated:

I loved my life. I loved that condo. I loved every stick of furniture. That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinets were me. The television was me. It was me that blew up.²¹

The narrator describes his thirst for precisely the 'right' furnishings in feminine terms, referring to it as a 'nesting instinct' as if he were an expectant mother furnishing a room for her soon-to-be-born child.²² Just as the male interviewees in *Brief Interviews* often adopt feminine language to reassert power over the female interviewers (and over women in general), *Fight Club's* narrator likewise adopts a feminine position in order to regain a sense of power. Temporarily at least, the narrator is seduced by consumerism's promise of autonomy; the

decisions he makes about how to furnish his apartment feel entirely of his own will and, as such, instil him with the belief that he is in control of the construction of his own identity. It is no coincidence that the narrator gets his furniture primarily from IKEA, whose products typically require self-assembly and therefore reflect the narrator's efforts to assemble his own identity. However, IKEA products are known also for their cheapness and veneer construction, implying that the identity they enable the narrator to forge is similarly a kind of cheap veneer of identity. This is also reflected in the contents of the narrator's refrigerator. He describes its contents thusly:

I'd collected shelves of different mustards, some stone-ground, some English pub style. There were fourteen different flavours of fat-free salad dressing and seven kinds of capers.

I know, I know, a house full of condiments and no real food.²³

Like the identity the narrator labours to create, the contents of his fridge are a kind of illusion; what looks like food is really just an empty facsimile of food. Ultimately, then, consumerism's promise is really an illusion; the process of attainment offers no means of forming stable masculine identity but is, instead, a process which *fragments* identity. The narrator's ever-changing, ever-expanding list of must-have items means that any rigidified sense of identity he creates is quickly negated; as the pieces of furniture ('clever Njurunda coffee tables in the shape of a lime green yin and orange yang,' for example) which once empowered him go out of vogue, the sense of identity they enabled him to forge is likewise eroded and he must start again.²⁴ Despite his loathing for the corporate, capitalistic masculinities practised by his father and his boss, the narrator reproduces a version of his own via his consumerism. (Indeed, consumer capitalism entirely depends on a cycle of obsolescence and renewal shrouded in the illusion of enabling autonomously defined identity). Whatever identity the narrator creates, then, is neither his own nor autonomously created; instead he is at the behest of designers and corporations who dictate to him the furniture he 'needs' in order to be 'complete.' He notes the existence of many others like him whose lives are largely ruled by the acquisition of furniture:

And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the

bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue.

We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern.

[...] We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper.²⁵

These lines reveal the empty camaraderie of consumerism; the narrator and those like him are, in theory, connected by a shared desire for ‘stuff,’ but the connection is a hollow one. Already tenuous at best, the connection is repeatedly and entirely severed as the material goods which are its basis are rendered meaningless (if they had any meaning at all) by new must-have items. The above quotation also highlights the way in which objects have become a kind of fetish; in *Fight Club*, material goods are as sexualised as the bodies in pornography while, conversely, bodies are commoditised material items. This means that the acquisition of material goods is essentially equated with a kind of sexual success — that possessing an abundance of items is almost akin to sexual conquest. Similarly, the narrator’s apartment full of stuff reflects the kind of financial success which Donaldson notes is a feature of ‘successful’ masculinity.²⁶ Furthermore, the above quotation’s comparison of an IKEA catalogue with pornography alludes to the impossible expectations both perpetuate with their polished imagery; just as pornography depicts unattainable airbrushed bodies and unrealistic sexual fantasies, the IKEA catalogue — employing many of the same techniques as the pornographic industry (professional lighting and photography, digital photo manipulation, and so on) — depicts idealised images of perfect living, dining, and bathrooms which are likewise unrealistic and unattainable for most. Lust for furniture has not, however, entirely supplanted lust for women’s bodies — what R.W. Connell terms ‘heterosexual performance.’²⁷ Instead, the two exist in tandem and contribute to an unrealistic ideal of masculinity which demands that men are materially successful (i.e., possess an abundance of material goods, a well-furnished home) *as well as* sexually successful (i.e., desire and/or objectify women, achieve sexual conquest). The same passage in which the narrator describes his obsession with the furnishings of apartment also details his encounter with a ‘security task force guy’ at the airport. The task force guy objectifies the female flight attendants and attempts to draw the narrator into participating in this objectification:

Then, maybe because I'm a guy and he's a guy and it's one o'clock in the morning, maybe to make me laugh, the guy said industry slang for flight attendant was Space Waitress. Or Air Mattress.²⁸

Indeed, the whole encounter with the security guy is charged with masculine bravado; the narrator describes how 'the task force guy called the baggage handlers Throwers. Then he called them Rammers.'²⁹ The security guy attempts to bolster his masculine power — to appear more powerful than he really is — by objectifying women and insulting the other, presumably male workers. He insults not only those below him in the airport hierarchy, the baggage handlers, but also those above him, the pilots:

The security guy asked my name and address and phone number, and then he asked me what was the difference between a condom and a cockpit.

"You can only get one prick into a condom," he said.

These threads of narrative — the relentless details of the narrator's furniture and the account of the conversation with the security guy — are run in parallel (a technique employed throughout *Fight Club* and the effects of which I will detail more later) to suggest that the masculine ideals of material and sexual success they connote likewise exist in tandem. The juxtaposition of these threads illustrates the multiple and often incongruent expectations made of men; workplaces, institutions, women, the media, and other men demand and reinforce different kinds of masculinities. These parallel threads of narrative fragment the text and, as in *Brief Interviews*, serve to reflect the way in which masculinity is a fragmented identity; as I argued in the previous chapter, to inhabit masculinity one necessarily inhabits a fragmented identity. That masculinity is fragmented is further evidenced by the competing sets of expectations the narrator often has to negotiate which necessitate that he occupies multiple, often conflicting roles.

As I noted earlier, the narrator's job demands that he maintains a stoic, unemotional disposition — that he remains emotionally detached despite the violence and loss of human life he is privy to — and this demand is reinforced by his boss whose preoccupation with his own tedious personal routines allows him to remain seemingly emotionless and thereby to model the ideal, dispassionate employee. While his employers condone violence in the name of profit, evidence

of the narrator's participation in the violence of fight club is not tolerated; when the narrator shows up for work injured and wearing bloody clothing, his boss summarily despatches him home to change:

My boss sends me home because of all the dried blood on my pants and I'm overjoyed. [...] "Go home," my boss says. Get changed."³⁰

Indeed, there is a tone of disapproval when the boss asks the narrator, "What do you get yourself into every weekend?"³¹ The narrator explains that he 'just [doesn't] want to die without a few scars' and, shortly afterwards states 'Who I am in fight club is not someone my boss knows.'³² Aware that his boss would likely disapprove of his participation in fight club, the narrator elects to keep that facet of his existence

A lot of best friends meet for the first time at fight club. Now I go to meetings or conferences and see faces at conference tables, accountants and junior executives or attorneys with broken noses spreading out like an eggplant underneath the edges of bandages or they have a couple stitches under an eye or a jaw wired shut. These are the quiet young men who listen until it's time to decide.

We nod to each other.

Later, my boss will ask me how I know so many of these guys.

According to my boss, there are fewer and fewer gentlemen in business and more thugs.³³

There is obvious irony in this last statement; the violence perpetuated by the car company is hardly gentlemanly. Indeed, although the violence of fight club is confronting (the narrator quite graphically details the stitches inside his cheek like 'snarled fishing line on the beach' and his mouth 'shining with blood and blood climbing the cracks between my teeth'), the fights themselves are conducted in a relatively restrained fashion.³⁴ Far from mass frenzied brawls, fight club's bouts are a series of regulated, one-on-one battles reminiscent of duelling knights. Kevin Alexander Boon notes:

Tyler Durden orchestrates a fair fight, re-connecting "fight" with its etymological origins from the Old English *feoht*, which connotes an honourable confrontation.³⁵

To call *Fight Club*'s confrontations 'gentlemanly' would be inaccurate, but the fights are at least governed by a clear set of rules:

Tyler gets under the one light in the middle of the black concrete basement and he can see that light flickering back out of the dark in a hundred pairs of eyes. First thing Tyler yells is, "The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club.

"The second rule of fight club," Tyler yells, "is you don't talk about fight club."

[...] Tyler runs through the other rules: two men per fight, one fight at a time, no shoes no shirts, fights go on as long as they have to.³⁶

Although the participants of fight club are told by Tyler, "[...] if this is your first night at fight club, you have to fight," they attend fight club of their own accord and enter its violence willingly, unlike the victims of the car company's dubious practices who are entirely unsuspecting.³⁷ Furthermore, the narrator notes the third rule of fight club, which stipulates that 'when someone says stop, or goes limp, even if he's just faking it, the fight is over.'³⁸ Fight club's violence has clear limits, then, while the violence meted out by the car company in the pursuit of profit is virtually limitless, and frequently results in death. Here we see a prime example of the narrator experiencing incongruent demands — what Boon describes as the 'web of idealised rhetoric' that *Fight Club*'s men face:

In *Fight Club*, Palahniuk examines American men born in the latter part of the 20th century who face a web of idealized rhetoric that publically condemns qualities associated with traditional manhood — for example, the characterization of an aggressive male as a *typical* man carries with it the inflection of a slur, which 60 years ago was not the case — yet still expects men to perform the same tasks they have been asked to perform millennia: protection of the home and family, expansion and growth of the community, and defense of the nation, all of which demand an ability to act with aggression.³⁹

Boon goes on to describe this paradox — that men are condemned for displaying the qualities typically associated with masculinity but still expected to perform tasks which necessitate the cultivation of those qualities — as a kind of 'cultural dissonance.'⁴⁰ Certainly, *Fight Club*'s narrator is prey to this cultural dissonance;

on the one hand the car company condones violence while on the other it suggests that violence is intolerable, shameful, and unprofessional. Similarly, although the car company expects stoic unemotion from the narrator, the narrator's boss — who really exemplifies the company and its practices — is unable to exercise the same stoic detachment when confronted with the narrator's injuries. The boss is a model of detachment in one instance, but models entirely different behaviour on the other.

In contrast to the detachment expected of the narrator in his job, Marla (whom we might usefully call the narrator's love interest, though he is of course unaware of the full extent of their relationship for much of the novel) expects the narrator to be her emotional or at least conversational counterpart (i.e., to meet her emotional needs). Their encounters are subtly charged with this expectation; in one scene, Marla — perceiving the narrator to be emotionally distant (or at least inconsistent) — states with some exasperation: 'I just can't win with you, can I?'⁴¹ Furthermore, Marla herself makes incongruent demands of the narrator. As with many of the men in *Brief Interviews*, the narrator of *Fight Club* is likely aware of the principle tenets of feminism; indeed, it is difficult to imagine that a college educated character such as the narrator could be unaware of at least the main themes of feminism — in particular the broad aim of liberating women from objectification. Yet, earlier in their encounter, Marla all but invites the narrator to objectify her when she dances around him provocatively, and lifts her skirt to reveal her lack of underwear:

Marla gets up from the kitchen table, and she's wearing a sleeveless blue-coloured dress made of some shiny material. Marla pinches the edge of the skirt and turns it up for me to see little dots of stitching on the inside. She's not wearing any underwear. And she winks.

"I wanted to show you my new dress," Marla says. "It's a bridesmaid dress and it's all hand sewn. Do you like it? The Goodwill thrift sold it for one dollar. Somebody did all these tiny stitches just to make this ugly, ugly dress," Marla says. "Can you believe it?"

The skirt is longer on one side than the other, and the waist of the dress orbits low around Marla's hips.

Before she leaves for the store, Marla lifts her skirt with her fingertips

and sort of dances around me and the kitchen table, her ass flying around inside her skirt.⁴²

Of course, Marla is merely enacting the greater sexual freedom which feminism champions for women and with which men have long been privileged. Still, the narrator experiences difficulty reconciling what feel to him like disparate expectations; on the one hand, Marla purports to want an emotional connection with the narrator while, on the other, her motivations are more sexual. Once again, the narrator experiences Boon's 'cultural dissonance'; he is aware that the routine objectification of women which once characterised masculinity is now frowned upon, yet he is presented in his own kitchen with a woman who ostensibly wants to be objectified — who is, essentially, objectifying herself before him. Indeed, Marla's self-objectification effectively grants the narrator permission to also objectify her but immediately rescinds this permission by pre-emptively defusing his objectification which, it could be read, amounts to a kind of emasculation of the narrator. Furthermore, Marla's unusual sexual appetite challenges received masculine wisdom about women's desires. The narrator recounts Tyler's descriptions of his and Marla's sexual activities; the narrator is, of course, unaware that Tyler is his alter-ego and that, therefore, he is the one really having sex with Marla:

And now, at breakfast the next morning, Tyler's sitting here covered in hickies and says Marla is some twisted bitch, but he likes that a lot.

[...]

After Tyler and Marla had sex about ten times, Tyler says, Marla said she wanted to get pregnant. Marla said she wanted to have Tyler's abortion.⁴³

The narrator goes on, in a later passage, to describe yet more of Tyler and Marla's unusual sexual exploits:

[...] You can hear Marla and Tyler in his room, calling each other human butt wipe.

Take it, human butt wipe.

Do it, butt wipe.

Choke it down. Keep it down, baby.⁴⁴

These descriptions of Marla's rather extreme sexual desires are in stark contrast to the apparent emotional connection she seeks with the narrator. There is irony in Marla's statement that she 'can't win' with the narrator, then; in grappling with Marla's apparently incongruent desires, the narrator feels he cannot win with her either. In a similar vein, the character Chloe — whom the narrator meets at a support group for sufferers of brain parasites — perhaps exemplifies the disparity between what men have been conditioned to believe women want (i.e., loving, caring, emotionally fulfilling relationships) and the reality that women are equally driven by sexual desire:

The little skeleton of a woman named Chloe with the seat of her pants hanging down sad and empty, Chloe tells me the worst thing about her brain parasites was no one would have sex with her. Here she was, so close to death that her life insurance policy had paid off with seventy-five thousand bucks, and all Chloe wanted was to get laid for the last time. Not intimacy, sex.⁴⁵

It would be natural to expect that, in facing her incumbent mortality and grappling with the apparent unfairness of premature death, Chloe might desire some kind of consolation — some kind of empathy or emotional connection with another person. Instead, as the narrator notes, Chloe simply wants to have sex and intimates that her wish to 'get laid' is nothing new; far from the domain of the modern 'liberated' woman, Chloe's desire for a 'meaningless,' no-strings sexual encounter, she suggests, has widespread historical precedent:

During the French Revolution, Chloe told me, the women in prison, the duchesses, baronesses, marquises, whatever, they would screw any man who'd climb on top. Chloe breathed against my neck. Climb on top. Pony up, did I know. Screwing passed the time.⁴⁶

This interaction with Chloe presents the narrator with a kind of masculine conundrum; she unsubtly offers the narrator a straightforward path to not only sexual conquest (and, because masculinity and sexual conquest are so closely linked, an opportunity to gain or assert masculine power) but conquest of an idealised sort in which the female is essentially an object to be used for male pleasure. Chloe describes the assortment of sexual aids she has in her possession — pornographic movies, lubricants, strapless underwear, oils, and handcuffs —

which realise most masculine sexual fantasies.⁴⁷ Similarly, Chloe's imminent death and frank admission that all she wants is to 'get laid' promise no emotional demands on prospective sexual partners. The narrator, however, is neither interested in Chloe's advances nor attracted to her; he describes '[watching] the second hand on my watch go around eleven times' while Chloe lists the sexual aids she has at home. He notes that, 'normal times, I'd be sporting an erection. Our Chloe, however, is a skeleton dipped in yellow wax.'⁴⁸ The narrator, then, must reconcile his subjective desire (or lack thereof) with the entirely separate expectations of hegemonic masculinity.

The 'cultural dissonance' the narrator experiences — along with many other features of his modern, urban existence — induces in him a sense of dissociation. Steven N. Gold argues that 'a central message [of] *Fight Club* is that the structure of contemporary society promotes a dissociative mode of existence.'⁴⁹ Gold suggests that 'the principle character [i.e., the narrator] is suffering from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)' and goes on to detail what comprises the condition:

We can think of dissociation as a psychological disconnection from one or more of three major spheres of experience: (a) the here and now, i.e., orientation to time and place: (b) other people, i.e., interpersonal communion; and (c) one's own subjective experience, e.g. visceral sensation, physical pain, affect, or sense of identity.⁵⁰

There is clear evidence that the narrator feels disconnected from these 'spheres of experience.' As I noted earlier, the narrator comes to measure the passing of time according to the colour of tie his boss is wearing, which he knows correspond to particular days of the week; this suggests disconnection from the first sphere Gold describes, the 'here and now' and, more specifically, time. The narrator's constant travelling for work also disorients him from a clear conception of time as he repeatedly passes through multiple time zones. He describes adjusting his watch:

I set my watch two hours earlier or three hours later, Pacific, Mountain, Central, or Eastern time; lose an hour, gain an hour.⁵¹

Indeed, the narrator's first 'encounter' with Tyler involves a discussion of the time which connotes the narrator's disconnection from a single time zone and his straddling of many:

Tyler called over, “Do you know what time it is?”

I always wear a watch.

“Do you know what time it is?”

I asked, where?

“Right here,” Tyler said. “Right now.”

It was 4:06 P.M.

Further illustrating the narrator’s sense of dissociation, the text frequently shifts into a second-person mode of narration — most notably at the beginning of the third chapter where this shift to second-person is combined with frequent references to various airports. The chapter begins:

You wake up at Air Harbor International.

[...]

You wake up at O’Hare.

You wake up at Laguardia.

You wake up at Logan.⁵²

These references to airports persist throughout the chapter and suggest the narrator’s disorientation, disconnection from place; the narrator’s constant travelling prevents him from feeling connected to any particular location. He is frequently in the air and therefore present neither in the place he departed nor at his destination. Similarly, airports function as a kind of intermediary space; despite being situated in a particular locale, they remain distanced from it. At the airport, the narrator is made aware that he will soon leave a place behind him — will soon be distanced, disconnected from a place — while, at the same time, anticipating the place he is going to and being made hyper-aware of the distance still to travel in order to get there. Furthermore, by shifting into a second-person mode, the narrator essentially refers to himself as a different person, perhaps connoting his disconnection from Gold’s third sphere, one’s own subjective experience, visceral sensation, and sense of identity. Similarly, throughout the entirety of the novel the narrator’s direct speech is never enclosed in quotation marks. This is made most apparent in a section of dialogue between the narrator and Marla regarding their sexual relationship:

I call Marla from my Seattle motel room to ask if we’ve ever done it.

You know.

Long distance, Marla says, “What?”
Slept together.
“What!”
Have I ever, you know, had sex with her?
“Christ!”
Well?
“Well?” she says.
Have we ever had sex?
“You are such a piece of shit.”
Have we had sex?
“I could kill you!”
Is that a yes or a no?⁵³

The absence of quotation marks around the narrator’s speech further signals his disconnection, his dissociation from other people — from personal communion, as Gold terms it. The lack of quotation marks distances his speech from that of others, and suggests difficulty communicating, connecting with other people. Ironically, Tyler’s words are enclosed, are legitimised by their enclosure in quotation marks; despite being an illusion, a figment of the narrator’s imagination, Tyler is more real and more connected to Gold’s spheres of experience than the narrator.

The narrator’s constant travelling also makes connecting with other people difficult. He describes the people he sits directly beside on the plane — who presumably, like the narrator, are frequent travellers — as ‘single serving friends’:

Everywhere I go I make tiny friendships with the people sitting beside me from Logan to Krissy to Willow Run.

What I am is a recall campaign coordinator, I tell the single-serving friend sitting next to me, but I’m working towards a career as a dishwasher.

[...]

A thud, and the second wheel hits the tarmac. The staccato of a hundred seat-belt buckles snapping open and the single-use friend you almost died sitting next to says:

I hope you make your connection.⁵⁴

Another indicator of the narrator's dissociation is the insomnia he suffers:

All night long your thoughts are on the air.
Am I sleeping? Have I slept at all? This is the insomnia.
Try to relax a little more with every breath out, but your heart's still
racing and your thoughts tornado in your head.
[...]
You count up the days, hours, minutes since you can remember falling
asleep.⁵⁵

The narrator visits his doctor, hoping to be given sleeping pills, but the doctor denies him the prescription and instead suggests he try alternative methods:

I just wanted to sleep. I wanted little blue Amytal Sodium capsules,
200-milligram-sized. I wanted red-and-blue Tuinal bullet capsules,
lipstick red Seconals.
My doctor told me to chew some valerian root and get more exercise.
Eventually, I'd fall asleep.⁵⁶

Gold argues that the narrator's 'account of the influence of insomnia on his daily life contains subtle hints that what he is experiencing is not insomnia, but dissociation.'⁵⁷ In particular, the narrator describes how, in his experience of insomnia, 'Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything, you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you.'⁵⁸ The description of being unable to touch or be touched evidences the narrator's dissociation from sensation in particular. These words, Gold suggests, are evidence of the narrator's feeling of 'derealization and the accompanying sense of estrangement and isolation from [his] surroundings.' Essentially, the narrator does not feel real or entirely present in his own life. Indeed, he describes as such:

Three weeks and I hadn't slept. Three weeks without sleep, and
everything becomes an out-of-body experience. My doctor said,
"Insomnia is just a symptom of something larger. Find out what's
actually wrong. Listen to your body."⁵⁹

There is obvious irony in the doctor's suggestion that the narrator 'listen to his body' when he feels almost entirely disconnected from it — from visceral sensation. Indeed, the narrator's suicidal thoughts are perhaps permitted by his

sense of separation from his body and, therefore, from physical pain. He describes how, on business trips, he wills the plane to crash:

Every takeoff and landing, when the plane banked too much to one side, I prayed for a crash. That moment cures my insomnia with narcolepsy when we might die helpless and packed human tobacco in the fuselage.⁶⁰

That the narrator is able to sleep after imagining his own violent death lends further weight to the notion that his insomnia is really dissociation; only in imagining the most extreme brutalisation of his body (so extreme as to result in death) is the narrator able to feel sufficiently connected to his physical self to relieve his dissociation — his insomnia — and fall asleep. Occurring at the beginning of the novel's third chapter, the above quoted passage foreshadows the narrator's participation in fight club where he experiences for real the brutalisation of his body and which similarly liberates him from his feelings of dissociation.

Throughout *Fight Club*, filmic terms, imagery, and techniques are used to reflect the narrator's experience of dissociation — in particular his sense of disembodiment, that he is watching himself as if he were a film character and, not unlike a viewer, possessing no ability to directly influence the action of his narrative. Film rhetoric is employed most notably in an extended passage in which the narrator describes the film changeover process in a cinema projector booth:

The two projectors running, you stand between and hold the shutter lever on each. On really old projectors, you have an alarm on the hub of the feed reel. [...] As most of the movie rolls onto the take-up reel, the take-up reel turns slower and the feed reel has to turn faster. At the end of a reel, the feed reel turns so fast the alarm will start ringing to warn you that a changeover is coming up.⁶¹

This passage serves both as a metaphor for the narrator's seamless transitioning between Tyler's and his 'regular' persona and, as I suggested, lends yet more weight to the theory that he is experiencing a kind of dissociative identity disorder. Along with the novel's non-linear style, this technique of frequently 'cutting' within a scene — of running multiple threads of narrative in parallel and switching abruptly between them — also gives the text a filmic quality and evokes a sense of the narrator's dissociation; the constant cutting means the reader

can never fully grasp a narrative thread before it is torn away and replaced with another. Indeed, Gold notes that:

The very structure of *Fight Club* is designed to engender disorientation. Although the plot line can be organized in a linear fashion, it is not presented in temporal sequence. Instead, there are sporadic shifts in time and place that serve to instil a sense of the dissociative.⁶²

There is a recurring theme here in the way that the narrative threads are repeatedly stripped away and replaced; this is not dissimilar to the narrator's ever-revolving list of desired consumer goods, where each new item negates the previous. This is also not unlike the effect of the long, multi-clausal sentences and frequent, intrusive footnotes in *Brief Interviews*, particularly those in *The Depressed Person*, which frequently interrupt (and, indeed *disrupt*) that story's narrative. As with *The Depressed Person*, *Fight Club*'s fragmentation — its intersecting narratives — connotes the narrator's psychological struggles and dissociative feelings by reflecting broken, hyper-anxious thought. Similarly, these intersecting narratives reflect the fragmented nature of masculinity in *Fight Club*.

Also as in *The Depressed Person*, *Fight Club* derides the language of 'therapy culture.' Just as *The Depressed Person* makes light of the eponymous character's attendance of an 'Inner-Child-Focussed Experiential Therapy Retreat Weekend,' *Fight Club* mocks therapy language via a long string of pseudo-psychological terms:

[...] We sit around a circle on the shag carpet. We close our eyes. This was Chloe's turn to lead us in guided meditation, and she talked us into the garden of serenity. Chloe talked us up the hill to the palace of seven doors. Inside the palace were the seven doors, the green door, the yellow door, the orange door, and Chloe talked us through opening each door, the blue door, the red door, the white door, and finding what was there.

Eyes closed, we imagined our pain as a ball of white healing light floating around our feet and rising to our knees, our waist, our chest. Our chakras opening. The heart chakra. The head chakra. Chloe talked us into caves where we met our power animal. Mine was a penguin.⁶³

Once again the intention is to expose the way in which the deeply introspective language of therapy can inhibit as much as foster sound mental health; while the language is intended to relieve the mental anguish of depression and dissociation, its tendency to abstraction can in fact reinforce sufferers' sense of disconnection.

After denying him a prescription for sleeping pills, the narrator's doctor suggests that he ought to drop in on one of the many support groups for victims of various diseases in order to witness true suffering — to gain some perspective on his insomnia and to understand its insignificance in comparison with 'real' diseases:

My doctor said, if I wanted to see real pain, I should swing by First Eucharist on a Tuesday night. See the brain parasites. See the degenerative bone diseases. The organic brain dysfunctions. See the cancer patients getting by.⁶⁴

The narrator goes along and soon becomes a regular attendee of several different support groups. The support groups provide him with relief from his insomnia — from his dissociation which Gold describes as 'constriction of the ability to access immediate experience of the self, connection to other people, or the here and now.'⁶⁵ The support groups — at least temporarily — allow the narrator to access this immediate experience. The narrator describes being hugged by Bob at the support group for testicular cancer and it is clear that Bob's immense physicality — that being held inside Bob's arms — permits the narrator to feel more attuned to visceral sensation:

His arms wrapped around me, Bob's hand palms my head against the new tits sprouted on his barrel chest.

"It will be alright," Bob says. "You cry now."

From my knees to my forehead, I feel chemical reactions within Bob burning food and oxygen.⁶⁶

Similarly, the realisation that others are plagued with real, life-threatening diseases connects the narrator with his own, comparatively healthy physical self:

Walking home after a support group, I felt more alive than I'd ever felt. I wasn't host to cancer or blood parasites; I was the little warm center that the life of the world crowded around.⁶⁷

As well as connecting him to physical experience, the narrator feels an emotional connection — an interpersonal communion — with the support group attendees that he does not feel with the single-serving friends he makes on his business trips:

This is why I loved the support groups so much, if people thought you were dying they gave you their full attention.

If this might be the last time they saw you, they really saw you. Everything else about their checkbook balance and radio songs and messy hair went out the window.

You had their full attention.

People listened instead of just waiting for their turn to speak.

And when they spoke, there weren't telling you a story. When the two of you talked, you were building something, and afterward you were both different than before.⁶⁸

It is clear from this passage that the narrator finds in the support group attendees the emotional connection and validation he had long been seeking through consumerism, through the acquisition of furniture incapable of providing any kind of validation. The narrator is, at least in part, liberated from his sense of dissociation by attending the support groups, and this allows him to 'pierce through the emotional numbness that has been plaguing him' and to finally fall asleep.⁶⁹ He describes with a tone of relief:

And I slept. Babies don't sleep this well.

Every evening, I died, and every evening, I was born.

Resurrected.⁷⁰

The narrator perhaps derives the most relief from a support group for testicular cancer called 'Remaining Men Together.'⁷¹ It is at this group that the narrator is most able to 'let go' and to cry:

The big wet face settles down on top of my head and I'm lost inside.

This is when I'd cry. Crying is right at hand in the smothering dark, closed inside someone else.⁷²

In particular, the narrator is most able to cry in the presence of Bob, a former body-builder whose testicles have been removed because of cancer and who, due

to the resultant hormone imbalance and subsequent ‘hormone support therapy,’ has sprouted breasts — ‘new sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God’s as big,’ in the narrator’s description.⁷³ According to Jesse Kavadlo, Bob — feminised by his pendulous breasts and lack of testicles — acts as a kind of mothering figure for the narrator:

Like a mother, Bob uses his enormous breasts, hugs, and love to give the narrator his release, allowing him first to cry, and then to sleep, both infantile needs.⁷⁴

However, it is not only Bob’s nurturing, motherly presence which relieves the narrator from his sense of dissociation; the narrator is able to derive, via his ‘interpersonal communion’ with Bob, the masculine power his father and boss were unable to model for and instil in him. Despite his immense physicality — his cultivated, muscular body which is typically an exalted quality of masculinity — Bob is emasculated by the removal of his testicles and the growth of his ‘bitch tits.’⁷⁵ Thus, in his interactions with Bob, the narrator is entirely assured of his own masculinity; he still possesses his testicles and although he is not muscular (indeed, there is no physical description of the narrator in the text), nor is his appearance overtly outside the masculine norm in the way that Bob’s is. This assurance of his masculinity is perhaps what really enables the narrator to cry so freely, to express emotion without fear that such expression will brand him as unmasculine; compared with Bob, the narrator is wholly masculine. This is reminiscent of the subject of *B.I. #48*, who manipulates women into submission (both physical and verbal) in order to reaffirm his masculinity to such an extent that crying becomes permissible — to be so assured of his masculinity that even ‘unmasculine’ expressions of emotion cannot challenge his reified masculine status.

The narrator’s heightened masculine power and relief from dissociation are challenged, however, when Marla begins attending the support groups — particularly when she arrives at Remaining Men Together, the groups from which the narrator derives the most relief and power. Marla’s presence serves to confront the narrator with his duplicity:

I haven't slept in four days. With her watching, I'm a liar. She's a fake. She's the liar [...] In this one moment, Marla's lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies.⁷⁶

Marla's presence reminds the narrator that he is not really diseased or atrophied like the other group attendees — that the connection he feels with them and, therefore, the masculine power he gains is illusory. Of course, Marla is not host to cancer or parasites either. Like the narrator, Marla begins frequenting the support groups as a means of alleviating her own sense of dissociation:

“No,” Marla says. No, she wants it all. The cancers, the parasites. Marla's eyes narrow. She never dreamed she could feel so 'smarvelous. She actually felt alive. Her skin was clearing up. All her life she never saw a dead person. There was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with. Oh, but now there was dying and death and loss and grief. Weeping and shuddering, terror and remorse. Now that she knows where we're all going, Marla feels every moment of her life.⁷⁷

Despite this common ground, neither the narrator nor Marla attempts to forge any kind of interpersonal communion with the other; Gold notes that ‘they are both seeking genuine interpersonal contact [...] but] they fail to reach out to each other and connect. Instead, they both jealously guard their access to the groups.’⁷⁸ Indeed, the narrator repeatedly refers to Marla as a liar and a faker, apparently oblivious to the irony that he too is faking:

Oh, and Marla's looking at me again, singled out among all the brain parasites.
Liar.
Faker.
Marla's the faker.⁷⁹

The succession of male figures from whom the narrator endeavours to derive his masculine identity — his absent father, boss, Bob, etc. — evidences the socially and culturally embedded belief that masculinity is learned from or in conjunction with other men. Thus, when Marla begins attending Remaining Men Together, the

narrator views her as a barrier to forging a unitary masculine identity and endeavours to make Marla leave the group:

Her arms squeezed tight against her sides, and my lips pressed against her ear, I'll say, Marla, you big fake, you get out.

This is the one real thing in my life, and you're wrecking it.

You big tourist.

The next time we meet, I'll say, Marla, I can't sleep with you here. I need this. Get out.⁸⁰

Marla, then, is a woman intruding onto an exclusively masculine space and, in the narrator's mind, must be expelled. However, the narrator maintains a covert attraction to Marla. As Gold notes:

Probably due to his disconnection from self and others [...], instead of recognizing his affinity for Marla and pursuing a relationship with her, the narrator is only aware of his irritation with her focusing on how her presence at meetings has "ruined everything" for him.⁸¹

Essentially, the narrator's sense of dissociation prevents him from identifying his affection for Marla; instead, his affection for her remains mired in his subconscious. In response to Marla's invasion of the space in which he attempts to forge a sense of self, the narrator creates Tyler Durden and an alternative, exclusively masculine space, i.e., fight club. It is notable that the narrator's first 'encounter' with Tyler (the first appearance of Tyler if the narrative were arranged in a chronological sequence) occurs just after the narrator meets Marla. It can be read, then, that Marla is really the motivation for Tyler's existence — for the narrator's fabrication of a hypermasculine alter-ego. Indeed, the narrator acknowledges this later in the novel:

I know why Tyler had occurred. Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla.⁸²

It seems that the narrator subconsciously creates Tyler in order to win Marla. Without a unitary masculine identity, the narrator is unable to negotiate the socially embedded gender paradigm in which men and women occupy discrete roles. Thus, the narrator creates Tyler who functions as a replacement role model

and who embodies masculine ideals in such a way that they are taken to their hypermasculine extreme. Tyler embodies all of the masculine qualities the narrator would himself like to possess:

I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not.

I am not Tyler Durden.⁸³

The influence of Tyler and fight club liberates the narrator from his sense of dissociation even more effectively than the support groups. He describes how fight club allows him to feel as if he is present and participating in the world rather than merely passively observing it:

Fight club is not football on television. You aren't watching a bunch of men you don't know halfway around the world beating on each other live by satellite with a two-minute delay, commercials pitching beer every ten minutes, and a pause now for station identification. After you've been to fight club, watching football on television is watching pornography when you could be having great sex.⁸⁴

In the process of its transformation into Project Mayhem, however, fight club returns to one of the many structures which promote dissociation. It comes to reflect the corporate regimes it purportedly aims to overthrow, following a hierarchical structure. Evidencing Project Mayhem's function as a corporate entity 'applicants' are required to bring with them identical sets of clothing and other items:

Two black shirts.

Two black pair of trousers.

One pair of heavy black shoes.

Two pair of black socks and two pair of plain underwear.

One heavy black coat.

This includes the clothes the applicant has on his back.

One white towel.

One army surplus cot mattress.

One white plastic mixing bowl.⁸⁵

This is reminiscent of the narrator's boss and his preoccupation with the colours of his ties, and also reflects an earlier passage (which passage perhaps foreshadows fight club's eventual transition to Project Mayhem and, indeed, its adherence to a kind of corporate model) in which the narrator describes owning a stockpile of the same shirts and trousers:

Like this is a big deal. I have two pair of black trousers. Six white shirts. Six pair of underwear. The bare minimum.⁸⁶

Similarly, the applicants who are accepted to Project Mayhem are referred to as 'space monkeys,' a term also employed by the narrator early in the text to describe, in part, his dissatisfaction with his job:

I hug the walls, being a mouse trapped in this clockwork of silent men with the energy of trained monkeys, cooking and working and sleeping in teams. Pull a lever. Push a button. A team of space monkeys cooks meals all day, and all day, teams of space monkeys are eating out of the plastic bowls they brought with them.⁸⁷

Indeed, Project Mayhem shares much with the narrator's job; Tyler's Paper Street house which serves as Project Mayhem's ad hoc headquarters becomes a kind of factory, only instead of producing cars it produces bars of soap. Similarly, the space monkeys blindly follow Tyler's orders and mantras in the same way the narrator — or at least the narrator's boss and fellow employees — once dispassionately carried out the duties of their jobs:

"The first rule about Project Mayhem," Big Bob says with his heels together and his back ramrod straight, "is you don't ask questions about Project Mayhem."

So what brainless little honor has Tyler assigned him, I ask. There are guys whose job is to just boil rice all day or wash out eating bowls or clean the crapper. All day. Has Tyler promised Big Bob enlightenment if he spends sixteen hours a day wrapping bars of soap?⁸⁸

In further mimicry of corporate entities, Project Mayhem involves a series of ‘committees’ charged with carrying out discrete tasks which contribute to the project’s overarching goal. Also like a corporate organisation, Project Mayhem has leaders — like managers — who are at the behest of Tyler, whose role is like that of a CEO; Tyler is in charge, he gives orders, but is largely invisible:

The meetings for Project Mayhem have moved to bigger basements because each committee — Arson, Assault, Mischief, and Misinformation — gets bigger as more guys graduate out of fight club. Each committee has a leader, and even the leaders don’t know where Tyler’s at. Tyler calls them every week on the phone.⁸⁹

Ironically, then, Project Mayhem takes the form of the very structures it aims to depose. This suggests that corporate entities are so pervasive, so enmeshed in all facets of life that adopting their patterns is almost inevitable — that even movements intended to resist corporations invariably come to resemble them. Indeed, the narrator likens the ubiquity of corporations to colonisation:

This was something Tyler talked about, how since England did all the exploration and built colonies and made maps, most of the places in geography have those secondhand sort of English names. The English got to name everything. Or almost everything.

Like, Ireland.

New London, Australia.

New London, India.

New London, Idaho.

New York, New York.

Fast forward to the future. This way, when deep-space exploitation ramps up, it will probably be the megatonic corporations that discover all the new planets and map them.

The IBM Stellar Sphere.

The Philip Morris Galaxy.

Planet Denny’s.

Every planet will take on the corporate identity of whoever rapes it first.

Budweiser World.⁹⁰

It can be read, therefore, that masculine identity and corporate models are so wedded that even masculinities which challenge the hegemonic mode necessarily reproduce the corporate structures upon which the dominant variety is founded. There is a kind of logic to this; in order to challenge hegemony it seems only natural to emulate its patterns. Ultimately, however, this only reinforces such patterns as those which guarantee power or, as with Project Mayhem replace the hegemonic mode with something equally oppressive and destructive.

¹ David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Little Brown, 2007), pp. 75, 111.

² Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 50.

³ M. Donaldson, 'What Is Hegemonic Masculinity?', *Theory and Society, Special Issue: Masculinities*, 22.5 (1993), p. 648

<<http://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1149&context=artspapers>> [accessed 12 May 2017].

⁴ Donaldson, p. 648.

⁵ Palahniuk, p. 186.

⁶ Palahniuk, p. 96.

⁷ Palahniuk, p. 126.

⁸ Palahniuk, p. 96.

⁹ Palahniuk, p. 30.

¹⁰ Palahniuk, pp. 30–31.

¹¹ Palahniuk, p. 99.

¹² Palahniuk, p. 30.

¹³ Palahniuk, p. 49.

¹⁴ Palahniuk, p. 30.

¹⁵ Norah Vincent, *Self-Made Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 146.

¹⁶ Palahniuk, pp. 50–51.

¹⁷ Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 16.

¹⁸ Palahniuk, p. 12.

¹⁹ Palahniuk, p. 41.

²⁰ Palahniuk, p. 44.

²¹ Palahniuk, pp. 110–11.

²² Palahniuk, p. 43.

²³ Palahniuk, p. 45.

²⁴ Palahniuk, p. 43.

²⁵ Palahniuk, p. 43.

²⁶ Donaldson, pp. 643-657.

²⁷ R. W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 86.

²⁸ Palahniuk, p. 43.

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- ²⁹ Palahniuk, p. 43.
- ³⁰ Palahniuk, pp. 63–64.
- ³¹ Palahniuk, p. 48.
- ³² Palahniuk, p. 49.
- ³³ Palahniuk, p. 54.
- ³⁴ Palahniuk, p. 47.
- ³⁵ Kevin Alexander Boon, 'Men and Nostalgia for Violence: Culture and Culpability in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*.', *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 11.3 (2003), p. 272
<<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.3149/jms.1103.267>> [accessed 23 May 2017].
- ³⁶ Palahniuk, p. 50.
- ³⁷ Palahniuk, p. 50.
- ³⁸ Palahniuk, p. 49.
- ³⁹ Boon, p. 270.
- ⁴⁰ Boon, p. 270.
- ⁴¹ Palahniuk, p. 68.
- ⁴² Palahniuk, p. 67.
- ⁴³ Palahniuk, p. 59.
- ⁴⁴ Palahniuk, p. 64.
- ⁴⁵ Palahniuk, p. 19.
- ⁴⁶ Palahniuk, p. 20.
- ⁴⁷ Palahniuk, p. 20.
- ⁴⁸ Palahniuk, p. 20.
- ⁴⁹ Steven N. Gold, 'Fight Club: A Depiction of Contemporary Society as Dissociogenic', *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 5.2 (2004), p. 14 <https://doi.org/10.1300/J229v05n02_02> [accessed 22 May 2017].
- ⁵⁰ Gold, pp. 14–15.
- ⁵¹ Palahniuk, p. 29.
- ⁵² Palahniuk, p. 25.
- ⁵³ Palahniuk, p. 159.
- ⁵⁴ Palahniuk, p. 31.
- ⁵⁵ Gold, p. 162.
- ⁵⁶ Palahniuk, p. 19.
- ⁵⁷ Gold, p. 16.
- ⁵⁸ Palahniuk, p. 21.
- ⁵⁹ Palahniuk, p. 19.
- ⁶⁰ Palahniuk, p. 25.
- ⁶¹ Palahniuk, pp. 27-28.
- ⁶² Gold, p. 15.
- ⁶³ Palahniuk, p. 20.
- ⁶⁴ Palahniuk, p. 19.
- ⁶⁵ Gold, p. 15.

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- ⁶⁶ Palahniuk, p. 16.
- ⁶⁷ Palahniuk, p. 22.
- ⁶⁸ Palahniuk, p. 107.
- ⁶⁹ Gold, p. 18.
- ⁷⁰ Palahniuk, p. 22.
- ⁷¹ Palahniuk, p. 18.
- ⁷² Palahniuk, p. 17.
- ⁷³ Palahniuk, pp. 16-17.
- ⁷⁴ Jesse Kavadlo, 'The Fiction of Self-Destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, Closet Moralist', *Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature*, 2.2 (2005)
<https://www.academia.edu/attachments/30986879/download_file?st=MTQ5Nzg1MDY3MywxMzAuMjE3LjE5OS4zLDY1NDkyNjI5&s=swp-toolbar&ct=MTQ5Nzg1MDY3OCwxMCw2NTQ5MjYyOQ==> [accessed 24 May 2017].
- ⁷⁵ Palahniuk, p. 21.
- ⁷⁶ Palahniuk, p. 23.
- ⁷⁷ Palahniuk, p. 38.
- ⁷⁸ Gold, p. 20.
- ⁷⁹ Palahniuk, p. 35.
- ⁸⁰ Palahniuk, p. 24.
- ⁸¹ Gold, p. 20.
- ⁸² Palahniuk, p. 198.
- ⁸³ Palahniuk, p. 174.
- ⁸⁴ Palahniuk, p. 50.
- ⁸⁵ Palahniuk, pp. 127–28.
- ⁸⁶ Palahniuk, p. 64.
- ⁸⁷ Palahniuk, p. 130.
- ⁸⁸ Palahniuk, p. 131.
- ⁸⁹ Palahniuk, p. 135.
- ⁹⁰ Palahniuk, p. 171.

CONCLUSION

[Step into the Blue Clean: Masculinity and Sensory Awareness]

This thesis has argued that, in both *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and *Fight Club*, each text's cast of contemporary male characters grapples with the tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities and, ultimately, fails to adequately negotiate this tension. Indeed, the characters' efforts to resist hegemonic masculinity or at least navigate its tension with other, non-hegemonic forms, frequently results in the continued perpetuation, the reinforcement of hegemonic masculine ideals. In *Fight Club*, for example, when traditional models of masculinity prove unsatisfactory, the narrator subconsciously creates an idealised hypermasculine alter-ego in Tyler Durden and establishes an exclusively male or homosocial group. Via fight club, the narrator hopes to find or forge a suitable model of masculinity and in doing so reinforces the hegemonic belief (espoused by Robert Bly and other mythopoetic men's movement figures) that 'true' masculinity can only be learned from or in conjunction with other men. Furthermore, fight club's later iteration, Project Mayhem, comes to resemble precisely the constraining corporate structures it aims to overthrow — structures which demand that men occupy a dutiful and emotionally detached mode of masculinity in order to properly execute their jobs and attain the material and financial reward which marks 'successful' masculinity. The former fight club attendees — now Project Mayhem's 'space monkeys' — obediently follow Tyler's plans and orders without question, as if he were their CEO/manager or military superior. Indeed, Project Mayhem resembles a kind of military organisation; the space monkeys sleep in rows of bunks in the basement of Tyler's Paper Street house; they are assigned to 'committees' — 'Arson, Assault, Mischief, and

Misinformation’ — not dissimilar to army companies or platoons, and they carry out tasks in a regimented fashion (boiling rice, cleaning toilets, planting herbs, etc.).¹ Despite Project Mayhem’s aim to deconstruct the established systems which have confined men to unfulfilling modes of masculinity, the movement deviates little from those established systems; like the narrator’s father and boss, Tyler represents a single, ‘senior,’ idealised masculine figure from whom an alternative and supposedly more gratifying mode of masculinity can be learned but, in reality, Tyler offers nothing new at all. Instead, Project Mayhem’s adherence to these familiar, established structures simply reinforces hegemonic masculinity’s socially and culturally dominant position.

In *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity is similarly depicted and, as in *Fight Club*, occurs insidiously. The subjects of the text’s many interviews frequently adopt feminine (i.e., non-hegemonic) roles or positions and/or weaponise the rhetoric of feminism in order to reassert their dominance over the female interviewer(s). In *B.I. #19*, the subject wields his apparent knowledge of feminism’s aim to liberate women from objectification against the interviewer. He anticipates the interviewer’s (apparently his intimate partner) desire to be valued as more than a sexual object and so praises her intelligence, but only as a ploy to convince her to sleep with him — or, in other words, for the precise purpose of objectifying her. In other interviews, the subjects feign emotional expressivity (i.e., non-hegemonic expression of emotion over hegemonic stoicism) in order to similarly manipulate the female interviewers into sex or otherwise being emotional pawns; in *B.I. #40*, the subject feigns insecurity about his malformed arm as an affective ploy to elicit sympathy from women in the form of sex, while in *B.I. #2*, the subject ‘confesses’ a longstanding need to discuss with the interviewer — again his intimate partner — a pattern of his previous relationships in which he feels powerfully that he must back out of the pairing. This feigned emotional outpouring, paradoxically, enables him to avoid admitting his commitment phobia (and, hence, to ‘preserve’ his masculinity which would be threatened were he to admit fear) by categorising it as merely a ‘pattern’ — as an unidentifiable ‘thing’ inside him which, conveniently, he doesn’t fully understand. Similarly, the subject of *B.I. #20* uses his apparent self-awareness — a quality typically associated with femininity — as a manipulative tactic; he openly admits to objectifying a woman whom he met at an outdoor festival and who later recounts to him the story of her rape by another man. The

subject acknowledges similarities between his pick-up of the girl and her rape, but only as a self-aware rhetorical strategy intended to forestall the interviewer's potential criticism of his actions, which he seeks to justify and position as a safer and more acceptable kind of predation by making clear distinctions between himself and the woman's rapist. According to Mary Holland, the men in *Brief Interviews* each 'enact a mask of earnestness to work towards cruel, ironic purposes.'² Essentially, the subjects adopt feminine or non-hegemonic traits to serve hegemonic means; they wield the greater emotional expression which, at least in part, characterises non-hegemonic masculinities, in order to achieve the goal of sexual conquest or to avoid sincere expressions of emotion as well as the admission of fear or vulnerability. The ideals of hegemonic masculinity — sexual conquest, stoicism, strength, invulnerability, etc. — are therefore reinforced, but camouflaged in non-hegemonic performance.

While both *Brief Interviews* and *Fight Club* expose the difficulties in negotiating the tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities and illustrate the dissociative effects these difficulties have on men, neither text provides a clear, concrete solution to the problem of successfully navigating this tension. Instead, as noted, efforts to resist hegemonic masculinity (*Fight Club*'s Project Mayhem) and thereby forge space for alternative modes are shown to ultimately and inevitably reproduce the patterns of the dominant variety. This seems only natural; surely the way to wrest power from a dominant group is to emulate the machinations by which that group achieved ascendancy. Unfortunately, as with Project Mayhem, this approach is *regressive* rather than *progressive* and simply reinforces the dominant group's status by continuing to perpetuate its patterns as those which secure power. Similarly, the hegemonic strain co-opts typically feminine or non-hegemonic characteristics — the very characteristics it derides in order to position itself as the desirable form of masculinity — in order to maintain its dominant place; *Brief Interviews*' 'hideous men' inhabit non-hegemonic roles, but primarily as a subversive means of maintaining hegemonic power. Indeed, this is a feature of how hegemonies of any variety — whether of masculinity or some other ruling class are maintained. By frequently redefining its patterns — even to the extent of permitting or co-opting non-hegemonic behaviours — hegemonic masculinity ensures that meeting its criteria is always just out of reach and thereby positions itself as the ideal to which men feel they must strive. This is the central paradox of hegemonic masculinity; it

is at once a rigid categorisation and one whose criteria are constantly, if subtly, shifting. Both texts, then, provide a somewhat bleak view of contemporary masculinity; they suggest that the hegemonic strain is so entrenched and the allure of its dividend so powerful that the equal celebration of multiple, alternative masculinities is only a remote hope. *Fight Club*'s narrator is unable to forge a stable, unitary masculinity; in fact, at the novel's conclusion the narrator is institutionalised, apparently driven close to insanity by his attempts to construct a stable masculine identity. Of course, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, a singular, stable masculinity is not really possible; as Adams and Savran note in *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, 'masculinities are historically constructed, mutable, and contingent,' meaning that different periods of history and different contexts (i.e., cultures, workplaces, etc.) construct masculinity differently.³ Essentially, masculinity is not and never has been a singular, fixed category and it would thus be problematic were *Fight Club* to conclude with the narrator successfully forging a stable masculinity. Indeed, both texts reflect the fragmentary nature of masculinity in their form and style — *Brief Interviews* with its nonconsecutively numbered, achronological interviews and footnotes and *Fight Club* with its non-linear narrative and frequent narrative perspective shifts, which repeatedly fracture the text.

Although neither text clearly provides strategies for navigating the tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities, both offer ways of remedying the dissociative effects of this tension and suggest qualities which ought to be exalted over hegemonic ideals. In *Forever Overhead* from *Brief Interviews*, readers encounter a thirteen-year-old boy who (at least physically) is on the verge of adulthood. The text is written in a second-person mode of narration, directed at the boy:

Happy Birthday. Your thirteenth is important. Maybe your first really public day. Your thirteenth is a chance for people to recognise that important things are happening to you.⁴

The story, as the above quotation intimates, focuses on the boy's experience of puberty — i.e., the physical changes that are happening to his body:

You have seven hairs in your armpit now. Twelve in your right. Hard dangerous spirals of brittle black hair. Crunchy, animal hair. There are

now more of the hard curled hairs around your privates than you can count without losing track [...] And two weeks of a deep and frightening ache this past spring left you with something dropped down from inside: your sack is now full and vulnerable, a commodity to be protected.⁵

Similarly, the majority of the first portion (i.e., prior to the text's first double line break) of *Forever Overhead* is devoted to a description of a new type of dream he has been experiencing:

For months there have been dreams like nothing before: moist and busy and distant, full of yielding curves, frantic pistons, warmth and a great falling; and you have awakened through fluttering lids to a rush and a gush and a toe-curling scalp-snapping jolt of feeling from an inside deeper than you knew you had, spasms of a deep sweet hurt, the streetlights through your window blinds cracking into sharp stars against the black bedroom ceiling and on you a dense white jam that lips between legs, trickles and sticks, cools on you, hardens and clears until there is nothing but gnarled knots of pale solid animal hair in the morning shower, and in the wet tangle a clean sweet smell you can't believe comes from anything you made inside you.⁶

While stories of a young male character's transition to adulthood are not uncommon in literature (Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* or Dickens' *Great Expectations* examples which leap immediately to mind) few discuss the physical, bodily changes involved with the level of detail of *Forever Overhead*. The story, then, encourages wider, more open discussion of male bodies — a subject typically off-limits in masculine conversation as tending too much towards vulnerability or preoccupation with personal appearance (qualities, of course, incongruent with hegemonic masculinity). The intensity of *Forever Overhead*'s physical description — as evidenced by the above, lengthy quotation — distinguishes it from many of the other stories in the collection which, although not entirely lacking in this kind of concrete imagery, perhaps tend more towards the cerebral than the sensory. Indeed, in *Forever Overhead*, the reader is almost bombarded with sensory information and the story's second-person mode of narration serves to make this description feel more intense and personal to the

reader. As well as outlining the changes happening to the boy's pubescent body, the story details at length the sights, sounds, and smells of the swimming pool to which he has come on the afternoon of his birthday:

Around the deck of this old public pool on the western edge of Tucson is a Cyclone fence the color of pewter, decorated with a bright tangle of locked bicycles. Beyond this a hot black parking lot full of white lines and glittering cars. A dull field of dry grass and hard weeds, old dandelions' heads exploding and snowing up in a rising wind. And past all this, reddened by a round slow September sun, are mountains, jagged, their tops' sharp angles darkening into definition against a deep red tired light. Against the red their sharp connected tops form a spiked line, an EKG of the dying day.⁷

Like the 'white jam,' the pool's smell is described as a 'bleached sweet salt, a flower with chemical petals.'⁸ In the pool, 'Your sister plays Marco Polo [...] She is being blind now, her Marco's being Polo'd' while 'on the deck behind [the pool] is the SN CK BAR.'⁹ The story's juxtaposition of descriptions of bodily change with vivid, almost microscopic details of the swimming pool system necessarily suggests a connection between the two, as if the boy's newfound awareness of his changing body has brought with it a similarly new awareness of the world at large — a kind of elevated sensory perception awakened by the onset of adolescence. However, the story goes on to suggest that this heightened sensory awareness is impermanent and is lost in adulthood; the above quotation's 'EKG of the dying day' is perhaps intended to connote the 'death' of this awareness. The piece describes how the boy had hoped to come to the pool alone:

Your party is tonight. This afternoon, on your birthday, you have asked to come to the pool. You wanted to come alone but a birthday is a family day, your family wants to be with you. This is nice, and you can't talk about why you wanted to come alone, and really truly maybe you didn't want to come alone, so here they are.¹⁰

As the piece continues, the boy's plan to leap from the high diving board is revealed as the reason for his desire to come alone:

Happy Birthday. It is a big day, big as the roof of the whole southwest sky. You have thought it over. There is the high board. They will want to leave soon. Climb out and do the thing.¹¹

The board is described as ‘protrud[ing] from the top of the tower like a tongue’ and appears almost endlessly long:

The board is long. From where you stand it seems to stretch off into nothing. It’s going to send you someplace which its own length keeps you from seeing, which seems wrong to submit to without even thinking.¹²

The diving board serves as a metaphor for the boy’s transition from childhood to adulthood — his figurative ‘leap’ from boyhood into masculinity (Alex Hobbs notes that ‘boyhood is largely considered outside masculinity’).¹³ Furthermore the board’s apparently infinite length and invisible ‘someplace’ connote the boy’s apprehension about entering this new and uncertain stage of life. Indeed, the text provides glimpses of what adulthood might look like; none are promising: the boy’s father is described as having a ‘back like the hint of a hump of a whale,’ while elderly people in the pool ‘[move] tentatively through shallows on stick legs, feeling at the water with their hands, out of every element at once.’¹⁴ Above all, adulthood seems to be characterised by a kind of lonely, dissociative boredom reminiscent of the dissociation experienced by *Fight Club*’s narrator:

You are in line. Look around. Look bored. Few talk in the line. Everyone seems by himself. Most look at the ladder, look bored. You almost all have crossed arms, chilled by a late dry rising wind on the constellations of blue-clean chlorine beads on your backs and shoulders. It seems impossible that everybody could really be this bored.¹⁵

This dissociative boredom is in stark contrast to the boy’s own hyper-awareness of the swimming pool — his sense of being entirely present in the world which, in addition to the vivid description of the pool, is connoted by feeling his weight on the rungs of the diving board tower’s ladder:

Four more rungs to the top of the tower. The rungs hurt your feet. They are thin and let you know just how much you weigh. You have real weight on the ladder. The ground wants you back.¹⁶

This motif of hurt feet is a recurring one and is suggestive of ‘rituals’ in which participants walk over hot coals or broken glass. Indeed, the boy’s compulsion to leap from the diving board can be read as a kind of self-imposed ritual of initiation to adulthood — a ‘rite of passage’ — which, as is often the case with rituals of this kind, features a component of pain or violence. The boy observes a woman ahead of him in the line for the diving board as she makes her leap from its protruding white tongue:

She pauses for just that beat of a pause. There’s nothing slow about it at all. It makes you cold. In no time she’s at the end of the board, up, down on it, it bends low like it doesn’t want her. Then it nods and flaps and throws her violently up and out, her arms opening out to inscribe that circle, and gone. She disappears in a dark blink. And there’s time before you hear the hit below.¹⁷

Lending further credence to the notion of the diving board as a rite of passage are the ‘two vague black ovals [...] two dirty spots’ of skin left at the end of the board from those who have made the leap in the past:

They are from all the people who have gone before you. Your feet as you stand here are tender and dented, hurt by the rough wet surface, and you see that the two dark spots are from people’s skin. They are skin abraded from feet by the violence of the disappearance of people with real weight. More people than you could count without losing track. The weight and abrasion of their disappearance leaves little bits of soft tender feet behind, bits and shards and curls of skin that dirty and darken and tan as they lie tiny and smeared in the sun at the end of the board.¹⁸

Ritual initiation to masculinity is, of course, a theme of the mythopoetic men’s movement — in particular Robert Bly’s *Iron John* which argues, at least in part, for a return to ‘ancient initiation practice.’¹⁹ While Bly’s work espouses that ‘only men can initiate men’ into masculinity (and thereby suggests that [in particular,

older] men are the ‘gatekeepers’ of ‘true’ masculinity), *Forever Overhead* depicts a ritual of initiation which does not necessitate that other men be involved at all.²⁰ Instead, the boy’s ‘initiation’ into masculinity is, as noted, entirely self-directed and autonomous. This model allows for the celebration of multiple masculinities by permitting men to ‘initiate’ themselves into modes of masculinity they have independently defined, rather than a singular, rigid mode they must be ‘shown’ how to inhabit by other men. Indeed, the text suggests that masculinity need not be defined in conjunction with or influenced by other men at all — that men and masculinity are, in fact, separate things. Connell echoes this in *Masculinities*, stating that:

[...] to define masculinity as what-men-empirically-are is to rule out the usage in which we call some women ‘masculine’ and some men ‘feminine,’ or some actions or attitudes ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ regardless of who displays them.²¹

While *Forever Overhead* depicts an initiation ritual of sorts, the story should not be read as advocating for the return of rituals of initiation (even autonomous ones) — rituals which Norah Vincent, in her observations of men’s movement ‘support groups’ in *Self-Made Man*, calls ‘insipid parlor games’ which offer no ‘genuine obstacle, a real trial that would test the limits of a person’s character or sense of self.’²² Rather, as I have noted, the boy’s imminent jump from the diving board represents his ascension, as it were, to adulthood. The dark ovals of skin at the end of the board carry obvious connotations of shedding one’s old, childhood skin and inhabiting a new, adult one, but also — by way of their being left behind on the board — signify the loss of the boy’s adolescent sensory awareness. Similarly, the areas of skin are twice described as resembling blind eyes — a kind of metaphor for the sensory blindness of adulthood and, in particular, masculinity, which latter necessitates that men eschew sensitivity:

But they should clean the board. Anybody who thought about it for even a second would see that they should clean the end of the board of people’s skin, of two black collections of what’s left of before, spots that from back here look like eyes, like blind and cross-eyed eyes.²³

The story clearly laments this loss of sensory acuity and suggests that the resultant blindness is a permanent and almost inevitable product of entering adulthood — of masculinity:

The board will nod and you will go, and eyes of skin can cross blind into a cloud-blotched sky, punctured light emptying behind sharp stone that is forever. That is forever. Step into the skin and disappear.²⁴

The language here is telling: that the light (representative of the boy's sensory acumen) is 'punctured,' destroyed, evidences the text's mourning of the loss of sensory awareness; that the boy will 'disappear' when he steps into his new, adult skin suggests that sensory perception is key to the formation of identity, of a real and authentic self. In essence, this is what the tension between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities depicted in both *Brief Interviews* and *Fight Club* amounts to. *Forever Overhead*, then, recommends cultivating in adulthood the sensory perception and awareness one has of one's body in adolescence as a means of navigating this tension or (as I suggested earlier) at least remedying its dissociative effects.

Fight Club similarly champions the cultivation of sensory awareness. As I noted in chapter two, the violence of fight club liberates the narrator from dissociation and allows him to regain a sense of bodily awareness — what Steven N. Gold describes as 'one's own subjective experience, e.g., visceral sensation, physical pain, affect, or sense of identity.'²⁵ Even outside of fight club, Tyler encourages or, more accurately, *forces* the narrator to reconnect with physical, sensory experience. As chapter eight of the novel closes and chapter nine begins, Tyler burns the narrator's hand with lye:

“This is a chemical burn,” Tyler said, “and it will hurt more than you've ever been burned. Worse than a hundred cigarettes.”²⁶

It is notable that these are the only chapters in the novel which follow a linear or chronological sequence — i.e., chapter nine is a continuation of chapter eight. The narrator attempts to distract himself, to block out the intense pain of the burn, but Tyler forces him to focus on it. That these two chapters occur in sequence similarly forces the reader to focus on the physical sensation of burning, as chapter nine's opening provides no escape into an alternative narrative thread:

Picture the fire still burning, except now it's beyond the horizon. A sunset.

"Come back to the pain," Tyler says.

This is the kind of guided meditation they use at support groups. Don't even think of the word *pain*.

Guided meditation works for cancer, it can work for this.

"Look at your hand," Tyler says.

Don't look at your hand.

Don't think of the word *searing* or *flesh* or *charred*.

Don't hear yourself cry.

Guided meditation.

You're in Ireland. Close your eyes.

You're in Ireland the summer after you left college, and you're drinking at a pub near the castle where every day busloads of English and American tourists come to kiss the Blarney stone.

"Don't shut this out," Tyler says.²⁷

Similarly, the Paper Street house in which Tyler and the narrator come to reside also reconnects the narrator with physical experience. In contrast to the narrator's apartment whose thick concrete walls and valueless material goods promote disconnection, the Paper Street house is akin to a living environment — a wilderness in which the narrator must remain alert and aware in order to survive:

When it's raining we have to pull the fuses. You don't dare turn on the lights. The house that Tyler rents, it has three stories and a basement. We carry around candles. [...] The rain trickles down through the house and everything wooden swells and shrinks, and the nails in everything wooden, the floors and baseboards and window casings, the nails inch out and rust. Everywhere there are rusted nails to step on or snag your elbow on.²⁸

Indeed, the notion of wilderness is a recurring one; later in the novel, Tyler reveals his vision for a world returned to wilderness — to a kind of hunter-gatherer existence:

"Imagine," Tyler said, "stalking elk past department store windows and stinking racks of beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos on hangers;

you'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life, and you'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. Jack and the beanstalk, you'll climb up through the dripping forest canopy and the air will be so clean you'll see tiny figures pounding corn and laying strips of venison to dry in the empty car pool lane of an abandoned superhighway stretching eight-lanes-wide and August-hot for thousands of miles."²⁹

Tyler's vision is a radical one, but then most of his endeavours are extreme; fight club involves extreme physical engagement and Tyler himself — as a hypermasculine figure — occupies an extreme position on the spectrum, as it were, of masculine identity. This extremity is, of course, intended to suggest a kind of intermediary position or space — a mode of masculinity which prizes the sensory, physical awareness that fight club's violence and Tyler's vision of a return to wilderness promote, only in a less ultimately destructive form.

Also in the Paper Street house, the narrator finds a stockpile of old *Reader's Digest* magazines in the basement — 'big teetering stacks of magazines that get taller every time it rains.'³⁰ In them, a particular series of articles catches his attention:

In the oldest magazines, there's a series of articles where organs in the human body talk about themselves in the first person: I am Jane's Uterus.

I am Joe's Prostate.³¹

The narrator quickly adopts the premise of body parts given voice as a means of expressing emotion. When Tyler reveals that he and Marla had sex, the narrator employs a series of 'I am Joe's...' statements to reveal how he feels:

I am Joe's Raging Bile Duct.

The things Marla said to him last night, Tyler says. No girl's ever talked to him that way.

I am Joe's Grinding Teeth.

I am Joe's Inflamed Flaring Nostrils.³²

The implication, then, is that the narrator's heightened sensory perception and connection to his physical self enables him an increased capacity for expressing

emotion.

As I noted earlier, while neither text proposes a complete solution to negotiating the oppressive forces of hegemonic masculinity, they do intimate where resistance to such forces might begin. The violence of fight club is subversively employed as a means of accessing the ‘here and now’ — of feeling alive and real and recognised in a world which promotes dissociation. In *Forever Overhead*, the adolescent boy’s intense visceral experience of the diving board similarly enables him to feel entirely present. In both texts, it is the body that is the true site of resistance to the hegemonic ideals which confine men to unfulfilling modes of masculinity.

¹ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (New York: Norton, 2005), pp. 131, 135.

² Mary K. Holland, ‘Mediated Immediacy in Brief Interviews with Hideous Men’, in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies*, ed. by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 117.

³ *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, ed. by Rachel Adams and David Savran (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2002), p. 2.

⁴ David Foster Wallace, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (New York: Little Brown, 2007), p. 5.

⁵ Wallace, p. 5.

⁶ Wallace, p. 5.

⁷ Wallace, p. 6.

⁸ Wallace, p. 6.

⁹ Wallace, p. 7.

¹⁰ Wallace, p. 6.

¹¹ Wallace, p. 7.

¹² Wallace, pp. 8, 13.

¹³ Alex Hobbs, ‘Masculinity Studies and Literature’, *Literature Compass*, 10.4 (2013), p. 389 <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.waikato.ac.nz/doi/10.1111/lic3.12057/pdf>> [accessed 26 April 2015].

¹⁴ Wallace, pp. 8, 10.

¹⁵ Wallace, p. 9.

¹⁶ Wallace, p. 12.

¹⁷ Wallace, p. 12.

¹⁸ Wallace, pp. 13-14.

¹⁹ Robert Bly, *Iron John: A Book About Men* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 34.

²⁰ Bly, p. 16.

²¹ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities* (New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 1995), p. 69.

²² Norah Vincent, *Self-Made Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 250.

²³ Wallace, p. 14.

²⁴ Wallace, p. 16.

²⁵ Steven N. Gold, 'Fight Club: A Depiction of Contemporary Society as Dissociogenic', *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 5.2 (2004), 13–24 (p. 15) <https://doi.org/10.1300/J229v05n02_02> [accessed 22 May 2017].

²⁶ Palahniuk, p. 73.

²⁷ Palahniuk, p. 75.

²⁸ Palahniuk, p. 57.

²⁹ Palahniuk, p. 125.

³⁰ Palahniuk, p. 57.

³¹ Palahniuk, p. 58.

³² Palahniuk, p. 59.

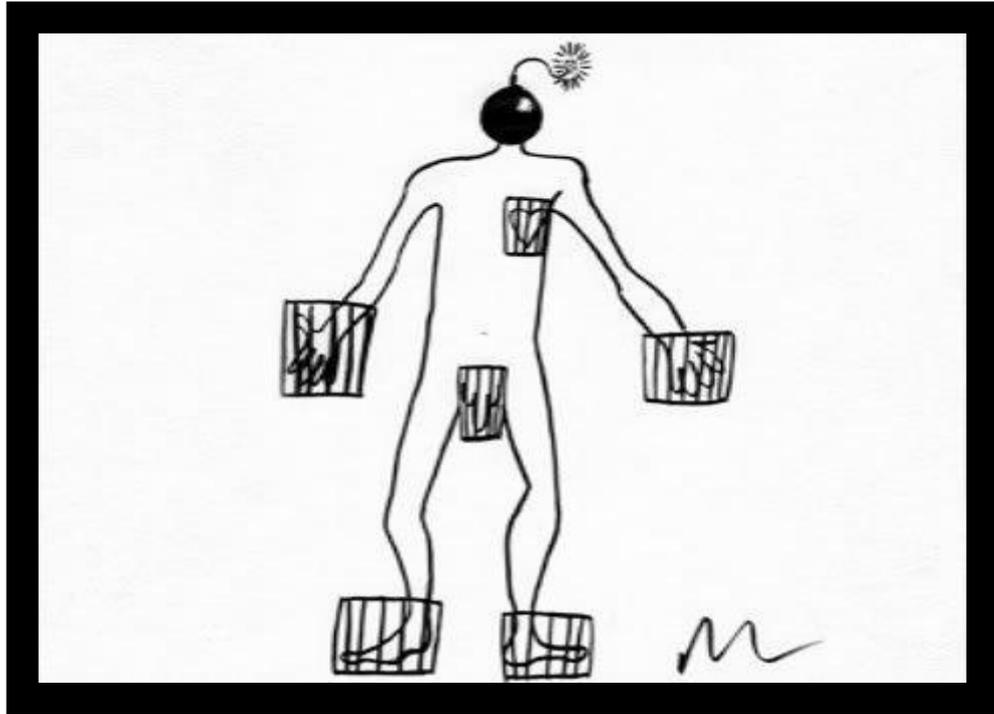
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{ Insecure Men's }
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Small Rural Town (Part I)

'Well I was born in a small town

And I live in a small town

Probably die in a small town'

—John Cougar Mellencamp / Small Town

Steve was a recent business-school graduate who, upon completing his degree with second class honours and finding that he was not immediately gainfully employed, spent eight months working in his father's farm supply shop in the Small Rural Town where he was born, where he had attended high school, and where he still lived with his parents. It was the current economic climate and the competitive nature of the job market, he told himself, which meant he could not presently find work in the field he had studied, and a matter of necessity that he take up the job in his father's shop and remain living with his parents—though he confessed that he liked having his mother wash and fold his clothes (or at least would have done had he possessed more self-awareness) and marvelled at the deftness with which she was able to fold T-shirts into neat unwrinkled squares¹ while his own efforts more closely resembled crumpled paper. His parents, too, approaching their fifties and despairing of falling into Empty Nest Syndrome were, in Small Rural Town parlance, quietly chuffed to have their youngest child

¹ Her technique was to take them up by the shoulder seams, stick the collar under her chin — serving as the fulcrum on which she would fold the shirt lengthways — then tuck the sleeves in before dropping the whole thing over her forearm thereby reducing its size by half and allowing it to be stacked neatly into a standard dresser drawer.

and only son still living at home. They would explain to the other townsfolk—and in particular their next-door neighbour Jeff, who owned a local panel-beating shop and with whom they often conversed over the lower section of fence that separated their two properties, or when he strolled past with his Labrador while they were weeding the front garden — that they were allowing their son to continue living with them while he was job-hunting, meantime he would work in the farm supply shop in order that he have something to list as work experience on his résumé and to earn some money to pay them board. This dressed the whole thing up as an exercise in educating the lad in the ways of the world, the cycle of income and expenses, etc., and painted parents and son alike in a good light, dispelling any myths about Steve being a workshy freeloader and his parents being spineless enablers of the lazy habits which typified someone of Steve's generation. The townsfolk, approving of this entirely reasonable and pragmatic approach to parenting — for it was the prevailing attitude of the Small Rural Town that one worked hard and thereby rightfully earned what one desired in life — smiled at Steve's parents in the local supermarket and allowed them to manoeuvre their trolley through the aisles unimpeded, while the elder males of the Small Rural Town would slap Steve's father manfully on the back when they met him in the RSA bar. These same courtesies were not extended to the people who lived on the outskirts, in the state houses which flanked the Small Rural Town, who were invariably referred to as spongers or sometimes 'bludgers.' Indeed, the hard-working people of the Small Rural Town considered themselves to be the very heart of the community and that the endeavours they undertook—like transforming the old post office building into an art gallery—were for the benefit of everyone and not simply personal pet projects that took up council funding which ought to have been more thoughtfully allocated to fixing the leaky local swimming baths or filling in the potholes on the main street.

After eight months of interviews and rejection letters and working conscientiously in his father's farm supply shop, Steve was interviewed and accepted for a position at a reputable accounting firm in a neighbouring city (the same city in which Steve had attended university). The townspeople credited Steve's success in part to Steve's parents, whose practical but not deferential approach had set Steve on the Right Path. The Right Path, according to the people of the Small Rural Town, was steady employment with a view to promotion and eventually the purchase of a four bedroom house on a desirable new subdivision

and later a set of handsome children — one boy and one girl, ideally — who would attend the local school and become wholesome, humble people by virtue of being raised in a Small, unpretentious, Rural Town. They considered this to be the pinnacle of human achievement or, at the very least, the most that — as they were Small Rural Town folk and therefore not in possession of the vulgar, lofty, unattainable aims and expectations of city-dwellers — it was pertinent for them to achieve.

On the first day of Steve's new job and every day thereafter he left home at 7:35am and drove the twenty-five minutes from the Small Rural Town to the city where he parked his car at a cost of \$4.50 and displayed the small white ticket on the dashboard after a five-minute ordeal with the automated machine, during which Steve never once lost his cool or lashed out and kicked the computerised obelisk-cum-robotic-parking-attendant — as one might justifiably do at such an infant hour — but remained staid and convinced that the machine would eventually concede to spit out his ticket. After this, Steve crossed the bridge into the centre of the city and walked a further two blocks to the office, arriving at 8:20am and gaining access via his supplied security key fob before exchanging cursory greetings with a handful of coworkers and settling down at his desk. His desk was part of a pod of four² comprised of grey felt-covered partitions and beige Formica work surfaces adorned with dual liquid crystal monitors, black A4 document holders, memory-gel wrist comforters, plastic file trays, and revolving storage for pens and paperclips. Steve's own desk was near the second-floor window and overlooked the carpark where the firm's partners displayed their predominantly monochrome German vehicles under the similarly battleship-coloured sky. Steve began the day with emails before tackling balance sheets and more challenging tax reports and breaking for lunch. During lunch he sat in the break room at one of four more beige Formica tables which, on the advice of a management consultant, had been pushed together to form one large table, thereby encouraging senior and junior members of staff to build affinities, designating the break room as a space for more informal office interactions and creating a more cohesive working environment.³ Lunch consisted of a pot of fruit-flavoured

² Though one was entirely unpopulated save for a lone computer monitor and its hanging tangle of necessary cables — which sparse equipage gave it the vulnerable appearance of a car stripped of its vital parts and perched abandoned on stacks of bricks.

³ It didn't work.

yoghurt, two sandwiches (ham and egg or ham and salad, white bread, tightly clingfilmed), and an apple — which foodstuffs Steve methodically extracted from a plastic lunchbox and laid in order on the table. The lunchbox snapped shut with integrated plastic fasteners and was accompanied by a matching water bottle whose domed lid slid back in the manner of an observatory roof to reveal the tube from which the water could be sucked (which Steve did perpetually despite the firm keeping a fine selection of responsibly-sourced single-origin coffees and a chrome espresso machine, which stood sentinel at the head of the office). Steve carried his lunchbox and water bottle in the same small black nylon backpack he had used throughout high school, and which still bore his name and address, written in permanent marker on a square of white card and slipped into the little window on the inside of the main pocket. Steve’s impenetrably laconic manner meant that few attempted to engage him in conversation over lunch and, similarly, it never crossed his mind to enquire about his coworkers’ lives.⁴ When a coworker did, on occasion, take pains to initiate some semblance of verbal intercourse with Steve, it typically proceeded in the following fashion:

Coworker [*enters*]:

—What’s for lunch today, Steve?

Steve [*unpacking his lunchbox*]:

—Oh, just the usual.

Coworker:

—Get up to much at the weekend?

Steve:

—Uh, played a bit of golf.

Coworker:

—Oh yeah? What’s the course like over there in the Small Rural Town?

Steve:

—Oh, just... normal really.

[*Crickets chirp*]

Steve never left the office during his lunch break as many of his colleagues did to attend appointments or client lunches, to hang out in one of the adjacent friendly

⁴ This was despite — as his résumé so grandly reported — the excellent interpersonal skills Steve had developed via the customer service and engagement experience he had gained while working in his father’s farm supply shop.

local cafés, or to temporarily escape the confines of the office by taking a short walk or by browsing the nearby second-hand book shop. (Steve was not interested in books). Despite his ascension into independent working life and the not insignificant salary it brought him⁵ — which, as he paid no mortgage, supported no children, and indulged few expensive habits, was handsome remuneration indeed — Steve remained living with his parents. Steve’s parents, conscious of Steve’s newfound financial independence but equally conscious that their youngest-and-only son not be crushed by perceived parental rejection, gently encouraged him to find a place of his own. His mother reiterated that they both loved him and that he was always welcome in their home but suggested that embarking on a flat-share with a coterie of similarly-aged working professionals might be good for him.⁶ His father, in a manner reminiscent of Don Corleone, simply sat in stern silence. After scrolling through the ‘flatmate wanted’ ads online, Steve viewed precisely eight houses with vacant rooms for rent and considered each one adequate, but on all occasions the advertisers and would-be housemates declined Steve on the grounds that his taciturn manner would probably make him tiresome and difficult to live with.⁷ Thus, Steve remained living with his parents, who explained to Jeff the next-door neighbour that Steve’s intention was to depart on an Overseas Adventure after a period of working and frugally saving — which aspiration they were supporting by allowing him to continue living at home at greatly reduced rent.⁸ In truth, Steve had neither expressed this intention nor displayed any interest in experiencing another country.

Most days after work — upon returning from the city to the Small Rural Town — Steve would lift weights at the fitness centre across the road from the

⁵ For, although he was a relatively recent business school graduate, even relatively recently graduated accountants are paid inordinately large sums of money.

⁶ Though she didn’t or, rather, couldn’t elaborate on precisely what benefit she envisaged Steve might derive from cohabiting with such creatures.

⁷ They did not make their reasons for refusal explicit to Steve but simply informed him via text message that they had offered the rooms to various someones else.

⁸ This satisfactory explanation meant that Steve’s mother was allowed to host the fortnightly meeting of the local Wine-Tasting Society — a privilege surrendered by the previous host, the late Mrs. Vivian Jones, who had committed the unforgivable faux-pas of penning a letter to the editor of the Small Rural Town newspaper in which she had applauded the council’s decision to introduce an environmentally-conscious user-pays system for kerbside refuse collection.

squash courts and local veterinary clinic. At weekends he would play golf or pool or darts with one of the small number of friends he had made at high school and still remained in contact with, or one of the few of his cousins who was not yet married with children.⁹ His physique belied all this athletic enterprise; Steve was of average height and neither-fat-nor-thin build. Despite the weight-lifting having no obvious effects he considered it essential to his self-actualisation.¹⁰ Steve did not currently have, nor had he ever had, a girlfriend.¹¹ His first and only sexual experience had occurred in his first year of university following the first and only party he had attended or, indeed, was invited to, and happened only by sheer miracle when the girl — fed up that Steve had either misinterpreted or entirely missed her advances the whole night — finally made explicit her intention to take him back to her room in the halls of residence to fuck. The event itself did not live up to her carnal billing; Steve confessed to the girl that it was his first time (at which point she looked heavenward, sighed, and reassured him it was OK), though he needn't have done so as the ensuing four-and-a-half minutes of tepid missionary-position thrusting made this blindingly obvious. After apologising several times and dressing, Steve left (or, rather, was instructed to leave) and, uncertain what to do with the sheath he had been wearing moments earlier and which now contained a curved meniscus of his spent fluid sloshing about inside a spermicidal interior, carried the used condom with him as he stumbled through the darkened corridors of the halls of residence in search of an exit. When finally he found his way out of the building — with the condom swinging in his hand like a damp flaccid sock — he deposited it in a nearby rubbish bin and took the last bus home. There had been a handful of further occasions on which girls had made eyes at Steve but, as ever, he was blind to their flirtations. Conversely, Steve had experienced no shortage of crushes — the most recent being directed at a girl, Chloe, also a recent business school graduate, who had been employed by the

⁹ Steve was not so much dragged by his parents as dutifully attended baptisms, third birthdays, and gender-reveal parties.

¹⁰ Steve was not entirely sure what this meant but it was a phrase which, in its advertising leaflet, the fitness centre had promised would result from the various rigorous training and exercise regimes available to patrons.

¹¹ Which lack of success with women had, on more than one occasion, prompted Steve's father to ask Steve if he were gay, adding — after an uncomfortably long silence and pleading, disapproving stare — that it would be OK if he were.

accounting firm approximately a week after Steve had begun his position there.¹² Despite these shared circumstances providing ample conversational fodder, Steve never once summoned the intestinal fortitude (i.e., guts) to actually talk to her. What little conversation they did share was confined mostly to the subjects of spreadsheets, month-end profit statements, and the photocopier being depleted of toner. Steve did, however, make a concerted effort to listen to her conversations with others in order to glean details about her life and interests, reasoning (against all reason, for he had employed this stratagem before to no effect) that he might feel more capable of talking to her if he could build up a clearer picture of who she was.¹³ It was during one of these overheard conversations that Chloe mentioned her partner, Brad.¹⁴ Upon learning of his love-rival, Steve quietly left the break room and entered the bathroom where he vented his rage by tearing almost an entire roll of lavatory paper from its holder (before gathering it up again and placing it in a waste bin so not to leave a mess). Brad — as Steve discovered via further covert listening (though he needn't have obscured the fact he was paying attention; Chloe revelled in regaling all and sundry with the relentlessly banal details of her life) — was in his early thirties and managed a chain of entirely charmless local restaurants which he had inherited from his late father. Brad's managerial status meant that neither he nor Chloe ever cooked. Instead, they dined most nights in one of the various restaurants free of charge. For her birthday, Brad had taken Chloe on a surprise skiing holiday and shortly after on a five-day trip to Las Vegas where the pair had gambled (and mostly lost), taken a helicopter trip over the city, and spent the remaining time sunning beside the hotel pool. Brad was (at least in his own mind) an exceptional athlete who worked out in the gym five of every six days and had once run three marathons in the space of two weeks. In short, Brad was superior to Steve in every department (or at least every department the hopelessly self-centred, vapid, materialistic Chloe considered important). With no possible hope of wooing her, Steve resigned himself to simply admiring Chloe from afar and inserting her into his masturbatory fantasies. As with the rest of his life, Steve's self-pleasure routine

¹² She was an insipidly dull girl and therefore perfect in Steve's eyes.

¹³ There wasn't much of a picture to build. Really.

¹⁴ She chose consciously to refer to him as her 'partner' rather than 'boyfriend' in the belief that it made their relationship sound more mature and serious but which mainly succeeded in painting her as a pretentious twerp.

was a tense and regimented affair. After his parents had bid him goodnight, Steve would remain watching television for a further agonising half-hour to ensure adequate time for them to fall asleep, before switching off the set and taking himself quietly to his own room.¹⁵ Having satisfied himself that the door was properly latched and that excepting fire, earthquake, or tsunami he would not be interrupted, Steve opened the web browser on his laptop and loaded one of the three or four websites that delivered the pornography of his preference.¹⁶ In a separate tab he would load Chloe's social media profile¹⁷ and — finding one of the few pictures in which Brad was not also present — flip between it and the pornography, thereby mentally superimposing Chloe's face onto the naked, supine, spread-eagled body of the female performer whom he ensured possessed the same insipid, bleached-blond hair and roughly-similar build as the real-life object of his desires.¹⁸ Occasionally at work he would glance across to Chloe's desk or witness her stooping to fill her glass at the water cooler and, remembering the previous evening's fantasies, begin to feel his enthusiasm growing beneath his sliding keyboard tray. Steve had never rubbed one out on the clock but had on more than one occasion overheard the pleased groans and witnessed the unmistakable (even in patent-leather dress shoes) toe-curl of a colleague doing precisely that in an adjacent bathroom stall. On the first such occasion, Steve was so distraught that — after avoiding all eye-contact with the perpetrator while they

¹⁵ Steve knew from childhood camping holidays that his parents fell asleep quickly and were not the type to read by lamplight beforehand (or, indeed, at all). He rejected the possibility that they might also engage in genital-based activities between brushing their teeth and slumbering, believing that all such carnal instincts left the body by age forty — which misguided notion served only to heighten his desperation to be more successfully laid before being condemned to the same fate.

¹⁶ On a scale ranging from softcore to 'leather and lace', Steve's tastes were very much in the vanilla-bland zone; after an unfortunate experience with a POV video in which the male artiste — while going at it from behind — had extracted a string of fluorescent beads from the clenched sphincter of his female counterpart, Steve had given up masturbating for a month.

¹⁷ Steve's friend request sat in a purgatorial state of unacceptance but, mercifully for him, Chloe's rampant narcissism and resultant blasé attitude to online security meant that anyone could view her photographs and suicidally-boring boyfriend-centric status updates without first digitally befriend her.

¹⁸ This being pornography there was, of course, a veritable abundance of starlets who matched this description.

washed their hands¹⁹ — he rushed red-faced out of the bathroom and nearly knocked over one of the firm's senior partners as they were making their way to the photocopier. Surprised by Steve's unusually purposeful striding through the office, the senior partner, Paul, seized this opportunity to feign caring about one of his staff and invited Steve into his office to discuss how he was getting on at the firm.²⁰ The office was dominated by a large desk comprised of a slab of polished wood set on two blades of low-iron glass and swivel-chair which resembled the figure-hugging seat of a race car (and was somehow less gaudy than the wood-and-glass monstrosity it was parked behind). Indeed, the wall behind the desk featured several framed photographs charting Paul's recent vehicular history — mostly sporty-looking sedans with innumerable gaping vents in each flank. Steve was, of course, mightily impressed; his own vehicle was a modest hatchback whose most noteworthy features were its low mileage and body-colour interior stitching. Steve explained with characteristic brevity that he was enjoying working at the firm and found his job and its component tasks stimulating and challenging. Satisfied with this diligent response, Paul turned the subject to the weekend's Big Game and his and Steve's shared interest in golfing — which enthralling subjects they spoke on for three or four whole minutes before exhausting the extent of their conversational abilities, prompting Steve to return to his desk. He did so with a renewed sense of direction in life; his encounter with Paul and the images of success he had witnessed on the walls of his office had convinced him (i.e., Steve) that Paul was a worthy role-model.²¹ From then on, Steve and Paul's relationship blossomed (as much as it is possible for a relationship between two strictly heterosexual men of disparate ages to do so); they would greet one another each morning with a stiff nod across the office (always initiated by Paul as the senior figure) and discuss fishing or motorcycles

¹⁹ Equally, Steve took great care to neither look at the trouser-bulge where the perpetrator's remnant tumescence lingered, nor imagine the cooked shrimp radiating its latent warmth within.

²⁰ Paul often held these sorts of meetings with junior members of staff; they afforded him the opportunity to talk down to those beneath him in status, thereby bolstering his already burgeoning sense of superiority and allowing him to feel as though he played a key role in their personal and professional development.

²¹ Steve had not been aware of any sense of rudderlessness, nor his desire for a figure whose life he could endeavour to emulate; these had been revealed to him during the conversation with Paul and, consequently, he basked in the glow of his rare and meaningful epiphany for the remainder of the afternoon.

or mixed martial arts when, on occasion, they were both present in the break room.

Steps to a story

Add one whole fresh male character,
skin on,
white
(of course; there aren't enough
of those already).

A good sort of bloke,
but not too good;
a bit of a shambles
with his shock of dark hair
and grey in his beard.
He lives in knitted jumpers,
tobacco-browned and frayed at the cuffs;
his jeans—
the colour of smudged ash—
worn thin at the knees;
sort of Kurt Cobain meets grizzled local
pub philosopher,
learned in the wisdom
of beer mats:
Guinness is good for you;
Ask the man for a Ballantines.
The best stories need booze.

Have him neck a whiskey every other line
 (alcohol is punctuation),
drain a bottle of vodka
right
down
to the punt.

You'll need a good setting;
your main character likes quaffing spirits
so a pub seems appropriate
 (the light's sharp there too;
 describe the backlit green bottles,
 the burnt-orange glow
 of thick-filament bulbs).

But not one that's too corporate, soulless.
This is a story about real people;
their shirts
shouldn't be too clean.

He's there in the pub,
your gin-soaked Ghandi;
in a hushed corner—
his usual spot—
with his mates who he'll defend
to the hilt
if push comes to shove
and in comes this girl
 (there has to be one; heteronormative
 is all the rage these days).

She hooks with a finger
her twisted
liquorice-strap
hair,
threads it
behind a white question mark,

and orders a drink

(something bright and sweet,
how all girls should be).

Our man is besotted

(now your story has tension,
a love interest).

On the absinthe baize

a rock wall of a man

smacks

the eight into the back

of leather,

snatches a clutch of twenties

under a pint-glass,

proceeds to the bar;

Hey there darlin'

Lemme buy you another.

Our hero is magma.

His heavy

native

timber

barstool

scrapes across

the beer-sodden floor;

his mates look on.

(Insert sensory detail here;
the band plays a smoky blues number—
sounds like Ohm and Tesla
fist fighting).

Hello.

Insecure Men's Support Group

[VI.]

i remember a moment vividly, yeah. i was ten, in like my third week of karate lessons. in the local school gym with the painted enamel lines on the floor and the sort of paste of dead skin cells and sweat all gummed up between the boards. anyway, it's nearing the end of the lesson and the sensei usually devotes some time to self-defence type stuff, what to do if someone comes at you with a knife, he used to hand out lengths of garden hose for us to use as mock knives so we could get all patrick bateman without actually hurting each other. that sort of shit. anyway, we're all sitting cross-legged on the floor and he's sort of quizzing us about a couple of moves he showed us last week, what to do when a guy grabs you by the lapels and threatens you. so the sensei's asking if anyone remembers what to do and a couple of guys get up and try to demonstrate this move where you thrust your hands in between the other guy's wrists and push outwards and break his hold, but they can't really remember how to— and they stand there all hesitant or get it kinda wrong and only manage to knock the grip of one of his hands. the sensei's not being a dick about it either, like he's way stronger than everyone in the room but he doesn't— point is that the move should work even on a really strong dude 'cause you're basically exploiting the natural weak point in a guy's grip and even though we're all wearing our gis which have these really thick lapels, like you can get a really good grip on them, the move should still work. anyway, so the sensei runs us through how to do it properly, the key is to drop kinda low then step up and towards the guy while thrusting your hands through his wrists, really get some momentum behind it. so we're all cool with that but there's one more way of dealing with this situation the sensei is quizzing us about and no-one remembers except me, i remember so i volunteer to— it's

pretty different, like all the other guys remember the slick moves that twist someone's arm or whatever because that's the cool shit but this one's real simple—you look like kind of a weirdo but it works, the sensei showed us last week. so there's this thing you do in karate called a kiai which is basically like a shout you do when you kick and punch and stuff, but not like a sort of weak shout from the throat—like some guys would make this sort of deflating balloon noise like 'oose,' or just sort of say the word 'kiai,' pretty lame, right? like it's supposed to come from the gut and—no, no, nah i'm not gonna do it. anyway, it's supposed to give you this kind of rising strength behind your punch or kick or whatever, make it more kind of forceful, geddit? sort of like the thing that tennis players do nowadays when—i think they must have had an advisor or someone told them to do that for their power game or something. but not on every shot like the tennis players. like if you're sparring with someone you don't kiai on every kick or punch, you front-kick or jab or whatever to keep them at a distance, create an opening, then maybe side kick to the ribs or something and that's when you would— to give that extra force behind the kick and make sure it lands. anyway, so this other move. the sensei showed us last week how a kiai can get a guy to back off if he's holding you by the lapels or in your face or whatever. so i get up and the sensei grabs me by the lapels and i kiai in his face but it's a real weak one from the throat and i sort of don't know what to do with my body so i just kind of tense and un-tense real quick like that sort of falling feeling you get sometimes when you're going to sleep and of course the sensei doesn't—like last week he demonstrated with the senpai, like a junior instructor but still this guy is like a third-degree black belt, and the dude, the senpai, immediately dropped his guard and stood up from his kamae and his whole face changed, like he had that kind of staunch tense-jawed glare but as soon as the sensei kiai'd in his face he was all wide-eyed and slack-jawed and stepped back, but when i do it it comes out all weak like and the sensei doesn't even flinch and the other guys in the class laugh. i'm pretty embarrassed and of course my first instinct is to cry. not full-on tears, i just sort of well up a bit and i sit back down and kind of just pretend i'm brushing my hair out of my face and sort of try to hold it all in, 'cause my dad is sitting on a wooden bench at the side watching the training. and the sensei, he's real good about it, like he says i had the right idea, just needed to do it with some guts and volume and step forward when i did it and assert myself. so i'm sort of half consoled, i still feel like sort of a dick but he was encouraging and at the end of

the lesson he kind of patted me on the shoulder and said it was a good training. so i bow out of the gym, the dojo, and i'm walking with my dad to the car and trying to brush the dust and the dead skin cells and stuff off my gi 'cause he hates if I make a mess in the car and he asks me if i got a bit flustered or something during the lesson but i don't really want to explain to him that i was embarrassed so i just sort of say um, what, no, i dunno, not really, and get in the car and we're sitting in the car and he keeps pressing, asks what i was crying about in the lesson and i just say i wasn't, i dunno, nothing, and he flies into a rage, slams his fists on the steering wheel and yells at me to tell him what i was upset about and i don't want to tell him but he screams at me to just tell him what the fuck i was crying about in there and i'm crying again and my seatbelt is all twisted round my shoulder and pressing the yellow knot of my obi into my stomach and i can feel the grab-handle of the door in my back and i tell him i was embarrassed and all the vowels of embarrassed come out squashed and flat because i really don't want to tell him and he keeps yelling at me and me for being fucking embarrassed and for crying
and for crying
and for crying.

[XII.]

Well it's been a while. Um, not since my last relationship ended. And, to tell the truth, I'm a little ~~scared~~ concerned about what'll happen ~~when~~ if it does eventuate because last time I had some, uh, ~~problems~~ difficulties. No, no, not that sort, no, no issues there, ahem, no, totally fine, uh, full mast as always. Fuck. No, I just had some trouble, um, finishing, er. Which, obviously, as a guy, is not usually a problem. Not that I ever got there too quickly or anything, ha, no, but I was never not able to get there. And I know it was because of the drugs and I'm not on them anymore so I have no reason to believe it'll still be a struggle. But still it's, well it's a concern, I'm concerned because I've—. The drugs? Oh, uh, ADs, yeah. I forget the name of them, sounds like a South American mountain range or something. No, it's not a struggle on my own, no, but it never is. I mean yeah it was more difficult when I was on the drugs, sometimes would take— would take a couple hours, pretty frustrating but never impossible. Not that it was always impossible, but sometimes only after, uh, like three or four goes with her and only when she would—. The drugs make you feel pretty fatigued all the time anyway,

y-yeah quite a number of side effects, not just the um— it's why I stopped taking them really. Anyway, so you're feeling fatigued all the time so mustering the energy for a third try is like wading through wet concrete and after the second she really just wants to go asleep anyway but she kind of can't until you're done. No, n—, are you fucking kidding? Of course she minds. You think she doesn't as long as she gets off? Doesn't want to return the favour? No, it's no different. You want to get her off but that's not your only goal and if it is then you're selfish. No, no, that *is* selfish because it's like all you care about is making her you know what and feeling like a big shot for getting her there but that's not allowing *her* to feel like she does the same for *you*, like she rocks your boat, gives you the old inner-thigh thunder too. Anyway, whatever, regardless, there is uh, a kind of um, I dunno, finality when the guy, when you— especially if she wants you to, uh, on her—. No, no forget it. So if it doesn't happen it's kind of— I dunno, just odd really. Because it is kind of the ~~ieing on the cake~~ full stop on the whole thing, end scene, fade to black, roll credits, whatever. No, I told you, not since my last relationship and before I got off the meds, that's what I mean, that's why I don't know if—. No it wasn't why it ended, no. Well, yeah, there might be and I want to— that's why I'm ~~scared~~ concerned, what if it's the same with her, what if we're there, what if we're doing the thing and it's the same?

Notes on a Razor

The blades are the kind that drug dealers might use to cut coke and they come in little foil packets—discretely wrapped like Cadbury Roses. Secret blades. Thin, flat, double edged blades. Surgical stainless, platinum, or anti-friction coated with names like Shark. Sword. Feather. They come in stacks of ten or twelve in a little cardboard holder or sometimes plastic, no bigger than a matchbox. The plastic one is spring loaded. A mini concertina pushes each new blade up through a slot at the end so you don't slice your thumb open. The blade is wrapped like chewing gum; foil tucked at the corners and folded over, held only by the memory of its creased form.

My father uses an electric shaver. The size of a McDonald's cheeseburger with two spinning turbines that hack his stubble short. It has a curly telephone cable and lives in a black case with moulded crushed velvet interior; little dark hairs like the clipped fibres of a paintbrush embedded in the burgundy lining. I'm six and standing at the bathroom sink, watching him roll this thing across his face. Back and forward along his jawline, downwards underneath his chin. He slides the back of the shaver over my face, the smooth black plastic side. It buzzes against my skin and I recoil as the tingle arcs electric between my shoulder blades.

The handle is coal-coloured resin and the comb triple-plated chrome. The blade is sandwiched between this and the head plate and curves like a wing or the edge of the atmosphere. The handle screws the whole exploded diagram back together.

My father never taught me how to shave. How to guide a razor over my skin. How to navigate the terrain of my features; crest the ridge of my chin. How to avoid taking a chunk out of my earlobe.

The pedestal basin is full of hot water and the badger brush hangs patient in its plastic tortoiseshell holder. The bowl of shaving soap is levered open on the side of the vanity and the smell of oat, flax, and green tea rises, buoyed by the steam misting on the mirror.

There are many things my father never taught me. He bent the training wheels up on my bike but when they no longer touched the ground I was the one who fetched the twelve mil ring-spanner from its outlined place, hanging on a nail on the garage wall, and took them off. When I learned to drive he failed to explain the intricacies of the clutch; how to release it smoothly and how to let the brakes do the work before I slot down from fifth to third and glide through the give way.

Dunk the brush into the sink. Scrub your skin in crop circles to soften the bristle; twirl the brush in the bowl of soap like beating an egg. Paint your face white with lather. Wet the razor in the geothermal water and watch the moisture bead along the dangerous edge.

He calls and asks me if I've got a girlfriend yet. He asks as if getting a girlfriend is like getting satellite TV or the flu vaccine. My father never taught me about women either.

Take the razor up. Grip the cold handle, feel its heft and weight. Start at your sideburn. Hold the blade parallel to your skin, press firm and slide. Feel the soft scrape, hear the flick and crackle; hundreds of tiny hairs being sheared. Carve the lather away in slow stripes.

My father never had the patience to show me how to mow the lawn in straight methodical lines, uniform as a bowling green. A cricket pitch.

Now the tricky part. Underneath the swinging hinge of your jaw. Close to the jugular where your pulse beats a bass rhythm beneath the surface. Where the curve of your neck and the straight razor fail to meet. Nick your skin with the corner of the blade. Watch your blood gather and drip into the basin. Watch it curl pink and smoky in the standing water.

Portrait of a Loser

[6.]

I'm twenty-three.

I'm twenty-three and I'm studying English.

I'm twenty-three and I'm wasting my life.

This is the consensus in the eyes of my extended family as they spear slivers of leftover turkey and gaze at me. Their plates and their faces are identical circles of ceramic white. Boxing Day lunch has just kicked off and everyone is silent.

Silent except for the sound of mastication. Of incisors gnashing and bubbles of saliva bursting in the corners of their lips.

People tell you: digestion starts in the mouth.

Silent except for the one rich bitch aunt who chooses this precise moment to ask me what I'm doing with my life. That's how she phrases it too.

What am I doing with my life?

She puts on a prosthetic smile and empties her lungs in a little chuckle that fogs up in her glass of merlot. A little chuckle designed to conceal her question. To disguise it as little more than the kind of good-natured banter that distant aunts and nephews who see each other once or twice a year of course engage in.

Of course.

She always does this.

She always picks the moment when everyone is silent.

The moment right after they've stacked their plates with slices of dead bird and left the carcass stripped and desiccating. A pile of bones on a chopping board in the tropical micro-climate of the kitchen.

We're soul brothers that bird and me.

The moment when everyone is sitting under the awning with their plates seesawing on their sunburned knees as camping chairs disappear like canvas ghosts into their buttocks. The moment right after I've shoved my gob full of potato salad. She always picks this moment to ask me.

What am I doing with my life?

She does this deliberately.

I can't compose an answer straight away. I'm still chewing through a starchy mouthful. The bitter wallpaper paste that masquerades as mayonnaise sticks my tongue to the roof of my mouth.

So her question hangs there.

Like all the dead Christmas decorations that the kids have half torn down with their shiny new candy-red ten speed bikes.

Shiny like their young faces.

People tell you: your family will respect you more when you're older.

It just *hangs* there. Heavier and heavier.

Like when you catch a huge eel with your cousin in the creek on your grandparents' farm. You carry it in a plastic shopping bag to show them. It gets heavier the longer you carry it. The longer it hangs off your arm with the handles cutting your wrist.

I look at the rich bitch and the rich bitch looks at me.

Her collarbones are sabre teeth and she's got an Audi Quattro haircut. I imagine it says 'Vorsprung Durch Technik' beneath the mudflap of her hair.

We're locked in this staring contest across the aircraft carrier of the table. Just eyeballing each other over the platters of snacks and nibbles dutifully contributed by each family. Little bowls of identity. Little bowls like nametags.

A layer of treacle-gold caramel trapped between two slabs of chocolate asphalt.

Hi, we're the fat ones.

Crackers like bite-sized Sahara deserts with pubic tufts of coriander.

Hi, we're the posh ones.

Her.

She leans forward slightly as the swinging of my jaw slows. As my molars stop mugging the potato salad. As my throat squeezes it in a headlock and it settles in the acid-pit of my stomach next to a chewing gum wad of absolute dread.

People tell you: gum will stick to your tripe for seven years.

She leans forward because my big moment is about to arrive. The moment she has orchestrated. The sun is my spotlight and she's given me my audience. My very own reality TV talent show with my very own panel of scowling judges.

Step forward to the microphone and tell us your name.

Sing.

Dance.

Perform.

They're all waiting. My tongue is free and they know it.

My tongue is free and now I have to answer.

—Studying.

This is all I can manage to say. My tongue has stage fright and cowers behind the curtain of my teeth.

The chief judge rich bitch wrinkles her nose.

—English.

I stumble over the last syllables. My tongue is a ballet dancer performing one terrible plié after another.

She wrinkles her nose further. It looks like my big toe after a long bath. She wrinkles her nose but the corners of her painted on lips turn up ever so slightly.

She loves this. Loves feeling twelve feet tall.

Loves feeling like she's exposed me for a charlatan.

A fraud.

She picks her knife up off her plate and turns it over and over in her hand. The jet wing of the blade sparkles as she dissects the last fibrous remains of her turkey.

That poor bird.

Another aunt cocks a pencilled eyebrow and sighs audibly.

An uncle shoves a third piece of garlic bread into his mouth.

Another says:

—English? What the bloody hell are you gonna do with *that*?

They all have their mannerisms of disapproval.

My father's is to say nothing. He just stares down at his plate. At his portions arranged in neat little piles. Separate and not touching. He looks down and he remains silent.

And not because there's a police officer present.

The police officer is my cousin. Six months my junior and therefore the person I am most compared to. Like two beads of water racing down a window pane but

only one of us can land in the pool of family approval at the bottom.
My cousin the cop. The same cousin I used to catch eels with on the farm.
The same cousin my father still thinks I have anything in common with. The
cousin he sat me next to last May when he married his second wife.
Name tags on fancy marbled paper and curly typeface marked our seats. My
father's intentions spelled out in every calligraphed letter.
People tell you: everyone should have a role model.
A third nametag reads 'rich bitch.' She sits down and picks her moment.
The moment right after the swish of waiters bringing entrees. It's silent except for
the wet towel snap of tablecloths flapping. She chooses this moment to ask me.
What am I doing with my life?
Right after my best man duties are done.
Right after I've put on an uncomfortable suit and stood next to my father in the
role of the dutiful son.
Cut to now. The tables are turned.
Cut to now and he sits staring at his plate like mourners stare at a casket in the
ground.
The body has an in-built internal moment. About three seconds. You get that
feeling like someone is sliding two wet fingers up the back of your neck when a
hug or a handshake goes on that one instant too long.
That edge of the high diving board feeling in your stomach when you make eye
contact with a girl and she holds it.
One instant too long.
It can go either way.
I don't even need three seconds to know my father isn't going to say anything. My
whole life has been a boot camp preparing me for this. For the time he'll say
nothing when saying something really matters.
People tell you: blah blah old dog, new tricks.
I know he's not going to rise from his seat. He's not going to clear his throat.
This isn't one of those Oscar-winning moments.
I know he isn't going to say anything.
Still, I cringe as he pitchforks a slice of white turkey flesh into his black volcano
crater mouth.
This is not one of those moments.
We don't have them, my father and me.

We just have long silences. Silences that crawl inside your head. You start thinking anything to drown them out. You start worrying about your posture. Whether in thirty, forty, fifty years' time your vertebrae will collapse and you'll wish you'd sat up straight.

People tell you: your regrets will become your obsessions.

He regrets not being a better father. Or at least someone told him he ought to.

He tries to impart the wisdom he never did when I was young. Wisdom I don't need. Little parcels of good intentions too little too late.

Little moments of Zen.

He rubs his elbows and shoulders where there's new skin. Fibreglass filler patches of pink that bleed into his otherwise tanned flesh. Tanned from working outdoors and scarred from surgery. A procedure to counter the effects of years of repetitive manual work on his joints.

That's what he told me. I can't tell whether it's the doctor's unemotive language or his.

He fingers his scars and he says:

—Look after your body.

Fingers them like they contain the wisdom of the world. Like they're a relief map of experience. His scars that look like a child's felt tip wandered outside the lines.

People tell you: you have to forge your own path.

So I did.

Insecure Men's Support Group

[XIV.]

So I met this girl down by the lake right this real nice looking bitch but not too nice y'know otherwise they won't go for it that's the key I mean they've gotta be nice enough to keep you interested to hold your enthusiasm know what I mean but not so nice they know it think they're too good for you so anyway she's just sitting there reading a book y'know and now most guys are scared of this type y'know the book-reading type think they're too smart or something but that's shit bitches are all the same they just want attention especially the average ones y'know they just wanna know they can pull too so she's just sitting there all alone so I go over ask if I can sit down real casual like and she says yeah so I sit down and start making conversation y'know just sliding into it asking her what she's reading she's given me a real easy in there with that one and I ask her if she always comes to the lake to read and isn't the wind annoying blowing the pages around polite kinda bullshit y'know and yeah she's pretty responsive she keeps kinda looking at the book but she never turns the page or probably even gets to the end of the line she keeps turning to me and answering my questions and smiling all the right signs so I say hey listen y'know there's this café on the other side of the lake does she wanna get coffee and she hesitates y'know looks at her phone this real cute little oh maybe I've got someplace better to be act but she says yeah okay of course she does so we walk round the lake and I say oh god jeez I'm sorry I haven't even asked your name so she tells me and I introduce myself y'know shake her hand all that shit and now she's more at ease so we get to the café right and I insist on buying the coffee y'know and she just lets me I told you they love

all that shit and so we're sitting down and I start working on her asking her lots of questions letting her talk feel like she's being listened to y'know fucking book one page one stuff turns out she works in the same building as my cousin which is fucking golden now we've got this like connection there's no way this ain't gonna happen so anyway I finish my coffee and wrap it up tell her I've got a bunch of important shit I need to do just drop her cold y'know cut her off real sudden leave her hanging but I say this was nice and I'd like to do it again maybe take her to dinner next week or there's this thing at the theatre she might be interested in my man T—— keeps me up to date with that kinda shit comes in real handy with these book-reading types y'know and she says thanks but she's not really interested can you believe it fucking bitch says no she doesn't wanna after all my nice guy stuff and the coffee I mean Jesus what else does she want so later I look her up on Facebook— y'know they do that sometimes give you a flat out no when really they mean yes weeds out the ones who only want one thing y'know they wanna see how keen you are anyway so I send her a message real civil y'know say I'd really like to take her out but still she says nah thanks she appreciates the offer fucking bullshit she does or she'd say yeah so I message her again and alright yeah admittedly I get a little hot but what guy wouldn't y'know I tell her I'm a nice guy and I wanna do more nice things for her and she should really come out with me and she sends back some shit about how she doesn't owe me anything and I'm not respecting her answer or her boundaries the fuck does that mean so I talk to my cousin see if he knows anything might convince her and he says that he and a couple of other guys in the building have had a go y'know that she does this all the time says yeah to coffee but won't give anything else up and it's not like she has a boyfriend or anything they're pretty sure so what her fucking problem is they dunno and I tell my cousin that she's probably just a tease and he agrees a grade-A fucking tease and he says that a couple of the guys go to her gym and she ignores them like she's civil in the office y'know bump into her in the lift and she's sweet as fucking pudding specially when she's got an armload of files and needs the button for her floor pushed but totally ignores you at the gym when you offer to spot her or whatever but will use the machines the cycles and the leg-presses right in front of you like a fucking bitch tease so I ask my cousin what gym and if he can find out what times she goes 'cause I'm in the market for a membership and I'm real curious how much weight this bitch can handle.

[III.]

You put on your smart casual, your nice shirt, nice shoes, nice watch. The whole thing. But always there's this panic on the way in the car. You should've worn the damn blazer. That's the rule; you wear the blazer, they give you the job. Nobody ever says it but it's true. And then you think no and you remind yourself it's just a fucking scan-and-bag, have a nice day sir or possibly madam, who really cares? A blazer would be trying too hard. And then you're there, holding your résumé, your Two Sides Of A4 Essence Of Everything You Are Typed And Double Spaced With Some Phone Numbers For Some People Who Will Hopefully Say Nice Things, things that don't sound too platitudinous 'cause you're a human fucking being not a greetings card. Anyway, so you're there with your bits of paper and you go up to the cashier girl, your seventeen-year-old possibly future coworker that all the oily also seventeen-year-old dudes unloading boxes in the back are desperate to get into. You tell her you have a meeting with A——, whoever he is, the guy you spoke to on the phone, and she looks you up and down through her makeup, that powdery kind of shit that clings to all the little fine hairs on her face so she's got these like bonsai trees of lumpy foundation all over her, and she says oh are you here for the interview, *the* interview, like the fact you're applying for this shitty job so you can pay the rent doesn't already feel destroying. And you say yeah, yes, and she gets on the phone to wossisname and says the guy, you, you're here for the interview. You're pretty goddamn exposed at this point, like Hey Everyone I'm A Fucking Broke-Ass Loser Over Here In My Pressed Shirt Basically Begging For Someone To Give Me A Job, Take A Good Look I'm Only Here For Maybe An Hour And After That I'm Planning To Be Dead So Make The Most Of It. So the girl hangs up the phone in this real dramatic fashion. It's one of those sort of standard-issue black curly-cable office phones with the clock-in clock-out function and she slams the receiver onto the base, perfect for this little drama, you and the girl a couple of marionettes and the guy on the phone, A——, whatever his name is, yanking both your strings. So she slams it down and looks at you and says he, A——, will be down shortly and you go and wait by a stack of half-year calendar-diaries. And you look totally out of place all buttoned up while everyone else is in uniform or regular-person clothes 'cause they are, they're just regular people there to buy a new desk or printer or set of ballpoint fucking pens

or something while you're standing there not knowing what expression to wear 'cause nothing about the place makes you want to smile but you know you probably ought to appear something other than apathetic. And you don't know which way to face either. There's these stairs you're sure probably lead to the interview room or an office where the guy, mister Assistant Manager, is gonna spring from but you don't want to face them and be forced to make eye contact the entire time he's walking towards you. So you just look around like you're watching what's going on, like you're really interested in how the place works because it's so fucking fascinating. Really you just look like you've seen a wasp or something and you're worried about being stung. You fold your arms but that looks too impatient, too like you've got something to hide, so you unfold them. You put your hands in your pockets but you take them out again because your grandfather always told you not to do that, just like he always told you to look someone in the face when they shake your hand. Anyway, A—— finally comes along and introduces himself and shakes your hand but you forget to look him in the face because his arm hair is so appalling, that thick dark hair that goes all in the same direction like a forest in a gale. Really weird. Guy looks exactly like you expect an Assistant Manager to look too, bald on top but that kind of fluffy lapdog growth down and around, all the buttons done up on his uniform polo shirt and you bet he's got a pen in the pocket, one of those four-colour ones 'cause he's Mister Important, Mister Needs To Write In Four Different Shades. He's got this gold Ten Years Of Service badge pinned above his regular nametag. Oh and he wears one of those watches with a fitness tracker, heart rate and calories and all that kind of shit 'cause shuffling papers and kissing the boss's be-hind all day really gets the old ticker going. I mean, the guy's not out of shape but he's no fitness buff, just this tall, elbows and knees kind of dude, real unfortunate looking, you could get your house key in the spaces between his teeth. And you just know he lives alone or with his mother and this is the best he can do, not Manager but Assistant Manager and, like I said, you can bet he's a real brown-noser. You can see it in him. And the Manager trusts the shit out of this guy — fuck it, depends on him — but not with important stuff like his house or his kids or anything. He's not gonna ask the guy to water his plants while he's away or pick up his daughter from clarinet practice while he's in a meeting or drive him to the hospital or anything. But the store, that's fine because, hey, it's insured up the wazoo and it won't be the manager's ass in a sling if shit burns down, no, that's why you have

lackeys like Mister Polo Shirt, Mister fucking Orthopaedic Shoes, so there's someone else to take the heat. So the Manager doesn't buy the guy a Christmas present, a cheap bottle of wine or a box of biscuits or anything for all his good work, of course he doesn't. He just gives him his yearly bonus a week before Christmas like everyone else. As Per Protocol. Anyway, this Assistant Manager guy directs you to follow him upstairs to the interview room where everything is that horrible sort of Soviet-era flecked vinyl, the way candied popcorn used to look with the kind of sick shades of red and green and the fleece-coloured corn visible through the cracks. You sit on opposite sides of this plastic table and he's already got his interview papers, the questions and shit all set out and a copy of your résumé 'cause he's Mister goddamn Organised too. He says he's had a look through your résumé but can you tell him about you? — that's how he phrases it — and you want to ask the guy to be more specific 'cause you're one multifaceted motherfucker and which bit of you in particular does he want to know about? But you know this isn't really a two-way thing, so you just summarise the relevant parts, pretty much just verbalising what's in your résumé but stopping short of flat out quoting the fucking thing 'cause that'd be kind of masturbatory. And there's this little pause while he writes down what you said, as if any of it is worth committing in ink. You wonder what happens if you don't get the job. Not like what happens if you don't get the job and you can't pay the rent, that much is pretty fucking obvious, but what happens to this piece of paper, this sort of dossier the guy is compiling on you before your very face. You hope they burn it or at the very least that they have a good cross-cut shredder, not a strip-cut, but you know it probably goes into a big recycling bin in the storeroom where any other polo-shirted puffball might pick it up for rough paper, for writing down an email address or a stock code or something. You imagine them turning it over and reading your responses and comparing them to the ones they gave in their interview and laughing and jabbing their band-aided finger at the page and saying, 'see, now that's where you went wrong.' Anyway, Mister Guy looks up from his notes with the next lot of questions. Really awful, shitty questions. If you don't get the job it's the fault of the questions. I mean, not to lay the blame squarely on this guy or anything, but the questions he asks are totally wrong and what kind of ne'er-do-wells must he have hired if this is what he wants to know? You came prepared with good answers and examples of the rapport you had with customers at your last job, like the Woman With Arthritic Fingers who struggled with the

zipper on her purse and trusted you to take her money in and out and not dupe her on the change. But he doesn't ask about any of that, doesn't ask for examples. He asks you why you want the job and he's totally earnest. This is a serious question and you practically have to bite your tongue in half, stop yourself from telling him that really you don't. That you're working on this probable goldmine of a manuscript or screenplay and you just need something — a set number of hours a week and some not-too-stringent contractual obligations — so you can pay the rent while you finish it. You don't tell him you could probably do the job with a bullet in your head and that even though you won't pretend to like it you'll turn up and work hard. Instead you feed him some bullshit about how you enjoy interacting face to face with people, helping them solve problems. That kinda shit. And he nods and shakes your hand again but it's obvious he doesn't buy it 'cause a week later he calls you, says they offered the job to someone else, someone more suited to the type of work. And even though you're relieved, even though you didn't want the job, you know you're supposed to. Want it. Because your grandfather told you so.

My father thinks I dream

My father thinks I dream
of a four-bed, two-bath
brick and tile,
of a manicured lawn
in a tree-lined suburb —
a neat little cul-de-sac
in the good part of town
where the streetlights
hang
hexagonal
as Victorian lamps;
my very own quarter-acre
burial plot
 (that's the mort in mortgage,
 right?)

He thinks I dream
of electric gates,
of moving the Audi to get to the mower
and Saturdays spent
synchronised pruning
with all the other House-Prouds
 (not the renters
 on the corner,
 bemoaned through fence-palings

for their wild pittosporum strangling
Kiki's azaleas);
of afternoons in Bunnings
looking for weed mat,
potting mix,
insecticide.

He thinks I dream
of pumping some girl
full of flower-petal platitudes,
little bits of myself
she'll form into a shiny,
chlorine-scented kid

(as if the fact of biology
is noteworthy);
of assembling a bright
primary-coloured
swing-set
(slot part A inside part B);
a Christmas movie
carousel
on endless repeat

He thinks I dream
of phoning him on his birthday,
calling him an old cunt,
going to his favourite restaurant;
the one with the tables
arranged claustrophobic
in tight rows of dark
wood,
white tablecloths
uncreased.

OCD

And now it's Christmas lunch at my grandparents' house and I've locked myself in the bathroom. In the hallway kids are playing with noisy new toys. I'm doing lines off my grandfather's shaving mirror, the only uncluttered surface I could find in here. Even in the bathroom my grandparents have ornaments and knickknacks.

The lace tissue-box cover. Wicker basket of potpourri.

A terrifying skeletal doll, her crocheted dress is clotted with dust and conceals a new toilet roll.

I cut the coke with a new razor blade from a foil packet and honk it up through a fresh twenty. I'm running the tap to mask my snorting.

I've locked myself in the bathroom because I can't bear to witness the crimes being committed in the kitchen.

Gobbets of gravy staining the tablecloth.

Pus and blood layers of trifle that leak into each other. Fallen crumbs from the base of a cheesecake. My grandmother's habit of hanging the dish towel on the oven door, and her good wine glasses with that faint puke smell of dusty cupboards.

My grandmother's kitchen is always filthy, not just at Christmas

My kitchen is my favourite room in the house. Nowhere else are there so many surfaces to polish.

The granite benchtop. Dark and expansive as a galaxy. If galaxies had a thin film of disinfectant.

The grand stainless canyon of the sink. The shining faces of the appliances.

The fridge. A double door Westinghouse. Big as an antique wardrobe with an ice maker and on-demand chilled water.

The dishwasher with nineteen programmable cycles. Three for delicate glassware.

The dual compartment, self-cleaning, steam-assisted induction oven.

The La Marzocco coffee machine in Monza red. Fifteen bar pump and full three-sixty swivel head for steaming milk.

Nowhere else are there so many delicious decisions to be made. How to arrange the cutlery. Left to right:

knives

forks

spoons;

teaspoons at the bottom.

Sundries in the big compartment on the far left. The Redi-Sharp™ vegetable peeler. Finger-Saver can opener (pat. pending).

Bottle opener corkscrew gadget. Paddle-shaped knives for spreading pâté and cutting soft cheeses.

Utensils go in the second drawer down.

Tongs.

Big spoons.

The fishslice.

A ladle that never sees use.

The garlic crusher. Cast aluminium. Hand wash only.

Glasses go on the top shelf of the corner cabinet with the transparent door. Then, working down:

coffee cups

breakfast bowls, bread plates

dinner plates, round and white, middle shelf

porcelain and glass serving bowls.

Wine and beer glasses in the pull-up cupboard over the fridge.

Sometimes I'd imagine being employed to go into other people's houses and arrange their shit. Standing there in the temple of my kitchen, I'd think:

I'd enjoy that. Being paid to put things into order. Alphabetising record collections and shelves of books.

Organising people's wardrobes. Left to right:

jeans

buttoned shirts

knitwear

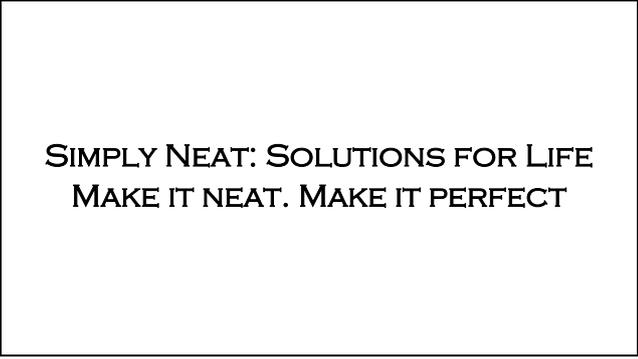
jackets;

shoes on a powder coated wire rack at the bottom. T-shirts folded into one foot by one foot squares and stacked in the drawer. Colour coded. Prints facing up for easy identification.

I dreamed of this at night. Between waves of Egyptian cotton and pillows the size of whole continents. I dreamed of being paid to deliver perfection. To make people's homes emptier so their lives seemed more full.

So I did it.

I took out a business loan. Shook the bank manager's hand and complimented his sharp suit. In return he slammed APPROVED on my application form. Towering inky red block letters that gave birth to:



**SIMPLY NEAT: SOLUTIONS FOR LIFE
MAKE IT NEAT. MAKE IT PERFECT**

I printed four thousand business cards with that slogan. Four thousand palm-sized billboards, minimalist as a Mondrian painting. I specified thick, quality card stock. 600 grams per square metre. Twice the density of your average estate agent's card. Matte finish. White. Black seam.

A simple serif typeface. Also black.

—What is it you do exactly?

An uncle asks me this, staring blank at the business card I've handed him. He stubs a bitten strawberry into a bowl of icing sugar. White powder falls on his lapel. I sniff and rub my nose.

—I help people de-clutter their lives, I say. The uncle looks from the card to me.

—So interior designer then? He makes a limp-wristed gesture.

—Of sorts, I say.

—And there's a market for this? He sounds insulted.

—Yeah. I shrug.

—I mean, I can understand people needing what *I* do, he says. They're building a house, they need earth moved, drainage. But this?

I smile weak and take the card from him before he soils it further. One of the many cards that started everything.

I left them in swanky wine bars and the better restaurants in town. Stuffed them into plastic holsters in paint shops and home improvement stores. Stores that sold shelves and curtains and clever ergonomic pressed plywood trays for balancing espresso on while reading in bed.

I had thirty clients within the first week. All kinds of clients.

There were the self-described 'young professionals.' Couples a few years out of university. They'd have advertising internships for developing Korean car companies under their belts and now work in middle management. They'd just bought their first house. Their boss was coming for a schmoosy dinner. Golf ball-sized portions on planet-sized plates and witticisms with barely trace elements of humour.

They wanted a raise. A corner office. They found my card while out shopping for the right bathroom hand towels and called me.

There were divorced middle-aged women too. Women who in the 1980s slathered themselves in baby oil and ignored the growing ozone hole so that later in life their husbands traded them in for younger, less leathery-skinned models.

Reformed drug addicts who had become addicted to organisation to distract from their latent desire for a hit.

I think I identified with them the most.

Instead of jamming needles into their veins they jammed their old clothes into black rubbish sacks and took them to charity shops or left them on the kerbside for collection.

I did the same.

On my company AmEx I bought:

Two-dozen linen Armani shirts in Eggshell, baby blue.

Six pairs dark selvedge denim jeans, tailored trousers, also Armani.

Six pairs brown patent leather brogues from a London boutique.

The latest Breitling watch. Brown leather strap.

I arrive in this get up to Christmas at my grandparents', park my new silver Alfa next to some American car. Some sixties throwback. Fake vents in the haunches

and a lurid paint-scheme.

—What sort of engine?

Someone's brother in law asks me this as I slide out of my hand-stitched Italian leather seat.

—V6, I reply, pushing a pair of tortoiseshell Clubmasters up the bridge of my nose.

—You're a couple of cylinders short. He gestures towards the American car.

—Yours, I gather. I gesture back.

—Supercharged, he says. 709 horsepower.

—Well, this is very quiet and comfortable, I say, and head inside to find the bathroom.

For a one-man start up business, so many clients should have been a problem. I didn't let them know this. Instead I used it to my advantage.

When they called and begged me for a consultation — their word, not mine — I ummed and ahed and rustled papers and said I could probably, maybe, fit them in in two weeks. At the earliest.

When I did meet with them and they asked me how much, I flipped open my leather agenda and pretended to consult a printed spreadsheet. Really there was nothing on the page. I just pulled the prices from nowhere, letting my imagination take me.

At first my consultation was free and the work I carried out \$150 an hour plus travel expenses.

—Payment is eighty percent up front, I told them.

Fitting out a double wardrobe would be twelve-hundred dollars for all the racks and cube shelves and revolving storage for ties and socks and underwear. I know because I'd done this in my own house with a laser-cut modular system from a local manufacturer.

After the first four months I added a zero to my hourly fee and doubled the price for wardrobe surgery.

Business continued to boom.

After the first year I refinanced and bought the factory that made all the shelves — storage solutions — including the laser cutter, the staff. I hired fourteen guys to go around fitting out wardrobes and other jobs that required power tools. I put them in practical but name brand clothing:

Dark-coloured Wrangler work shirts with detailed Western yokes. Selvedge jeans.

Clarks desert boots.

I put them in white Mercedes vans with my business card blown up and signwritten on the side and spent my time on less arduous jobs.

People paid me to wander around their house reassuring them that their *Reservoir Dogs* movie poster or their Jesus and Mary Chain 1994 tour bill in no way suggested a lack of taste. Teenage nostalgia was so in, I told them. A simple black frame would make them look as refined as any self-conscious piece of art.

And then they'd pay me to go and buy the frames. To slip the posters in behind the glass and secure the back with brown paper tape.

After that I realised it wasn't enough to organise. People wanted my opinion on style too. I started telling them if they chipped away the plaster on their kitchen wall to expose the brickwork and installed a stainless range they'd achieve the New York loft look. Some bullshit I read in an architecture magazine in a doctor's waiting room.

These people were masochists. They'd always got what they wanted. They'd never been denied anything. So when I got all faux-enraged and told them that their lives weren't perfect, that their sofa looked like something the 1970s had thrown up on, this was a kind of thrill for them.

This shit turned them on and when I left I knew they'd get right to fucking. To breaking in the new king slat bed with beech headboard and nautical striped duvet cover.

Sometimes their lusty advances were directed at me.

This job gets you a lot of attention. Usually from gay men who assume that because I can order weatherproof cushions that perfectly compliment their outdoor furniture online in like four seconds flat I must bat for their team too.

When they ask I always wink and say:

—I can neither confirm nor deny.

I know it's cruel to lead them on. Especially as I've cornered — fuck it, *pioneered* — this market. Sex or the implication of it is not necessary for a repeat gig. But if their checking out my ass in skinny jeans while I'm aligning a wall hanging with the coffee table keeps me in designer shirts, I'm not going to complain.

I've only ever gone there once. And never in lieu of actual payment.

She asked me to stay for dinner. I'd just helped her choose a new kitchen table, plates, napery. Most of my clients have Italian-made tiles on every bathroom surface and seven shelf laser-cut glass hi-fi racks in the living room. She didn't

seem to care about any of this. Her place was a mess but in the newly minted perfection of the dining room she came into focus.

Her hair looked like being afraid of the dark. Piano black and endless like a universe.

—I'm glad you talked me into new cutlery as well, she said, holding a knife and looking at me down its hand-sharpened edge.

After dinner she brought out dessert. A kind of miniature Death by Chocolate in a coupe glass. She sat opposite me again.

A few minutes later her foot was in my lap. The white half-moons of her French pedicure smiling at me from under the table.

Five perfect little seductive smiles.

A few minutes after that we were on the new table. We broke almost the entire set of new plates. She cut her ass on one of the clear white shards.

—That's gonna be tough to explain to my boyfriend, she said.

In the end she couldn't, so the boyfriend left.

I suggested a new floor rug. A gesture conciliatory for her and celebratory for me. You can guess how that got christened.

But it wasn't all fucking. Nothing as convenient as that.

She suggested we live together. Right there and then. Before either of us had put on the clean underwear necessary for thinking these sorts of things through.

—Whose house? I asked.

We debated this naked in the kitchen. I poured the post-coital Shiraz and we stood on opposite sides of the kitchen island. She leaned over and pressed her breasts on the cold granite benchtop. And then she played her joker:

—I'll let you do whatever you want. To this place I mean. Think of how much fun you'll have.

That weekend I was dragging suitcases up the stairs to her apartment.

Her apartment with its harbour views from the bedroom and deep divots in the floor rug in the shape of her knees. With its perfect dining room and mess everything else.

I'll admit I wanted a project. With the business practically running itself, I never got to make things neat anymore.

More than that, I wanted to make things neat for her.

She'd come home to find new things in place of old and old things in new places.

Retro bedside lamps with braided cloth cords and big vintage bulbs, filaments

thick as fencing wire. The Swiss-made, galvanised wall clock above the coffee machine in the kitchen.

—Tonight. Anything you want, she whispered when she saw our toothbrushes in the same turquoise holder on the side of the bathroom vanity. Apparently toothbrushes hold cosmic significance.

As if spreading saliva on intimate parts of each other is less of a big deal.

Three perfect weeks this went on before it happened. Like I always knew it would. I was in the kitchen in a silk kimono, swinging my legs off a new native timber barstool. Reading the newspaper and pondering which part of the house to re-do next. She came into the kitchen looking for breakfast.

—Where's the toaster? she asked.

—In the cupboard, I said thumbing the page.

—Why?

—Sorry?

—I mean why can't we just leave it on the bench?

—Oh, I said. It upsets the clean lines. Looks neater without it.

—But I use it every day. Her volume going up a couple of notches.

—It's so hard to get it out of the cupboard? I said. There was a pause.

—Why can't you just be happy with the way things are?

The new wall clock ticked by five seconds. The last thing she said to me before I left was:

—This could still work if you'd just lower your standards.

I returned to my apartment with its perfect rooms and my mess everything else.

—Do you have a girlfriend or a... partner?

An elderly aunt asks me this. She's clamped her hand round my arm. Her fingers are red and craggy like boiled yams.

—No one steady, I say.

I don't tell her that there was someone and that to forget her I've buried myself in work. What this really means is that I've started giving in to my clients' flirtations. I don't tell her that I've been tugged off into expensive face cloths and ridden in white leather tub chairs.

The aunt squeezes my arm tighter.

—You've no muscle, she says. Women like a man with muscle. You work indoors too much.

I don't tell her that the women I know like to be tied to headboards and doused in

Dom Perignon. I don't tell her that instead of working out I take cocaine.

I don't tell any of them anything.

I don't tell them that a major national fashion magazine asked to interview me. Called my office one morning and said could they do a profile on me for a section about successful young business people.

I agreed.

They sent over an attractive junior reporter. I was pouring wine and imagining her in various positions on my sofa when a hairy-knuckled photographer arrived.

I sighed and answered the reporter's questions. Then the orang-utan snapped some pictures of me in the kitchen. My favourite room in the house. There I am, leaning on a chessboard butchers block. Holding a cup of espresso and looking pensive out the window.

The interview was a complete success. There I am on glossy paper. Eleven inches high, action-figure me. Not quite Bowie or Lou Reed cool but give me a guitar and I'm there. Choice quotes in sans-serif type scattered carefully on the page. At the bottom they printed my business card.

A week later I was getting calls from across the country. Rich arseholes demanding to see me.

Sometimes I'd catch three flights a day. I'd fly five hours for a ninety minute consultation, fly back again.

Then a client offered me some coke and I said yes.

After that I was honking the stuff in airplane bathrooms just before the seatbelt sign came on and the stewardess asked everyone to please return to their seats in preparation for landing. We will be taxiing past the main terminal and disembarking down the stairs onto the tarmac. Please remain seated until the aircraft has come to a complete stop. The local time is...

—I don't know how you do it, my clients would say. All that travelling.

I fly back again. It's 2am and I'm wired. I spend the next three hours cleaning my apartment. Go to bed. Sleep till eight. Up again. Black coffee. And now Christmas lunch and my grandparents' house.

—Does your job take you anywhere interesting? A cousin's wife's sister asks me this.

—Oh, all over the place, I say vaguely.

I don't remember the names. They're printed right there on my boarding pass in a dot matrix of block letters. They're announced over the speaker system. A major

chord as if to herald good news and a bored airport attendant's voice. The flight has been delayed by two hours.

Or worse. The flight is right on time.

I look at the gate number and the airport clock in screaming red letters. Where I'm going makes no difference. I only ever see the inside of people's houses. Their bedrooms.

I take some naughty salt and fly back again.

Back to my empty apartment. I sink into a replica Eames chair clad in calfskin. It's the blue hour. Not quite night and not quite day. When everything struggles for colour. When everything is a sort of pale blue.

I finish off the dregs of a gram but I don't get high. I just feel floaty.

I feel myself rising. Up towards the ceiling. I thank God for recessed light fittings. I look down and vaguely recognise what I see. Some part of my brain feels warm with memory but the other parts fail to translate.

I know those polished concrete floors. That wall hanging. I know that kitchen.

The double door fridge. The dark granite benchtop. The coffee machine. I know them but I cannot place them.

There's a man I know too. His outline is familiar but I can see none of his details. Nothing to tell me who he is. He sits before an orange glow. The only source of colour in the pale blue room. He's dropping things into the orange ball. The same thing over and over. Little white rectangles of glossy card.

There's some kind of writing on them but I can't quite make it out.

Insecure Men's Support Group

[XXVI.]

So but then I get there and she's waiting on the doorstep with the mother and their little dog runs out, this little yap yap thing the mother keeps, supposed to have white fur but it's this long-haired fucken thing so the fur is hardly ever white, always kind of grey and daggy at the ends. Round the legs especially cos they're only short so the fur drags on the ground and just kinda mops up the dirt. That's what this thing looks like, one of those stringy school mops and it always stinks. Little dogs always stink. I mean but seriously, I grew up with dogs, big fucken dogs on the farm what used to roll around in shit and mud all day didn't stink as much as this little dog. I'd let them on the sofa before this thing. And she knows how fucken precious I am about my car, I mean it's bad enough they've got a gravel fucken driveway, I don't like dogs near it jumping up and scratching the paint and pissing on the wheels, she shoulda kept the fucken thing inside. And so I get out and shove the stinking, yapping little shit away with my boot and it runs under the house to mop up some more dirt, it's why the mother's house is always filthy. I don't even like going inside, the place is that bad. So they come out on the driveway and— no the mother doesn't say anything, why would she, I deal with dogs damn near every day. What the mother does say is, 'doesn't she look nice?' and it's like yeah, well, big fucken whoop, my family always looks nice. She's wearing a dress which makes a change, like I guess that's something. So I say hey, well, we better get a move on, my dad hates it when you're late, likes to have his lunch on the dot, let's go. She's pretty quiet in the car, I figure she's nervous

about meeting them and I say, look, it'll be alright, they're gonna like you, and she then starts goddamn crying about the dress, how she went to all the trouble of borrowing it and I didn't even say anything about it, like I can even deal with that right now. We're like ten minutes away and she's crying and I know I've gotta shut this down real quick so I say oh, no, baby, I'm sorry, I did notice, it looks good, I'm sorry, I'm just nervous about her meeting them too cos I really like her and I want them to like her as much as I do, and she finally quits her sniffing just as we pull in the drive. I go round and open her door and my mum comes out to say hi and says my dad is down the back paddock but it's just about 12:30 so he won't be too far away and speak of the devil he turns up on the four-wheeler and one of the dogs runs in behind, but I think all cool. And we're all standing in the drive making nice about to inside for lunch and but then the fucken dog cocks its leg and pisses all over my wheel, I mean can you believe it.

[XXVIII.]

Thank you for being straight up with me. I can't pretend I'm not disappointed or even mildly depressed but I have dealt with— it's not as though I hadn't already mentally prepared myself for the possibility, put it that way. I'm glad we can still hang out, and I want to assure you it's not a problem. I'm not going to be one of those guys who hangs on in that really sad way in the hope of being next in line, that's not why I'm here. Because I respect you more than that as a person, because to be that guy would be to insult your intelligence, to suggest that you're stupid and wrong and that your ability to choose what is right, what is satisfying for you is flawed and to imply that what you've got going on is not, can't be, a For Real Thing. That it's doomed to fail and that you're stupid because you couldn't see its inevitable crumbling from the outset. That's not what my being here is saying. If I thought all of those things then I wouldn't have come, wouldn't have been interested in the first place. And I respect *me* more than that, because I'm not willing to be the backup, the plan-B, the one who's there when it does fall apart, and have to heal a bunch of wounds or whatever that I had no hand in carving, that are some other guy's fault. Not that I'm saying it will fall apart and that's what you'd do. And, honestly— and it's by now no revelation that yeah I was interested, let's just call it what it is, you've gleaned it correctly and it's refreshing that you were able to and acknowledged it, had no uncertainty about it. But I was

never even sure that you were really my type. I mean, I was willing to try, I was open to the possibility. But your hair. I mean, it's pretty vivid. It was the part of you that got my attention in the first place but I could never entirely imagine myself walking down the street or holding hands in the supermarket with it, with you. So you've kind of spared me the trouble of finding out my instincts were right all too late. So thank you.

[XIII.]

No, I'm ok. Really. No. Honestly. I've dealt with it. I'm fine. You just expect me to feel something and that's what these tears are about, they're about the weight of your expectation. I'm just doing what you expect of me.

Portrait of a Loser

[22B.]

My father sits on the couch and I sit on one of his hard dining chairs worrying about my posture. Staring out the window at next door's oak tree.

Sometimes when I visit the leaves are brown.

Sometimes they're fresh green.

But my father is always the same.

He asks me:

—Got a girlfriend?

He asks like a girlfriend is a nice watch. A sudden downpour of heavy rain in my weather gauge of life success.

I tell him:

—No. I'm not really interested.

He asks me, am I gay.

Again.

It's not the first time so I've laboured over my response.

—Would it be a problem if I were?

—Well if that's the way you want to live your life, he says.

This means yes. Yes, it would be a problem.

—Well, for the record, I say, I'm not.

—So you don't have your eye on anyone? He gives me that faux-macho, nudge-wink tone.

—No.

—There must be someone.

—No.

Denial is the simplest tactic with my father. It's easier to just say no. No there isn't anyone. I can't explain that there *is* someone.

Someone who makes me feel all edge of the high diving board in my stomach.

Imagine midnight and you're imagining the colour of her hair. Imagine you're four-years-old and alone in your dark bedroom. Alone in the thick, black, immovable dark.

That's how it feels to look at her hair.

As if I can explain this to my father. As if I can tell him: relationships are for the weak but, hey, I really like this girl.

My father with his portions separate and not touching on his plate. Pacific, Indian, and Atlantic oceans of ceramic white between the continents of his food.

Separate like he sees the world.

You're either a cat person or a dog person.

Sweet or savoury.

Success or failure.

Gay or straight.

You either want to be with someone or you don't. There is no middle ground.

I can't explain that I like this girl but I don't want to be with her. Or anyone.

This girl who pulls me in five directions at once.

Who makes me feel like her favourite and her most hated person all at the same time.

This girl who invites me to a book sale.

Think of a perfect Sunday and you're thinking of wandering up and down cornrows of trestle tables with this girl. Trestle tables stacked with books and this girl hungry for them like you wish she were for you.

This girl with her vine of midnight hair brushing the back of my hand. Rolling over my knuckles. Tracing the pattern of my veins as she tilts her head to read the spine of a leather-bound novel.

Her hair that I want to grab fistfuls of and wrap myself up in. Right there.

Right under the gaze of the school gym lights that make the whole place hot.

The heat amplifies the smell of sweaty feet. Of dead skin cells trapped between the floorboards.

The smell of ancient dust trapped between the moulding pages of the books.
I don't care. I just want to be enveloped in her hair.
This is what I think about as I walk behind her. As I carry the boxes of books she's collected.
Every now and then she stops.
Gasps.
Swoops.
She's a magpie picking treasures from the mud. She shoots an arrow-thin arm out and hooks each book with her talon fingers.
She pauses.
She reads.
She tosses the book over her shoulder for me to catch. For me to stack in the box so it'll hold as many as possible.
Rinse, and repeat as necessary.
Three huge boxes of books that weigh down the back of my car. Each shock absorber a collapsed vertebrae.
She sits there with her twisted liquorice-strap hair draped over the shoulders of the passenger seat. Loose strands making crosshatch patterns against the seatbelt as I drive her home.
I drive her home and it's silent.
Silent until we pull up outside her gate and I open my stupid mouth.
—I'll help you carry your books in, I say.
There's a pause. My internal metronome ticks past three seconds.
—Oh, she says. Oh, it's ok. I'll just make a few trips.
She gives me that tone like I shouldn't break my back. Like I shouldn't inconvenience myself.
Like she's doing me a favour.
But they're daggered words really. Little glowing cigarette butts she stubs out on my heart.
She always does this.
I'm her personal pincushion.
—At least let me take them to the door, I say.
A door I fear I'm knocking on with masculine entitlement when all I want is to be helpful. To be a nice person.
Maybe then she won't think I'm so worthless.

Maybe then she'll at least make me feel welcome at her house.
The massive fortress of her house with its face of brick and plaster. A face that shows no knowledge of us, the two chess pieces standing in the driveway.
A face that gives nothing away.
Well, déjà-fucking-vu.
I imagine her sitting inside one of the eyes, the silver framed eye of an upstairs window. Just sitting and looking out over the street.
Looking out and letting no-one in.
—Just put them on the kerb, she says, using me for her ashtray again.
On the kerb where I'm starting to believe I belong. Stuffed in a black bag with all the other household waste.
Stuffed in a black bag instead of wrapped in her hair.
All I can think about is how I want to be wrapped in her hair.
Cocooned like the worthless caterpillar I am until she makes me into something good.
I do as she says and we just stand there outside her house.
Her massive house right at the end of a neat little cul-de-sac.
A cul-de-sac like our relationship. Or whatever this isn't.

#431AM

In the pale blue hour,
beside the brown cowshed,
rain rifles down
on the red quad bike
idling lumpy,
lazy in the tanker loop;
its single
butter beam
headlamp —
shot with holes by the falling drops —
shines weak on the high tide mark
of shale dust
up the rusted
iron
door
slicked half ajar,
leaning off its broken
metal
track.

Hanging in the narrow aperture,
another lone incandescent;
a moth, brown-bodied, beats
against the hot glass,

becomes stuck
in cobwebs strung as decorations
inside the yellowed shade.

Behind the vat a query mark
of red twists
across the hempen concrete
floor
from the temple of a good keen man;
a smear on the sight glass —
blood against milk —
traces his trajectory;
the stink of burnt hair,
old dairy,
and a shotgun shell peeled
apart.

Outside,
the white-faced cattle
groan
for their milking.

Russian Dolls

You're not supposed to be happy at a funeral. But I am.

A funeral that would look more like a wedding if it weren't for the cornrows of sombre relatives all crying and pressing squares of folded tissue to their Sunday best faces.

And the dead guy in the box.

There are cocaine lines of white plastic chairs and a uniformly green rectangle of lawn. A white building with vines climbing its white pillars. There's a sort of raised gazebo at the front you can imagine a happy couple exchanging pre-written sentiments under. Four more white pillars that describe a white box and a pitched roof with graphite-coloured shingles that overlap.

Like weddings and death.

The dead guy in the box is my uncle. An uncle I never really saw except at Christmases. At other relatives' funerals in churches with ceilings like upturned bathtubs when he was always asked by the deceased's left behind son or daughter to emcee.

That may not be the right word. Funerals don't get emceed so much as hen nights. Whatever it's called, he was always asked.

He had a reassuring manner perfect for funerals. You felt certain the hearse would be on time and there would be no maintenance at the cemetery. No lawnmowers to disrupt the burial ceremony. That life afterwards would be okay.

I imagined that's how they felt. The goddaughters and grandsons and other left-

behinds who asked him to speak.

He was a confident speaker and I admired him for it.

Others did too. The called-upon ones whose names are in the programme. Between the poems and the songs. The names of the people who leave their seats and cross the manicured lawn to stand next to the casket and say their piece.

Anecdotes and stories. How much they liked him. How he met his wife. Something funny he said in 1979. His appetite. How he'd lay his knife and fork down after two heaped platefuls of a full roast dinner and ask:

—What's for dessert?

People laugh.

They use his name and they look at the box. At the wreath of flowers where his face is underneath the lid. They look at the casket like the man they knew is still there. Like he's not just a Russian doll now. A container within a container.

A man with a voice like a gravel road gets up to speak. His hair is short and coarse. Like the bristles on a hearth brush. He wears a stiff grey suit and two medals pinned to his left breast. Polished silver discs and red and gold ribbons that mimic the early spring bloom.

He breaks down before he can finish. His mouth and brow tie themselves in knots and he cries and grips the edge of the casket like it's the shoulder of his dead friend.

My dead uncle's mother howls in her wheelchair.

I cry too. And not for the first time.

When I arrive with my father there are bagpipes to summon us to our seats. A liver-spotted man in tartan and long socks. He stands on the dewy lawn and blows the most mournful noise.

I cry when I hear the bagpipes.

I cry again when the casket is brought in. When my cousins lay the honey-coloured box on the stand.

The box that contains their dead father.

I cry when my cousin the same age as me and wearing his police uniform reels back from the casket. Pulled by some invisible tether. He holds his hand to his mouth. Looks like vomiting.

And I cry now as I sit behind my dead uncle's family with their arms tentacled around each other. As the man made of mountains wipes his nose with the back of his fist and people stand to let him back to his seat. His medals swing from his

lapels.

I cry behind my sunglasses and I'm happy.

About three years ago my uncle went to the doctor about a lump in his foot and now he's in a box. In the back of a big car on the way to the crematorium. Shining, polished black. Massive and dark like a moving galaxy.

Three years ago I went to the doctor too. My problem was at the other end of my body.

I sit in the waiting room and count the polystyrene ceiling tiles arranged in a grid. Four down and three across between each white strip light. I read a poster for meningitis vaccination eleven times while other patients stare into their phones and a nurse and receptionist cluck about their weekends.

The doctor calls my name. Or something remarkably like it.

The doctor prescribes me some red and green capsules. Some cheerful Christmas-coloured drugs. Their name tastes like chewing broken plastic.

I watch myself take the prescription, sheathed in a leaflet about possible side effects.

Somnolence.

Nausea.

Asthenia.

Anorgasmia.

The camera pulls focus and you're standing there watching the pharmacist. He funnels the drugs into an amber bottle and seals them in a brown paper bag. You go home. You take two with a large glass of water as directed.

My uncle's doctor takes the lump from his foot. Then he takes his lymph nodes.

At Boxing Day lunch my uncle limps in wearing brown leather loafers. A fact all in the room have observed, uncertain which shoe conceals the guilty foot.

The foot that is the uninvited guest. The guest that no one talks to or feels comfortable around. Wherever he walks people take a sympathetic half step back. A cousin fetches a chair and a cushion and my uncle props up his Swiss-cheesed foot.

I wish someone would do the same for my head. A migraine rages. The way a coastal storm whips a seaside town. Liquid explosions eroding walls and foundations. Another side effect.

I live only in side effects.

Last night I dreamed of a voodoo doll me and an anthropomorphised red and

green capsule ramming needles through my pincushion skin.

Someone asks my uncle how he's doing. A question that highlights his incumbent mortality and ignores it all at the same time.

—Oh, I'm doing alright, he responds. There's expensive wine complexity in his tone. You have to swill and sniff to distinguish the different notes.

Mild annoyance.

Peaceful resignation. I imagine the conversations between him and his wife. The back and forth hushed voices on the edge of the bed. I see exactly how the director would frame it. A slow zoom through a half-closed door and low key light filtering through high windows. Shared possessions part of the *mise en scène*. My own contemplations of death are less restrained. Less art house.

The tips of your shoes taste the white line along edge of a black road, tongue the gutter full of dirty water, of dead leaves and fag ends. A bus angles into its dotted yellow box. Fails to stop. Mounts the kerb. Presses you into a red smear against a glass shop front.

A mosaic of pills surrounds a three-quarters-drained bottle of spirits. Silver foil blister packs lie burst apart, dead on the floor.

A hungry loop of rope and the native timber beam that bisects the front room of your house.

One day my father calls me and says my uncle in is hospice. That it's nearly time and I should go visit.

My father doesn't use the word dying. Or any of its variants.

I meet him outside the hospice building that looks like a futuristic kindergarten.

The walls are painted with bright synthetic colours in overlapping circles.

Inside, the receptionist asks us to sign our names on the register, death's autograph book. Two columns for in and out and various smudged blue scribbles.

My father says I should prepare myself. That I haven't been around this sort of thing before.

Withheld

██████████ ██████████ Police Department

Report made by: [withheld]

Period for which made: 23-06-██████████

Name and offense charged: ██████████ ██████████,

Common assault; assault occasioning actual bodily harm; intentional infliction of emotional distress.

Persons interviewed and evidence collected:

Met with complainant, Miss ██████████ ██████████, at N10 apartment at 105 ██████████ Road on the above date at 1100hrs. She advised that she had been staying at the apartment belonging to her mother, Ms. ██████████ ██████████, following the incident which is the subject of this report, which took place the prior evening at the address of Mr ██████████ ██████████ (henceforth, the suspect), the residence being a detached house at 72 ██████████ Street. Miss ██████████ alleges that the suspect, her |former| partner, removed with the use of shaving foam and five blade disposable shaving razor Miss ██████████'s complete right and partial left eyebrows while the complainant lay asleep in their shared upstairs bedroom at approximately 2330hrs. Miss ██████████ states that she spent the evening in the company of friends at a local restaurant (the ██████████ ██████████ at 246 ██████████ ██████████ Street) where she consumed approximately four standard vodka tonics and a salmon fettuccine dinner before returning to her and the suspect's shared address via taxi around 2300hrs. Upon returning to the

residence, the complainant found the suspect watching a late-night television show in near-darkness in the living room and, after a brief conversation with him, she (i.e., the complainant) retired to bed alone and very quickly fell asleep. The complainant estimates that just prior to 2330hrs the suspect obtained the aforementioned shaving foam and shaving razor which he kept for his own personal use from a mirrored medicine cabinet in the bedroom's adjacent ensuite bathroom with the express intention of removing her (i.e., Miss [REDACTED]'s) eyebrows. The complainant describes waking to find the bedside lamp switched on and the suspect straddled over her and thereby intentionally pinning her beneath the duvet [article 1:/ photograph:/ blue and white nautical striped duvet cover:/ size king:/ blood-stained] and rendering her unable to move. Whilst astride the complainant, the suspect pressed the razor to her (i.e., Miss [REDACTED]'s) upper-left eyesocket. (The complainant notes that the suspect is right-handed and, as such, held the razor dextrally). The suspect had already, by this time, applied shaving foam to Miss [REDACTED]'s right eyebrow and surrounding skin and succeeded in removing the eyebrow with the use of the razor. The suspect was, Miss [REDACTED] alleges, in the process of removing her left eyebrow at the time of her waking. Upon discovering the suspect amid this endeavour, the complainant recalls screaming 'What the fuck are you doing?' and attempting to free herself from the suspect's hold. (The suspect possesses considerable physical strength; according to Miss [REDACTED], he is 'ripped' and 'a gym buff' and formerly competed in amateur body-building contests). The suspect's response was, Miss [REDACTED] recalls, 'This is for your own good.' The complainant details how, after struggling against the suspect for a period of approximately two minutes, she managed to free one of her arms and fend the suspect off by, in her words, 'karate-chopping' (i.e., employing a hacking motion against) the interior of his right forearm with the edge of her hand with the result of knocking the razor from his (i.e., the suspect's) grip and onto the bedroom floor. During this struggle the complainant suffered a moderate laceration to the area above her left eyesocket caused by the razor, requiring two (2) medical sutures [refer verified copy of A&M report, photographs affixed]. Miss [REDACTED] describes how, following the dislodgement of the razor, the suspect's hold weakened and she was able to effect a blow to his stomach with her knee and scratch at his face with her fingernails, at which point the suspect ceased straddling Miss [REDACTED] and became tearful and apologetic. Now unrestrained, the complainant threw off the

bedsheets and rushed to the ensuite bathroom where she inspected herself in the vanity mirror and also became tearful. With the use of a dampened washcloth [article 2:/ photograph:/ white linen washcloth:/ blood-stained] the complainant wiped the blood from her face and applied pressure to the laceration above her left eyesocket before returning to the bedroom where, with her unoccupied hand, she took a small duffel bag from the top shelf of the wardrobe and proceeded to fill it with clothes, several items of which became spotted with blood [article 3, 3.1: photographs:/ cream-coloured wool-knit sweater, light wash denim jacket:/ blood-stained]. As she did so, the suspect pleaded with her to stop and endeavoured to place himself as a barrier between her (i.e., Miss [REDACTED]) and the wardrobe. The complainant screamed at the suspect to 'Fuck off' and pushed him aside with her free arm; the suspect did not resist but, rather, assumed a foetal position on the floor in the centre of the room and muttered 'I'm sorry, I love you' repeatedly. Miss [REDACTED] then returned to the bathroom where she packed toiletry items into the duffel bag before leaving the bathroom/bedroom and moving downstairs followed by the suspect who had arisen from his curled position on the bedroom floor. The complainant took her car keys from a hall table before proceeding to the basement garage and opening the automatic door with the use of the remote controller attached to her key chain and simultaneously getting into her white Honda Civic hatchback and locking all the doors. The suspect attempted to gain access to the vehicle via the passenger-side door, all the while apologising and imploring Miss [REDACTED] not to leave but to stay and discuss the event that had occurred. The complainant ignored his (i.e., the suspect's) pleas and reversed at some speed down the driveway (in the process knocking over a garden refuse bin belonging to the residents of a neighbouring property) while the suspect pursued on foot. The complainant then proceeded east along [REDACTED] Grove before turning and heading northeast along [REDACTED] Lane in the direction of her mother's residence [traffic camera C127 still image timestamp 0017hrs enclosed]. At this point, the suspect discontinued his pursuit. Miss [REDACTED] reports that the suspect has endeavoured on multiple occasions since the incident to contact her via telephone but the complainant has ignored his calls and requested that her carrier place a block on his number. When questioned as to whether the suspect had exhibited this or any type of violent behaviour in the past, the complainant stated that it was 'very unusual' and that despite the suspect's

physical prowess she had never witnessed him become aggressive with anyone. The complainant will reside at her mother's address indefinitely and has requested that an order preventing the suspect from entering the property and its vicinity be put in place [R0197A].

Met also with suspect, Mr [REDACTED] [REDACTED], on this date at his aforementioned address (105 [REDACTED] Road) at 1330hrs. The suspect corroborated Miss [REDACTED]'s account and admitted to the forceful removal of her eyebrows with the use of his personal shaving foam [article 4:/ Gillette Sensitive shaving foam 256g] and shaving razor [article 4.1:/ Gillette Mach 5 five blade disposable shaving razor]. When questioned as to his motivations the suspect, between bouts of crying, cited his growing concern at the amount of time the complainant had been spending out 'with friends.' He went on to describe Miss [REDACTED] as 'the most gorgeous woman I've ever been with' and explained that, whenever they were together in public, 'other guys were always checking her out.' The suspect then broke down into yet more sobbing.

Deep Cuts

4.

My father's disposable razor reclines on the bathroom vanity between the white soap dispenser and the chrome mixer tap. I take up the thin blue handle and stare into the three hungry blades. Press them to my curious thumb and slide. A bead of red runs down into my palm. A wing of transparent skin flaps from the pad of my thumb, a little stained-glass window of whorls and arches. The backlit ridges of my fingerprint. I run crying to my mother and she steers me back to the bathroom, lifts me up under my armpits and sits me on the edge of the sink. She yanks the petal of hanging skin and wraps a sticking plaster around my wound. The little potato-peeling of me lands in the white basin. Freckles of blood dot the porcelain. I have to look away and twirl the plastic rod that opens and closes the bathroom blind. Blades of light cut and heal on the tiled floor.

12.

I cut the same thumb open on a Stanley knife. A quick, clean cut. Painless at first. Sweeping and calligraphic. A fine red penstroke and two wedges of white flesh that reveal bone when prised apart. Blood floods the valley made by the retreating glacier blade. It floods and gathers and drips onto the garage floor, a stamped red circle on the grey concrete. Grey everything. The garage walls dissolve in pins and needles. Everything turns to smudged cigarette ash. I steady myself against a steel bench and I can taste the metal in the back of my throat. The cold hard lump of it.

14.

The nurse pulls a tourniquet tight around my arm and my vein bulges blue in the crook of my elbow. She swabs the area with alcohol. I don't look when she inserts the needle, when my skin subducts and my blood leaks into the little tube. I stare straight ahead at the cubicle curtain, count the stitches around the hem and ignore the hot pulse in my arm. The nurse clicks a new tube into place and keeps draining. Then a third tube for good measure before she removes the needle. The feel of it sliding through my vein runs across the back of my teeth. She asks me to hold a square of cotton, to finger it against the bend of my arm before she tapes it in place. White surgical tape that will pull hairs out later. Dozens more little needles withdrawing. She waves the tubes in front of my face, asks me to check my name, but I'm looking past the labels at my cherry-black blood. At the curved red meniscus of me and clinging to the sides of medical-grade plastic.

23.

I've just clocked off and I'm heading across the carpark. Across the seabed of crickets flitting and chirping on the still-warm tar seal. Shining black and leathery under streetlamps.

My pocket buzzes. I unlock my car and read the message in the dark interior. It's her.

Help. Cut my wrist. Can't stop bleeding.

I blink at the screen. The words don't change. I text back:

Seriously?

Yes.

Ok, I'm coming. I thumb the words onto the screen on autopilot while my brain screams Jesus.

Oh Jesus.

Fuck.

I text again, HERE, when I'm outside her apartment. Like everything is normal. Like all the other times I come over after work.

I pace outside the door for a full minute and decide to climb in the window that hangs ajar when I see her shadow. She rattles the lock open and lets me and the neighbour's porch light in. Snail trails of wet run in silver lines down her face. There's a towel twisted round her arm. We move into the living room.

—Careful, there's glass, she says.

Glass like crushed ice. Dozens of little broken stars embedded in the dark carpet. There's a broken razor blade on the couch and empty cans on the floor. Sticky

vodka and lemonade.

The towel around her arm is black with blood and she's crying. Her under-eyes look dark and rough. Like peeling bark.

—He'll worm his way out of this, she says. I know it.

I try to tell her no. No he won't. We'll make sure of it. All the right people know about this.

—It's not fair she says. He gets treated like normal. No one is on my side.

I tell her no again. Tell her that I'm on her side. Lots of people are.

She shakes her head and I'm invisible. She's got most of the lights off and I'm still in my black work clothes. I'm just a voice in the dark when she wants something real.

We sit for a moment and I stare straight ahead. Across the room at the kitchenette, at the gap between the cupboard and fridge. I suck air and ask her, can I look at it? I need to know how bad it is.

She spreads the towel and I stare into the trench she's made in her arm. It's rough.

A crude diamond shape. Hacked and desperate.

Desperate to get you out from under her skin.

I stare into the yawning red opening and ask her what she did this with. As if I don't already know. It's everywhere.

She started with the razor blade. Crosshatched little lines into her skin and watched as her blood coloured them in.

—It felt good, she says.

Then the glass. She smashed it on the floor in the kitchenette and watched the pieces scatter. Found the biggest shard. Big enough to hold in her thumb and forefinger and gouge through her skin.

—It felt *so* good, she says. Watching it bleed.

She's stopped crying now. Cartwheeling back round to euphoria after telling me about the feeling.

The feeling of cutting her arm. Of being in control of her pain.

I don't know what to do about this. My hand is clamped round my forehead.

We've been together for two weeks.

Two weeks and already there's blood and broken glass.

Because of you. Because of what you did. Because of what you made *her* do.

I get it together. She needs to get this looked at, I say.

—I'm not going to A&E, she protests. But I don't feel safe here.

I ask her, does she want to come to my house? I've got nothing. No bandages. No disinfectant. No idea. I don't know what else to suggest.

—I don't want to bleed in your bed, she says.

I tell her I don't care. It doesn't matter. I just want her to be safe.

She says nothing for a while. Closes her eyes. Then:

—Maybe I should go to the hospital.

I tell her, ok. Ok, I'll take you.

—You should go home, she says. I'll drive myself.

I say no way. She's been drinking.

—I'm not drunk, she says.

I tell her I don't care. I'm not letting her drive.

—I'll be fine. She snatches her keys off the table.

Words aren't working so I put myself between her and the door. She knows I'm stronger than her and gives up the keys without a struggle.

I want to cry. I'm no better than you. Physically imposing myself on her, just like you did.

Except no. This is not the same thing. Not even close

I make her put on a sweater and her glasses but she refuses to keep her arm wrapped in the towel.

—It's fine she says. It's not bleeding now.

She pulls her sleeve down over it and I wince, picture cotton threads snagging on raw edges of hurt.

Outside, everything feels dangerous. The dark shock of open space. I want to hold onto her. She feels far away. My car is a weapon. All the red lights are bloody holes in the skin of the night.

We get to the A&E and the only park is in a ten minute zone. It'll have to do. The automatic doors slice open on their tracks. Everything in here is sharp and straight. The lines in the floor tiles. The jutting glass tongue of the main desk.

The woman behind it does not smile. She just stares at us as we explain. From behind her computer screen. From behind the aquarium pane of glass.

She stares at us like we're the ones trapped in a tank. She twists a gold bracelet round her wrist. Rolls it over and over the purple pavement cracks of her veins and only stops to push some forms at us through this sort of mail slot.

Paperwork. She's got a hole in her wrist and they want her to write her fucking name and address.

—I like your bracelet, she tells the woman while she scribbles her details.
When she's done she gets a bracelet of her own, tag and release style. Laminated paper with sharp-looking edges. Self-adhesive and her name in heavy pixels.
We sit in the waiting area. The chairs are arranged in rows of hard vinyl, green and straight backed. Like school busses full of the sick.
I remember about the car, the ten minute zone.
—Go, she says. I'll be fine.
I head back through the guillotine doors. Back outside. Alone and in the dark, I say out loud: fuck.
Behind the wheel I think: I could go. Just go. Away from this.
But I don't. I move the car and go back inside where she's still waiting, sitting on a sick coloured chair. She smiles at me.
I put my head on her shoulder. The only comforting curve in the room. The pulse in her neck and the one in my eardrum beat in a syncopated rhythm. I'm tired but she's totally alert. Still high on spilt blood and booze.
Opposite us there's a girl wheezing and hacking, an asthma attack coming or going I'm not sure. She's draped in a pink blanket and a friend rubs her back with an ink-covered arm. The friend's face is a pincushion of piercings and studs. Two in her lip. One in her eyebrow. A ring in her nose and countless more in her ears.
I feel sick again. My mind is tattooed with images of sharp objects on skin. The resistance. The surface tension before the skin breaks and bleeds and gives in.
Just like she gave in to you. You pushed until you broke her skin.
We've been waiting about an hour when a nurse calls her name. I follow them both into this tiny cubicle and stand in the corner, obsolete.
The nurse sighs when he asks her to explain what happened. His face is a pencil sketch of stubble. A permanent five o'clock shadow of tending to the sick and injured.
—You seem cheerful, she jokes with him while he cleans her wound. Smiling and swinging her legs off the edge of the bed while he flushes it with stinging saline.
It's all part of the thrill for her.
The visceral thrill of pain. It takes her outside her head.
Outside the images of what you did. Of how you forced her.
A visceral thrill like the time we went karting. Tearing around on an indoor track. Slick tyres on shiny concrete. Slung low in a fibreglass seat that claws at my back, makes the base of my spine bleed and stick to the hem of my T-shirt. Cotton

threads snagging on raw edges. A chorus of revs inside my helmet. The heat of the engine turns my elbow to a fried egg while my forearms ache trying to keep the twitching insect kart in check.

I come round the corner on a hot one, floor it off the apex and the back of the kart steps sideways. She's got hers stuck in the tyre wall on the side.

I jab at the brake but there's nowhere for me to go. The rubber beneath me chirps, then the hard, hot sound of metal on metal and for a moment I've got two wheels in the air.

Back on earth, I look to see if she's ok. She's grinning beneath her helmet. Her cheekbones invade the borders of her eyes. She shakes with laughter and sticks her thumb in the air.

Later when she slides off her helmet I see the welts. Wide and red and diagonal across each shoulder from the harness that held her bear-hugged into the seat. She rolls up her jeans and reveals bruises on her legs. Whole continents of bruises that will turn from red to black to blue and yellow.

Later she'll joke:

—Look at what my boyfriend did to me.

She's still joking with the nurse while he takes her blood pressure. As he inflates the cuff like a life jacket round her arm. He sticks a huge bandage to her wrist. A white square with clear tape edges that ripple against her skin. He sends us back to the waiting area where the asthma girl is still rasping and the chairs are still straight and sharp.

A few minutes later there's more blood. Curling down the inside of her arm. Running in rivers through the lines in her palm and dripping on the floor. The squeeze of the blood pressure cuff.

—Shit, she says.

We approach the desk again.

Insecure Men's Support Group

[IX.]

My first reaction to any kind of strong emotion is to cry. Or at least to want to cry. It can be over anything. There was an article in *The New Yorker* recently about Vietnam with that famous photograph, the one with the naked possibly third-degree-burned children fleeing soldiers in the street and their mouths like bats while the defoliated jungle smoulders in the background. That one. I was reading the article and I found myself just staring at that image and after a few minutes I realised I was crying. Did you know that US troops drank thirty-two million cans of beer a month during the war? Sometimes it's a film that sets me off. Like the end of *Reservoir Dogs* when Mr. Orange tells Mr. White he's actually a cop, and Mr. White howls not because he's been shot but because he realises this guy he's been like a father to has betrayed him. I cried at that too. Did you know the film was so low-budget that some of the actors wore their own clothes? Did you know it contains 272 uses of the word fuck? The last time was in the car. *Hallelujah* came on the radio, the Jeff Buckley one, and I had to pull over I couldn't see from crying. Oh man I got Buckley'd. I felt like such a bitch. And then the next song was Nick Cave and I guess I got Nick Caved too 'cos I cried some more. I can usually keep myself from it when I'm in company, my sense of embarrassment takes over or something. But if I'm alone, well there I go. And I know why it happens. I know it's cos my dad was always real unemotional, never smiled or laughed and sure as shit never cried so I grew up with that as a role model and whenever I feel anything I sort of can't process it properly so I just cry. I can feel

it building up inside me before it happens. Like shaking a champagne bottle. Did you know there's more pressure in one of those things than in a car tyre? Think how strong the glass must be to hold that.

Small Rural Town (Part II)

One Friday afternoon, Paul invited Steve to eat with him and several other male colleagues at a nearby sushi bar.²² Eager to absorb whatever he could of Paul's apparent confidence and business prowess, Steve accepted the invitation with such ferocity that Paul jumped visibly backwards and stared sideways at Steve until Steve apologised and restated his acceptance with rather more restraint, at which point Paul clapped a manful hand on Steve's shoulder and guided him out of the office. At the sushi bar, Paul and the other male colleagues — mostly senior accountants — unbuttoned their blazers and sat wide-legged on stools discussing the intricacies of consumer tax economics and levering rolls of sushi into their mouths with chopsticks. Steve had selected an identical plastic platter of sushi (and what he later discovered were pouches of fried tofu) to that of Paul's, but forewent the chopsticks as he was unpractised at wielding them and, instead, used his fingers. (At this, the men exchanged amused smirks). During the meal, Steve managed to get a small amount of soy sauce on the cuff of his work shirt. Upon discovering the potential stain, Steve immediately dipped the corner of a cloth napkin into his glass of soda water and, turning his forearm upwards, dabbed (as his mother had taught him) the offending area and successfully removed the dark sauce from the light-coloured fabric.

—Get Martha Stewart over here, one of the men remarked, jabbing his thumb in

²² Steve had never previously eaten sushi; the notion of a food containing seaweed repulsed him and, similarly, he found the raw vegetables off-putting for he was accustomed to eating vegetables only after they had been boiled to flavourless oblivion as was his father's preference.

the direction of Steve and his domestic scene. You'll make a good little wifey someday, he added.

There was cacophonous laughter and Steve smiled weakly, conscious that he not come across as bruised by what (he assured himself) was simply friendly banter, and attempting to defuse his colleagues' collective scorn. Fortunately for Steve, the men quickly redirected their barbs, prompted by the appearance of a young Japanese woman who busied herself clearing nearby tables; one of the men made a crude comparison between the taste of raw fish and his imagined oral experience of her genitalia (met with more uproarious laughter, led by Paul), while a second poked the vegetables from the centre of a roll of sushi and inserted his tongue into the hole made in the compacted rice and tight-bound seaweed. Fearful of falling out of favour with Paul and having more scorn poured upon him by the group, Steve joined in the laughing and leering glances at the young woman. When he returned to his desk after the lunch, Steve felt a vague sense of disappointment in how the whole thing had proceeded but was, as ever, unable to pinpoint the precise cause of this unexpected emotion. In any case, this was soon alleviated when, late in the afternoon as Steve was tidying his papers and shutting down his computer,²³ Paul approached and offered Steve the opportunity to attend a two-day business conference in a nearby Much Larger City where he would acquire a range of skills to further his professional development. The trip would be paid for entirely by the firm; Steve and a handful of other junior accountants would be put up in separate hotel rooms for the duration and be free to do as they pleased in the evenings following the day's conferencing. Steve esteemed the offer a great privilege and — having learned from his earlier over-eagerness — quietly said that, yes, he would very much like to attend the conference, whereupon Paul shook him by the hand and told him they would work out the details on Monday. Steve drove home with a grin that spanned the breadth of the windshield and, when he informed his parents of the day's accomplishments over dinner, his mother became tearful while his father said it was 'good' and turned the volume up on the television news. Jeff the next door neighbour congratulated Steve when, on Saturday morning, the pair passed in the street while out dog-walking and jogging respectively. On Sunday, Steve played golf with a cousin and

²³ He always did so at 5:02pm, believing that ending the day's work so that he could leave precisely at the close of business did not reflect his commitment to the job and suggested a kind of desperation to depart.

school friend as usual and, owing to his increased sense of capability, won both rounds by a considerable margin. On Monday morning, Steve arrived at work to an email from Paul requesting that he attend a meeting at 10am in boardroom A where he would receive his itinerary for the conference beginning on Thursday. Steve was the first to make his way to the boardroom and sat in one of the leather-and-chrome chairs swinging his leg expectantly. Paul entered shortly after, narrowing his eyes at Steve's childish oscillating and trailing four more junior accountants behind him. The last in the line was Chloe, at whom Steve gazed with a mixture of wonder and confusion before the realisation that she would also be attending the conference arced across the appropriate synapses, prompting his heart and stomach to collide in his ribcage. Steve comprehended little of the meeting and it was only after closely studying the provided itinerary that the plan for the days of the conference became clear to him; the group would be ferried by mini-bus to their accommodation in the Much Larger City on late-Wednesday afternoon. They would get settled into their rooms and spend the evening however they saw fit, before (at Paul's recommendation) sensibly getting an early night and attending the first session of the conference in the function rooms on the hotel's sixth floor at 9am the following morning. Refreshments would be readily available throughout the day, with lunch provided at 12:30 and the day's proceedings winding up around 5pm. On the final day, Friday, there would be a small social gathering for conference attendees in the hotel bar (with two free drinks allocated per person) and, at the cessation of this, they would be driven back from the Much Larger City again by mini-bus. This was, however, a whole two-and-a-half days away, allowing Steve plenty of time to devise a plan to talk to, impress, and thereby win Chloe. (And, equally, to ruminate on how big of a failure the plan was sure to be). He hoped they might share a meal or at least a drink in the hotel restaurant and spent some time carefully scrutinising the menu online²⁴ in order to appear knowledgeable about their culinary offerings. Come

²⁴ At this moment, Paul had walked past Steve's desk and, glancing Steve's examination of the menu, derided Steve for even considering dining in such an inferior establishment with a plethora of prime eateries just a stone's throw from the hotel door. Steve protested that he was merely curious about the possibility of room-service, to which Paul responded that the only possible justification for having food delivered to one's room was if one were entertaining a lady and needed to re-energise post coitus which, he added, was hardly likely to happen to Steve.

Wednesday afternoon, Steve loaded his borrowed duffel-bag²⁵ into the back of the mini-bus with everyone else's luggage and stood sheepishly near the slid-open passenger door, hoping to wangle a seat beside Chloe. Sadly, Steve's failure to claim territory early meant that the others simply pushed past him and took all the seats in the back, forcing Steve into the only available seat in the front beside the elderly driver (whose sweater vest was not unlike those which Steve wore golfing, and smelled faintly of urine). Chloe sat in the rearmost seat next to a colleague, Simon, and the pair engaged in quiet, intense conversation for the entire journey, which Steve could witness if he glanced in the rear-view mirror but which was just out of earshot. This, along with the hierarchy of the seating arrangement, inflamed his paranoia that he was being made fun of.²⁶ The group arrived at the hotel just before dusk and split off to their separate quarters — rooms 23 through 27 on the third floor — to settle in and unpack. The rooms were identical, small, and utilitarian; each featured a small double bed with coarse white sheets straightjacketing the mattress and a small writing desk on which lay hotel stationery (a half-torn writing pad and pens not worth stealing) and a small flat-screen television. On the wall opposite the bed was a floor-length mirror, next to which hung a small hairdryer on a curly cord and a yellowed sheet of laminated A4 outlining the hotel's evacuation procedure. The bathroom contained the usual gamut of small soaps and facecloths and a tarnished-chrome shower mixer over a small seafoam-coloured tub. Behind a sliding partition was a small kitchenette with small sachets of coffee and sugar and a small bar fridge offering small foil-topped cartons of long-life milk. Steve had brought with him a fleet of pale blue work shirts and dark-coloured trousers, plus two smart-casual outfits for the evenings (jeans and a couple of less formal open-collar shirts his mother had bought him to wear to family Christmas functions and 60th birthday dos).²⁷ He busied himself unpacking these when there was a knock at his door and, excited

²⁵ He had borrowed it from an uncle who lived nearby, prompting Steve's father to ask what on earth he needed such a large bag for as it was only a two-night stay. Steve's uncle helpfully suggested that it was to provide adequate room for Steve's hairdryer and curling tongs and both he and Steve's father chuckled heartily.

²⁶ Momentarily, Steve despaired that, even in his mid-twenties, he had not achieved the escape-velocity necessary to leave Planet Dork and at least enter orbit around Planet Cool.

²⁷ His mother had lamented folding the freshly-ironed shirts so that Steve could fit them in his borrowed duffel bag and pleaded with him to hang them immediately on arrival so that any creases they might gain in transit would have the chance to fall away naturally.

by so soon an opportunity to make use of the spyglass, leapt across the room to peer at his visitor. When he was able to make sense of the distorted figure in the lens, his heart and stomach once more erupted into a fistfight behind the wall of his chest; it was Chloe who had knocked on his door, wearing a close-fitting blue dress and cropped blazer and adjusting a straggle of her colourless hair. All kinds of scenarios flitted through Steve's mind; she had come to ask him to dinner for two, cocktails, a movie, or perhaps none of those things. She would push him backwards into the room and kick the door closed with the point of her heel and the ensuing seduction would be frantic and busy. Vignettes of it appeared to him; there would be straddling of bodies and weighing of curves and afterwards he would be whole, real and complete. He flung the door open expectantly and, trying to appear nonchalant, leaning on his shoulder against the frame. He should have changed his shirt, he thought. Was the room behind him tidy?

She and the guys were going to dinner, she said. A restaurant up the road, she said. Thought they'd better ask if he wanted to come, she said. They sent her, she said. Leaving in ten minutes, meet us in the lobby downstairs, she said.

Steve said nothing. He simply nodded his agreement and closed the door. He pulled on a pair of dark jeans, one of his more casual shirts, and some less formal shoes while his mind replayed the conversation. She wanted him at dinner really, he told himself. She was just being coy, he thought, making it sound like she'd only asked out of a sense of duty.²⁸ He made his way downstairs to the lobby where, once again, Chloe and Simon were engaged in close, quiet conversation and floated separate from the rest of the group. Indeed, they remained in this formation as they made their way along the busy street to the restaurant; Chloe and Simon strode ahead with the two other guys following close behind (and conversing in their own language of brief sentences) and Steve the lone figure at the rear. The walk to the restaurant was Steve's first close-up experience of such a large city and everything about the place assaulted his senses; the buildings rose as sharp, dangerous columns and the constant movement—the throngs of people jostling for pavement space and standing in tight swarms at the crossing signals before fanning out into shops and restaurants and the noisy bloop-bleep of arcades while busses stopped abruptly in their dotted yellow boxes and hissed their doors open to deliver yet more warm, vibrating

²⁸ She had.

bodies — made Steve faintly dizzy. He could hardly keep up through the waves of people and marvelled at the ease with which his colleagues seemed to navigate the busy street. The reluctance of anyone to concede him space and the constant brushing of arms and shoulders with passers-by felt, to him, aggressive, and he was thankful when the group finally gained the restaurant and stood in a momentary safe huddle in the doorway out of the human river pouring behind them. The restaurant was, however, equally claustrophobic despite there being only a few small groups of diners dotted about the place. (This being a Wednesday, the restaurant was hardly bustling). There were too many tables too close together; the room was ringed with dark vinyl booths while the centre was dominated by a long, heavy-looking table which had been reserved for some later function,²⁹ with smaller tables occupying much of the space in between. Indeed, the channels through the restaurant were so narrow that patrons and wait-staff could move around only by turning side on and crab-shuffling.³⁰ The dark wood flooring extended halfway up the walls, dividing them into two distinct sections with the top half covered in busy flock wallpaper. Steve followed the group to a booth beside the fireplace — the only feature of the restaurant which eschewed wood-panelling and was instead clad with dark brick. Chloe and Simon occupied the booth side, with everyone else relegated to individual chairs. A waitress appeared with menus and, after reciting the specials, took everyone's orders for drinks; Chloe and Simon elected to share a bottle of red wine, the others ordered cocktails, and Steve unadventurously requested a pale lager beer, eliciting sideways eyes from the rest of the group. After the requisite discussion of the menu, they ordered food (one salmon fettuccine, two duck dishes, a vegetarian lasagne, and, for Steve, rump steak, mash, and vegetables) and resumed their prior bifurcated chatter. Steve tried to interject occasionally but found keeping up with two disparate conversations (neither of which he was expressly included in) akin to watching a tennis match and resigned himself to sitting in silence and occasionally stealing glances at Chloe as she dismantled her food. She spoke to Simon as she did so — enquiring how his meal was and offering to refill his glass — and Steve stared at him enviously, wondering how and why, of the four men in the group, it was Simon who was in Chloe's good books. Steve sucked at his beer

²⁹ Steve looked at his watch and wondered what kind of strange people ate dinner after 6:30pm.

³⁰ This meant that bottom-to-bottom or bottom-to-groin contact with strangers was virtually inevitable.

and stuffed his mouth with steak in an effort to quell his rising anger at not being chosen as Chloe's walking or conversational companion. After dinner, Chloe and Simon shared a slice of dark chocolate cheesecake (whose rich cream-cheese filling was beaded with moisture and decorated with shards of yet more dark chocolate) while the others declined dessert and Steve spooned his way through an ice cream sundae, avoiding the whipped cream which he found too sickly. After dinner, while the group queued at the bar to pay their respective shares of the bill, someone suggested they move on to a nearby nightclub for another round of drinks, music, and possibly dancing. Recalling Paul's advice to get an early night, Steve reluctantly agreed and the five of them once more headed out onto the street which, Steve was surprised to find, still brimmed with people even at the later hour. At the nightclub, the bouncer stared intently at Steve's shoes but decided — due, in part, to the company Steve was with — that they were passable and instructed Steve to hold out his arm to be stamped. Steve obeyed and the bouncer rolled his eyes and twisted Steve's arm over to stamp it on the inside as was the norm. Inside the nightclub, conversation was virtually impossible and Steve was grateful for this reprieve from the obligation he felt to make idle chit-chat. Steve recognised many of the songs which blasted over the nightclub's sound-system³¹ and was sitting on a stool contentedly tapping his foot when Simon slapped him on the arm and pointed to one of five identically-filled shot-glasses on the bar. Each contained some kind of luminous green liquid topped with a lightly foaming beige liqueur. Following the others' lead, Steve downed the drink and tried to smooth his face which had instinctively recoiled from the burning, ethanol taste. Almost immediately, another round was ordered and sunk. Steve perceived the room was rotating and was disconcerted to find that, whenever he could manage to draw any part of it into focus, it simply fell away again. He turned and sat back down on the stool but was almost knocked off it as the vinyl-covered squab seemed to rise up and hit him with greater weight than he expected. He leaned on the bar for stability and watched as the other four took to the dance-floor. The two guys moved near a flock of girls while Chloe and Simon danced together with raised arms and intimate parts orbiting in close proximity. Steve felt his jealousy welling again but was too busy trying to swim to the surface of his

³¹ Steve held no opinion and no real interest in music and simply tuned the radio in his car to the most popular station which (when its apparently fourteen-year-old DJs weren't spouting inane celebrity gossip) almost exclusively played saccharine pop bible.

mild inebriation for it to fully take hold. After a couple of songs the group became bored and ordered a third round of the potent shots before deciding they ought to return to the hotel. Steve was dreading walking back through the mosh of bodies doubtlessly still crowding the street, but the focus required to thread through them snapped him out of his half-drunk state. Back at the hotel, the group lingered for a short time in the hall outside their rooms, clinging to the last remnants of the evening's jollities. Steve watched as each closed their doors, and briefly considered speaking to Chloe — who, apart from Steve, was the last to return to her room — before she did the same, but found himself rooted to the spot and listened as she latched her door and slid the safety chain into place.

Next morning, Steve woke early and, feeling slightly off-colour owing to last night's binge, utilised the tea-and-coffee-making facilities to brew himself a strong cup of Joe.³² He laid his shirt and trousers on the bed and showered before heading up to the sixth-floor function rooms where the first session of the first day of the conference was about to get underway. The conference room was a large, mostly empty space with grey carpet, interlocking plastic chairs arranged in tight herringbone-shaped rows, a portable high-definition projector, and a pull-down screen at the front. A short, middle-aged woman stood beaming in the doorway, handing out pens and white write-on nametags. Steve sat in the row behind his four colleagues and took notes about the government's proposed changes to income tax brackets and new accounting software which promised to revolutionise balance sheets and inflation adjustment calculations. The lunch break afforded conference attendees a networking opportunity, which Steve's colleagues pursued with fervour; they took and handed out business cards and discussed management strategies with industry leaders, while Steve filled a paper plate with small savouries and stood nearby, hoping that someone would engage him in conversation (but equally hoping they wouldn't so his lack of self-confidence might remain a secret). At the end of the day's conferencing, Steve was caught behind a string of dawdling junior executives while his colleagues departed quickly and without a word. Steve returned to his room and changed into his second casual outfit and waited for Chloe's knock on his door and invitation to dinner.

³² Steve did not typically drink coffee; the last time he had done so he suffered terrible shakes and paranoia and remained awake for twenty-seven straight hours.

The invitation never came.

Growing impatient and hungry, Steve decided to head out and find some place to eat on his own and got as far as the reception desk in the lobby before the thought of sitting in a restaurant alone, and the pitying looks he would likely garner for doing so, got the better of him, and he turned around, pressed the button in the lift for the third floor, and returned to his room. He sat on the edge of the bed and imagined his colleagues in the flickering orange light of some restaurant drinking wine and wittering on to each other in their discrete little groups and probably laughing at him and feeling relieved that they had managed to ditch him. He perused the room-service menu and picked up the phone and ordered chicken cordon-bleu before wondering what the room-service guy would think of him when he brought the meal, how he would probably think of Steve as miserable and lonely and when he went back downstairs would probably tell all the other hotel staff about the miserable lonely fucker up on the third floor eating chicken and watching television probably in his underwear. Steve phoned the room-service guy back and, intent on obliterating his thoughts, told the guy to bring wine. As it happened, the guy simply knocked and left the food on a tray beneath a cloche and the wine in a paper bag outside Steve's door. A standard card reading *enjoy your meal* with the hours for ordering food printed on the reverse side was tucked into the origami serviette. Steve crumpled the card and tossed it on the floor. He sat on the bed and ate the chicken and drank the wine and watched the television; the late-night news was profiling some psychopath, some deranged killer who'd shot up an office building. A picture of the man appeared on the tiny screen while an ominous chord played and a grave voiceover described his life; he was twenty-five and came from Another Small Rural Town. Not far from the one where Steve lived, in fact. He was a recent IT graduate, had just landed his first proper job. People described him as quiet, sort of a loner, a diligent worker with few friends, never had a serious relationship. There was a cut and an image of blood-stained carpet flashed on the screen. Office carpet. Grey. Unmistakable. A yellow evidence marker had been placed next to a red smear. Another cut and an image of a splintered Formica desk, an exploded liquid-crystal monitor. The voiceover described the man's actions, how he had obtained a shotgun and stalked through the office where he worked in a neighbouring city, firing rounds into coworkers and muttering how she — some unidentified woman, possibly another coworker — refused to love him.

Steve switched off the television.³³

On Monday Steve returned to the office.

³³ Steve finished the last half-glass of wine but its intended numbing effect failed to manifest. The morning's strong coffee still surged through him and fought to counteract the booze. He decided to go for a walk. He snatched up his jacket and room-key and locked the door. In the semi-darkness of the hall he heard familiar voices. Laughter. Steve turned to see Chloe and Simon pressed up against Chloe's door, her dress slid up, up, and orbiting high above her hips and his hand crawling, crawling, crawling down the front of her mostly see-through underwear, his finger moving come-hither, stretching the waistband away from her skin and revealing an elastic stripe carved across her pubis. Her head raked back and she fumbled for the door handle.

Steve never went for the walk.

Instead he returned to his room, sat on the bed, and thought. He thought about the gunman and the stained carpet. Thought about Chloe and her cheating on Brad and how it was wrong. Thought about what he would give for her to cheat with him instead.

Next morning, Steve woke early, showered, skipped coffee, and went to the conference, day two. He looked at the slides on the projector screen and the grey carpet and imagined pumping round after round into his coworkers, into everyone in the room while they ate cocktail sausages and tiny mince pies and made small-talk at lunch.

He went to the post-function drinks and imagined the spray of splintered glass, blood, and bullets.

On the ride home in the mini-bus he imagined yanking the wheel and veering them into the path of an oncoming truck and trailer. He could do it, he thought. All that separated them was a painted white line.