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Picture Frame

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*inspiration**—Mai-Anh Tran*

It takes a lot of hubris
 To dive into strangers' heads through ink and paper
 Digging up those last few tricky trickles of meaning
 (ceci n'est pas un font)
 To offer—on a silver platter, naturally—
 To your muse.

You need astonishing presumption
 To dare mimesis of another soul—
 Living or dead? Check it empirically;
 Great or pathetic? Slightly more difficult.
 That's what sorting
 (with greedy hunger)
 Through the ashes of someone's
 words will do
 To you.

Just don't forget to breathe down there
 Don't let yourself get pulled head-below
 There in the guttering fires
 That's what you get
 —the revenge of old dead thoughts—
 Who said you were allowed to be a phoenix?

October 9

Picture frame

Finally, we are alone.

I'm sorry for keeping you in that box for so long (I know how dark and lonely it must have been), but you have to understand that Mrs. Warden hates it when I leave, even if it's just to go down the street to the market. She's a very unreasonable landlady that way. If she knew it was me that stole her keys and made the hole in her fence, there's no telling what she would do to both of us!

But the important thing is that you're here in my room now, safe with me. When I saw you tucked away on the shelf behind the fruit stall and the peanut seller, I could almost feel your sadness. A filthy pile of torn scraps and secondhand toys is no place for a goddess. I even took the time to wrap you up in two pieces of old newspaper dated April 20, 1999 and held you like a delicate infant the entire walk home. I'd have tried to find a bigger box, but I had to get home before Mrs. Warden woke up. She's always disagreeable after a long sleep.

I think I'll place you high up on the wall facing north. Yes, just so. I'm sorry to defile you with my clumsy hands. I won't touch you again. Now you can see the rest of my room. I admit it has seen better days. The wallpaper has started to turn yellow and peel and my little bedtable has faded dreadfully in the sunlight. And

And that smell! The false hospital clean Mrs. Warden sprays when I am asleep to kill the cockroaches and remove the odors she says I create. I cannot complain, though. The rent's next to nothing.

That's Wife over there on the bed. She's still pretty for her age. If you are quiet and do exactly as I say, she may not even notice you. She sleeps most of the time. When she is not sleeping she stares at the growing crack on the ceiling. The crack grows every hour, just like my love for you.

October 11

Mrs. Warden is the fattest, ugliest woman I have ever known. She eats lard like air and bathes in gasoline. Her thinning hair smells of rabbit droppings, hundreds of them. The food she slides through the panel in my door reeks of sweat and resembles the brown shrunken heads of cannibals from the Lower Congo. I give half of the food to Wife and throw the rest out of the window each night. I take the forks that Mrs. Warden serves with my food and use them to make a sculpture. I shouldn't tell you this, but I've decided to make it for you. Not even Wife knows.

When it comes to Mrs. Warden, there are three things you *must* understand. One: Be very quiet at all times. Mrs. Warden has the ears of a feral cat. She lives downstairs in the private wing, but if you make even one loud peep, she'll know *everything*. Before you could make another sound it would be too late. Two: Never look her straight in the eyes. I've been told that they are pitch black and fling shards of coal if you stare into them. That may not be true, but I wouldn't take any chances. Three: Mrs. Warden cannot enter my room unless someone lets her in. Now do you see why it was so important to steal her keys?

Lately I have had several nightmares. Mrs. Warden and an old man in a blue jacket are standing over my bed. The old man holds a blue box while Mrs. Warden spreads paste on both sides of my head. The paste feels like a raw clam's insides. I cannot move my arms to stop Mrs. Warden. She takes two metal chords connected to the box and places them in the paste, directly above my temples. The old man turns a red knob on the box and blasts of deep pink, orange, and magenta ignite the growing crack on the ceiling. Mrs. Warden's thinning hair turns into black fire that spreads to the old man and to the newspapers on the floor. Then I wake up in darkness and hear Wife's snoring and see her drooling face on the pillow next to me. I feel the wind rushing through the bars.

The next time you see Mrs. Warden and an old man standing by the bed, open your eyes quickly because it is only an elaborate illusion created by your brain. It is only a dream.

October 13

I shouldn't be telling you this, but the fork sculpture I'm making for you is now almost two feet high. I've been hiding it under the bed where Wife will never look. In order to make the sculpture, I rip up old newspapers and chew the pieces until they are sticky. I fold the wet pieces around the forks until the forks are sticky,

too. Then I press the forks together. Sometimes they don't stick together so I need to chew more newspapers. So far the sculpture is comprised of five forks and almost four fully chewed-up newspapers. Just today, I have chewed on the *Metro* sections of two newspapers dated September 24, 2003 and December 1, 1997.

Sometimes I make the sticky pieces of newspaper into balls and throw them against the far wall. It is nearly covered in spit and letters. Don't you think it looks better than the peeling yellow wallpaper?

I hear Mrs. Warden's ugly feet stomping up the stairs. I hear the clinking of glass and metal on my food tray. I must hide your sculpture quickly. If Mrs. Warden knew about it, everything would be ruined.

October 18

Wife hasn't noticed you. At least she doesn't act like it—she's so stupid sometimes. Look at her red mouth, how it hangs open like a cow! Can you see the puddle of drool collecting on her chin? But still, she *is* Wife, so I must try to keep her happy. To keep Wife happy, I make love to her every other afternoon. Sometimes she's asleep so I prop her back against the headboard, pull down the covers, and slowly move back and forth until Wife is pleased.

But what I really want to do is snap her plastic legs apart like a wishbone. I want to thrust all the way through her, come out the other side (still thrusting) straight towards your wall. I imagine the two of us doing all sorts of sexual things, which is silly, because we both know it would be impossible. But the idea of us doing these things is so alive in me, as alive as the two cockroaches currently depositing their eggs in bean-shaped cases next to some breadcrusts under the bedtable.

When I think of us doing these sexual things together, I look at Wife. I feel ashamed. But I do not feel ashamed because of her. I feel ashamed because of *you*, because I know I would be an inadequate partner for you, because I would never be able to fill you up the way I know you must be filled. And besides, I could not even reach that high on your wall if I wanted to.

When I feel ashamed, I feel horny, so I pull off the bed sheets and turn Wife on her back. Can't you see me whisper in her ears? I tell her I am horny. I lick her ears. I trace the wet lines around her mouth with my fingers. I look at her eyes to make sure she has not seen you watching, but they are shut tight or staring up the growing crack in the ceiling, I cannot tell. I thrust. Then I thrust harder. *Harder*. The mattress springs and Wife's hips bend beneath the weight of my shame.

Downstairs in the private wing, Mrs. Warden wakes up. I hear her fat slippers on the creaking stairs. I hear her dirty fists pounding on my door and a terrible scratching sound that must be her voice.

"Quiet down in there, you crazy bastard!"

I have her keys. She cannot come and take you away from me.

"Fuck off, witch!"

When I hear Mrs. Warden clomping back down the stairs, I am no longer horny. Instead, I take two stained pieces of newspaper dated March 21, 2005 and

roll them up into a tube. I push Wife's drooping head off the bedtable and move it over a few feet. I lean down and whack the cockroaches eight times. Eight hard whacks until I cannot tell the difference between their insides and their outsides. Until they are gray pulp.

October 26

I think Wife has left me. I cannot find her anywhere. On the bed, under the bed, in the closet, over by the east wall. I've been searching all morning. She must have opened the window and climbed out. I cannot figure out how she managed to squeeze through the bars. Wife is tricky. Not smart, but very *tricky*.

She must have found out about you—it's the only reasonable explanation. Mrs. Warden would not have been able to get in and take Wife. I still have her keys. Wife must have seen me looking at you while I was making love to her, or maybe she heard us late at night when we thought she was asleep. I knew she would be jealous. Your superior beauty and our conversations must have offended her deeply. She's probably still crying! *You* are the only reasonable explanation.

It's not that I am angry, or even saddened by Wife's leaving me. She had begun to put on weight. All she ever did was sleep over there on the bed. The only thing that bothers me is that when I feel ashamed, there will be no one to do sexual things with. You are too high up on the wall, the growing crack is still too small, and Mrs. Warden is far too fat.

October 28

Have you ever had any madness in your family?

I only ask because this morning I was invited to breakfast downstairs in the private wing. I wore my finest suit and sprayed some aerosol mousse on my hair for extra volume and shine.

At the bottom of the stairs, a doctor waited for me. An old doctor I had never seen. Somehow he knew my name and my occupation. His fingers felt like ten cold eels as he directed me into a room, checked my pulse, tested my reflexes, cupped my testicles, and measured my cranium with a pair of metal forceps. A very pleasant man, to be sure.

Then he began asking me questions. At first I started to shake a little, because I thought he would ask me about you, about our affair, about Wife's leaving me, but instead he only wanted to discuss some rather irrelevant topics. He wanted to know if there was a history of insanity in my immediate family, if my parents or grandparents had suffered from any form of dementia, paranoia, schizophrenia, unipolar depression, and a dozen other big words I didn't understand. Which is absolutely ridiculous, because as I've told you many times, I come from a good family, full of doctors and lawyers, most of them leaders in the fields of industry and politics. But I won't bore you with the details of their lives. I can see you want to hear more about my breakfast.

The old doctor had devised a way to shrink the nutrition found in a full meal

into the size of five tiny blue capsules. I know you must find that hard to believe, but it's true—just five blue capsules and a glass of water, equal in dietary goodness to a plate of steaming hot eggs, bacon, grits and sausage. He handed me the meal on a plastic slab, assuring me that it was as fresh as a newly-slaughtered chicken. My delicious breakfast was over in two large gulps. I left a clean plate.

I complimented the old doctor's cooking, forgetting to tell him how much better it was than Mrs. Warden's gruel. He and his assistant Thomas were even nice enough to escort me back to my room and tuck me into bed. Before they left, I fell into one of the most dreamless sleeps I'd had in years.



October 30

—Justin Peake

Outside the window and just past the metal bars, a tiny honey-colored butterfly flies by my face, then another. I wish you could see them tumble together so beautifully. Puffs of air sometimes brush them against the grass as they move across the yard towards the fence. Then a real gust sweeps them up—five feet, ten feet, twenty feet—until they become two tiny globes in the sky. I squint to see them for another thirty or forty seconds until they disappear into a cloud, maybe the sun. They are gone. I wait for them to come back, but after a few minutes I give up looking and turn to stare at you.

They probably like it better out there, don't you think? Two butterflies and Wife.

November 6

This morning I woke up early to work on your sculpture. It is now three feet

tall and almost complete. I wanted to touch it. When I reached under the bed, my hand found nothing besides three cockroaches swimming in a puddle of curdled milk. The sculpture was gone!

I tore apart the bed, flipped over the bedtable, and kicked around some newspapers. The sculpture was still missing. I heard a rustle downstairs in the private wing and thought of Mrs. Warden. Could she have seen the sculpture under my bed when she opened the panel in the door to slide me my breakfast? Had she found her keys? No, they were still in my right breast pocket where I have kept them for weeks.

I sat on the bed for a few minutes trying to collect myself and figure out what could have happened. Nothing came to mind. I knew I had put the sculpture back under the bed after working on it the night before. No one else besides you had been in the room in the past few hours.

Exhausted, I collapsed on Wife's pillow and turned my head towards the east wall. Then I saw it. A small piece of newspaper dated September 27, 2006 was poking out from under the closet door. I jumped out of bed, flung open the closet, and there it was, your sculpture, lying undamaged on the ground.

Who could have done this thing? Mrs. Warden is too fat. I would have heard her huge feet tramping around in my room. The old doctor is too pleasant. Was it Wife? She does hate you, and besides, she's the only one tricky enough to slide through the bars. After all, that *is* how she left me.

I have decided to hide the sculpture under Wife's pillow. That way, it will be right next to me at night. When I feel ashamed, it will be like I am sleeping with a part of you. Such a small part, though.

November 17

I wake up and hear conversations downstairs in the private wing. I slide over the bedtable and crouch to the ground, one ear to the floor. There are at least three people talking, possibly more. The floor is thicker than I thought. I only hear about ten words but what I can make out clearly are the tones of voice being used. What awful tones! You may not believe me, but in those tones I hear the beginnings of a horrible plan. I am very perceptive.

It appears as though Wife has returned and is the ringleader. I recognize her stupid, driveling voice. I listen to her tell the other people in the room awful lies about my treatment of her over the years, about Mrs. Warden's keys, about the sculpture, even about *you*! Of course Mrs. Warden agrees with her and proposes that something must be done. They want to take you and the sculpture from me, leave me here all alone, I know it. I cannot hear the reactions of the other people in the private wing, but if they have already looked Mrs. Warden in the eyes (which seems probable), it's already too late. They are all brainwashed and tricky, just like Wife.

I walk over to the bed and pick up the sculpture. It is more than three feet tall now and *very* sharp. I will take it and wait in the closet for Wife. She cannot find

me here, and if she does, I'll be ready.

If you love me as much as I love you, then you'll be very quiet. You will not make a sound until this is over.

November 18

It has been twelve hours. Still, Wife has not come. My back leans against the wall of the closet as I hold the sculpture, twisting it like a spit that drips with roasting meat. My breathing slows to fourteen inhalations per minute. I turn my ears in all directions, just in case Wife decides to sneak back in through the window. She cannot surprise me.

I hear a noise downstairs. I grip the sculpture harder. Another minute of silence and then the sound of feet on the staircase. Not loud, stomping feet, but tiny, soft feet, so quiet that the stairs barely make a creak.

There is silence in the hallway. For a second I think the sounds on the staircase are only a bad dream until I hear the clink of metal on the other side of my door.

"Hey, you in there. It's time to have some dinner."

Listen to her lies! It is Wife who would eat us both.

"I'm not fooling around. Come get your food or I'm throwing it out!"

My stomach rumbles. Wife *is* tricky. But I do not move. I raise the sculpture and grip the forks until drops of blood and sweat mix and fall from my hands. Wife pounds on the door. She pounds again. Louder. I hear a key jiggling in the keyhole. She must have taken Mrs. Warden's keys from me and made copies when I wasn't looking. That bitch! Still, I am well-hidden.

The quiet feet enter my room. They walk towards the bed. The tray makes a soft thud as she places it on the bed. The floorboards creak as she bends down to check under my bed. There is no sound for a long time. Then the feet change their direction and come back towards the closet. There is a hand on the knob. It starts to turn.

"I know you're behind the door. Just come on out. We've played this game too many times already."

But this is a new game, I say to myself as I scrunch my eyes shut and kick open the closet door, swinging the sculpture like a primitive warrior. She screams and falls to the floor as the ends of two forks slash her across the chest, maybe the stomach. I made the forks extra sharp, just for you.

I pierce and crack Wife for each time I felt ashamed. For each time I tried to thrust through her. For each time she drooled on her pillow. That makes 37 cracks. 37 holes in drooling Wife.

But when I open my eyes and look down, I drop the sculpture on the floor, unable to speak.

That is not Wife's tray of disgusting food spilled across the floor. That is not Wife's scratching voice. That is not Wife's thinning black hair. Those are not Wife's failing black eyes. That is not Wife.

November 18

The blood won't clot.

Instead, it falls carelessly down Mrs. Warden's arms, chest, and stomach, collecting in the expanding red puddle on the floor.

It looks more brown than red, don't you think?

I stare at her face. She's so fat that bulges of skin spill out from her sleeves, from the neck-hole in her blouse, and from under her filthy black stockings. Sort of like the expanding red puddle enveloping the floor, choking breadcrusts, newspapers, cockroaches, and my feet.

It looks like syrup, I think. Maybe that's why I'm stuck here. I cannot budge, not at the sight of the blood, or at the screams, or at the sirens. The old doctor pleasantly shoves me away from Mrs. Warden's body, swearing loudly, pleading with me to tell him something, anything.

"Yes, I did it," I say. "And I'd do it again."

November 22

Mrs. Warden's body became cold as all the blood slowly poured out of it. Her skin stiffened an hour after her fat ankles stopped twitching. It turned the color of light green chalk. That's when the cockroaches and other insects became interested.

I look out the window past the bars and see that the two butterflies have returned. It is a beautifully sunny day. Their yellow wings are tiny matchbooks making trails of fire on the grass. The sculpture rests on its side just below the window where I dropped it the other night. It reflects red and silver metallic sparks in the sunlight. It is more precious to me now than ever.

The door is open and there is no one left to give the rent money to. There is no one to feed me food on a metal tray. There is no old doctor to offer me breakfasts of blue capsules. There is nothing to help me when I feel ashamed. We must leave, the two of us, right away.

I will pull you off your wall, very gently, and wrap you in four pieces of newspaper dated May 26, 2000. Then I will put you back in the box. Don't worry, you won't be in there for long. I will find a new room, one with freshly painted walls, a bigger window, a pleasant old doctor, and no Wife. I will place you lower on your new wall so we can be closer and so I won't feel ashamed.

Neither of us will ever be alone again, I promise.

—Chris Vola