

5-2015

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Kasey Jones

East Tennessee State University

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<http://dc.etsu.edu/honors/273>

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Pathologized Peculiarities:
A Collection of Short Stories

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

Kasey Jones
The Honors College
English Honors Program
East Tennessee State University

April 16, 2015

Dr. Mark D. Baumgartner, Faculty Mentor

Dr. Michael Cody, Reader

Pat Cronin, Reader

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Critical Introduction

The main focus of my creative thesis is the pathologization of perceived social abnormalities. My thesis is comprised of three pieces of short fiction: “The Firmament,” “Shards,” and “A Box of Rocks.” Each of these stories is centered on or related to social isolation—whether self- or societally-imposed—as a result of non-normative behavior or characteristics on the part of the protagonist. The focus of “The Firmament” is general ostracization due to a social difference, while the latter two stories hone in on particular disorders that can lead to social isolation. None of these stories are meant to be exact representations of a specific disorder, but rather my interpretation of the materials that I encountered. I used reports and studies on disorders—namely high-functioning ASD and Schizoid Personality Disorder—for the characters and concepts in “Shards” and “A Box of Rocks.” While researching Schizoid Personality Disorder, I relied on three books as the foundation for my research: *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality* by W.R.D. Fairbairn, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* by R.D. Laing, and *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self* by Harry Guntrip. My research on ASD was more diverse, and my readings ranged from studies on the nature of high-functioning ASD to personal accounts written by people who had high-functioning ASD.

I approached each story in a different way, and as a result my research methods differed slightly. I based “Shards” on an article describing a belief pattern seen in certain schizoid individuals, and had already compiled research before beginning the story, doing supplementary research when necessary. I wrote “A Box of Rocks” with mild ASD in mind, but most of my knowledge about the disorder was limited to the basics. After writing the story, I then did more

research on Asperger's and used some of what I found to add additional substance to the story. I did little to no research for "The Firmament," only reading through a few articles on the ancient concept of a solid sky. These readings had almost no bearing on the story itself, but did provide me with a name for the story.

"The Firmament" is the broadest of the three stories with respect to the overall theme. I focused on portraying the ostracization of an 'abnormal' individual who lived in what was otherwise a homogenous culture. At the same time, however, I wanted this culture to be particularly absurd, highlighting the fact that the idea of normalcy is contingent on the dominant group in a culture. I referred to this culture simply as 'the community' and created a collective identity rather than giving a unique identity to any individuals in the group. Continuing along this same line of thought, I decided not to name anyone in the story in an attempt to create a more visible dichotomy between the collective and the individual. Even when I introduced outsiders into the community, I was careful to refer to the outsiders as 'them' in an effort to solidify the girl's isolation and the fact that she did not fit in with the community or anywhere outside of the community.

The protagonist herself is a victim of circumstance, though she does manage to separate herself from the rest of the community by overtly doing something that is outside societal norms. The idea behind this was to illustrate the absurdity of isolating someone for having a quirk considered weird. I tried to do this by inverting what would be considered normal and strange practices. I almost entirely relied on wordplay to create this society. As I mentioned before, I wanted to create a bizarre culture that used inane rules to standardize the behavior of everyone living in the community. I didn't want the reader to be able to identify with or find any of the practices logical, since that would defeat the purpose of the story. For the same reason, I

purposefully refrained from ascribing a particular disorder to the girl in “The Firmament,” unlike the main characters in the other two stories. Both “Shards” and “A Box of Rocks” follow a storyline similar to that of “The Firmament,” but they are set in more recognizable contexts.

The idea for the next story in the sequence was based on an article that I came across a few months ago—“Psychotherapy of Schizoid Process” by Gary Yontef—that described people who believed that their own love was destructive. I wrote the first line to the story not long after that, but I did not begin to develop the story itself until a couple months after I had found the article. I started doing more research about the idea, incorporating the writings of Fairbairn, Guntrip, and Laing. One thing that I found particularly interesting in my research was this individual’s relationship to his parents. Most of the material that I found placed a special emphasis on the schizoid child’s relationship with his mother during his formative years, so I began the story with Lane’s childhood interactions with his mother. In his book *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality*, W.R.D Fairbairn says:

[the schizoid] comes to feel that he is not really loved and valued as a person by his mother, and that she does not really appreciate and accept his love as good ... the child then feels that the reason for his mother’s apparent lack of love towards him is that he has destroyed her affection and made it disappear. At the same time he feels that the reason for her apparent refusal to accept his love is that his own love is destructive and bad. (Fairbairn 25)

Harry Guntrip elaborates on this in his book *Schizoid Phenomenon, Object Relations and the Self*, saying, “The mother is not frustrating, angry or neglectful,” but “cannot tolerate the natural healthy, robust vigor of his love-needs, so that he comes to feel he is a ruthless destroyer without intending to be so” (Guntrip 128). Initially I attempted to convey this exact idea, but had trouble

developing the sentiments of both Lane and his mother without becoming too detailed. The early draft ended up becoming cluttered since I was trying to convey the emotions of two different people, so I instead settled on writing Lane's perspective alone. As a result, I wrote Lane's mother as being unable to tolerate Lane, regardless of his behavior, placing an emphasis on her mood fluctuations in an effort to make Lane seem more stable and sympathetic. This deviated from what I had read about parent-child interactions, exaggerating the behavior of the schizoid's mother in an effort to make the root of Lane's problem more obvious. I hoped that the combination of the depictions of Lane and Lane's mother would highlight Lane's internalization of his mother's criticism, hinting at the fact that Lane's perception of himself is not rooted in reality.

The schizoid child's early interactions with his mother cause him to become detached from other people while still longing to be close. He represses the wish to be loved, learning to never desire love and believing that his own love is a destructive force. At the same time, however, some schizoids who harbor this fear manage to enter and maintain close relationships with others, though these relationships are usually limited to no more than a few people. In romantic relationships, many continue to hold on to the fear that they are destroying or will destroy their partners. This can make relationships tenuous for both parties, as the schizoid finds it difficult to allow himself to give and receive love. In some instances the schizoid is the only one aware of his struggle, which was how I chose to portray Lane's relationship with Lucy.

I wrote Lucy as having major depressive disorder and serious self-esteem issues. She, like Lane, believes that she is constantly hurting people due to her thoughtlessness, though more often than not these issues only exist in her head. She obsesses over any and all perceived slights and, as a result, is constantly preoccupied with herself and her own guilt. As a result, she notices

very little about her relationship with Lane. Guntrip states that “The terrible dilemma of the schizoid is that love itself is destructive, and he dare not love. Hence he withdraws into detachment and aloofness. All intimate relationships are felt in terms of eating, swallowing up, and are too dangerous to be risked” (Guntrip 30). Though I kept this in mind while writing the story, I also considered personal stories of persons with schizoid personality disorder who held this fear but entered relationships in spite of their fears. I wanted to show the constant bombardment of guilt, fear, and regret that Lane experiences with each relationship in an effort to express the feelings that a schizoid person might experience throughout his lifetime.

Unlike “Shards,” “A Box of Rocks” was initially supposed to be based on a personal experience, but ended up evolving into a completely different story. When I was in elementary school I collected rocks. I found them almost everywhere and would store them in my pockets until I could put them in a small cardboard box that I kept in my basement. I was proud of my collection and would frequently sort through the rocks, probably deluding myself into believing that they were worth something. Eventually I completely filled the box, so I kept my collecting to a minimum and spent more time just taking the rocks out of the box and then putting them back in. Not long after I had filled it, I was walking home from my grandparents’ house, which was across the street from my own, and found that my rock collection—box and all—had been thrown in the ditch next to my house.

I was having a hard time coming up with a story idea, so I decided to base a story on something that had happened to me. The incident with the rocks came to mind and I chose to write about that. For one reason or another, the only things that the story ended up having in common with my experience was the title and the fact that the secrets were kept in a cardboard box that the protagonist found in his basement. Although I had named the story before I wrote it,

I ended up keeping the title because I felt like equating the secrets to rocks stressed the utter lack of worth that the secrets held for other people. The protagonist treasures, cares for, and carries the burden of the secrets, but his efforts are neither understood nor recognized.

I also wanted there to be a perceivable communication barrier. The protagonist has something akin to what was formerly known as Asperger's and is now known as high-functioning ASD, and the story is essentially supposed to be about his attempts and inability to communicate with other people. In many ways, the protagonist lives in one world while trying to function in another. His efforts to interact with others are met with confusion or rejection, because others are unable to understand his methods of communication. As a result, he indirectly interacts with people by collecting their secrets.

One particularly interesting study that I found useful when writing this story was conducted by Henry and Kamila Markram. Their proposal, known as *The Intense World Syndrome*, says:

the autistic person may perceive its surroundings not only as overwhelming intense due to hyper-reactivity of primary sensory areas, but also as aversive and highly stressful due to a hyper-reactive amygdala, which also makes quick and powerful fear associations with usually neutral stimuli. The autistic person may well try to cope with the intense and aversive world by avoidance. Thus, impaired social interactions and withdrawal may not be the result of a lack of compassion, incapability to put oneself into someone else's position or lack of emotionality, but quite to the contrary a result of an intensely if not painfully aversively perceived environment. (Markram, Markram, Rinaldi)

The misrepresentation of people with autism as being unable to empathize has led some to portray them as unfeeling or even psychopathic. I felt like *The Intense World Syndrome* at very least offered a unique perspective on a frequently misunderstood disorder. Though I didn't use it as a template for my character, I certainly kept it in mind as I was developing the story. I wanted to illustrate the barrier that stood between the protagonist and the rest of the world, placing a particular emphasis on his struggle to communicate, as well as physically interact with others.

I also read through personal stories written by individuals with high-functioning ASD. On the Autism Spectrum Education Network's website I found an open letter written by a man named Richard Rowe. This letter provided useful insight into the struggles that persons with autism might face throughout their lifetimes. Though I read a number of studies and articles that essentially conveyed the exact information provided by Rowe in his letter, his story provided a more personal look at the world in which an autistic person lives, and I found that to be more useful than bare facts. Rowe describes his difficulties living in a world in which he felt different and alone, saying, "As a child I felt very strongly that I didn't belong here in this world" (Rowe). I wanted to convey that sense of otherworldliness and I wanted to base it in the protagonist's perception alone. Very little in the story is meant to be taken literally. The majority of the absurdities in the story exist in an effort to illustrate the protagonist's difficulty communicating and interacting with other people.

Each of the stories was almost entirely written in one sitting, though I spent a large amount of time editing and revising the stories later. I began with a single line—the first line, in all three cases—and the stories flowed from there. As I wrote, I began by creating the basic shape of the story from beginning to end, and then filled in the outline with additional details that gave the story more substance and character. I focused almost entirely on the narratives of the

stories, preferring to describe internal issues since the protagonists mostly kept to themselves. “A Box of Rocks” is the only story that contains dialogue, and all verbal interactions in the other two stories are simply stated within the narrative rather than being written as conversations. In the earlier drafts of “The Firmament” and “Shards” I included bits of dialogue here and there, but in both cases the dialogue seemed to disrupt the flow of the stories. The only reason that dialogue exists within “A Box of Rocks” is because it seemed to emphasize the protagonist’s strange interactions with other people.

Initially I had a lot of trouble revising each of the stories, because once I lost the original rhythm that I had had while drafting the story, I had trouble revising in the same style as the original text. As a result, some of the revisions felt especially forced and I had some trouble integrating them into the main story, though I was able to go back later and smooth things out. I had the most success with “A Box of Rocks” because the style was rather simple and easy to reduplicate. The story also felt more linear than the other two—unlike “Shards,” which I had quite a bit of trouble reworking since it wasn’t entirely in chronological order and the story was framed in the past tense, forcing me to write the vast majority of the text in the pluperfect. Most of my difficulties with “The Firmament” stemmed from the wordplay that I used. As I rewrote parts of the story, I wrote the revisions in a more straightforward manner than the rest of the text. As a result, it was easy to pick out which elements of the story had been added later, since they lacked the style of the original text. I found myself going back through the story over and over again in an attempt to replicate what I had initially written.

I also had some trouble writing the endings to “The Firmament” and “Shards,” because with each I felt like there needed to be some sort of resolution that wrapped up everything well. The first endings that I wrote practically screamed, “and they all lived happily ever after,” which

didn't fit with the rest of the stories at all. I eventually gave up on trying to tie everything together, and instead created open-ended endings that seemed to fit well.

I'm hesitant to call these pieces stories, because each conveys ideas and emotions rather than following a particular plot or narrative. Instead of covering a single moment or event, each piece covers several years in a very short length of text and ends when the existing issue is resolved or evolves into an entirely new problem. Though the stories have protagonists, the texts are less about the protagonists themselves and more a particular issue within their lives. I wanted the pieces to convey the divide between socially isolated people and what is considered normal society, as well as the difficulties that people experience when trying to overcome their isolation. I'd like to think that these stories are actually ideas encapsulated in story form, though if I had to put a name on them, I would say that they were third-person inner monologues, with "The Firmament" being a monologue of the community itself.

The Firmament

She had eyes that shone like stars because when she was twelve-and-a-half, a piece of the night sky fell from its place in the universe and hit her in the face. It was inevitable, really. At least, that was what people would say. The sky was getting old and weak and was in sore need of repair—if not replacement. Every now and then a piece would chip off and hit some unfortunate bystander on the head. Everyone agreed that something needed to be done, but it was always something to be put off until another day. Besides, they hadn't lost that many pieces of it and the odds of getting hit by a piece were smaller than the odds of getting hit by lightning, and everyone had agreed that they should get to keep the lightning, because a few people's problems shouldn't ruin everyone else's fun. No one had died from getting hit, and it was decided that as long as no one died, it wasn't a problem. But just to make sure that it wouldn't become a problem, dying from a collision with the sky was made illegal.

This had satisfied everyone for several years and they were pleased that they hadn't had to make any amendments to their new law. It gave them time to focus on other matters, like whether or not it was unconstitutional for someone to be up in arms if they had no arms or if cherry pickers could be used for activities other than picking cherries or which utensils justice ought to be served with, and so on. But a problem arose when a certain someone had allowed the sky to hit her in the face rather than on the head. This had never happened before. No one bothered looking at the sky anymore. There wasn't much to see and it was far more fun to see someone get hit by a piece of it—something you couldn't see if you were gaping at the sky. When someone was hit by the sky, that person's head would almost always break the piece into two or three smaller pieces. That person was then required to pick up the pieces and take them to the town hall, which was really just a long hall, because no one had seen any reason to add

rooms. (It seemed to defeat the purpose of the name and misnomers were against the law). The pieces were then placed in a small box labeled Firmament and the person who had brought them was given a stern lecture on the consequences of breaking the sky. The consequence of breaking the sky, as it turned out, was nothing more than receiving a stern lecture on the consequences of breaking the sky. The lecture would last anywhere from a few minutes to several hours. It really depended on who was giving the lecture and how circular their reasoning was. It wasn't unusual for town officials to be chosen solely based on the shape of their reasoning.

When the sky had hit her, it had broken into quite a few pieces—most of which had gotten in her eyes. This was unprecedented and had caused quite the uproar. It was all that anyone wanted to talk about, and even led to a riot, which ended almost as soon as it started, because no one really had any idea what they were doing or how to do what they thought they might want to do. This disturbed quite a few people, because it was impossible for them to know when they might need a riot. So everyone promptly forgot about the girl's eyes for a little while and instead put all their energy into creating riot laws so that they could have the best riots possible.

It wasn't until she was fourteen that the community voted on her eyes. It was agreed that the sky was public property and that it wasn't fair that a single person should be allowed to have a piece all to herself. A few people suggested that they remedy this by taking her eyes and putting them on display in the center of the public park. This suggestion was eventually discarded when no one could agree on where exactly the park's center was. Others wanted to extract the pieces from her eyes and then put them back in the sky, but no one could quite figure out how to pull them out. It was at this point that someone suggested that they put her eyes in the sky. Though it certainly would have solved the problem, everyone voted unanimously against it.

No one else got to keep their eyes in the sky and no one liked the idea of someone always looking down on them and watching them.

They finally agreed that she should have to do community service to compensate for having stolen the sky. It took them quite a while to figure out what she should have to do, as community service was infrequently used as a punishment. In fact, it was far more common for someone to be punished with community disservice. As it was, every now and then there came along an all-too-upstanding citizen who would be sentenced to a certain number of hours of community disservice. How many hours they served had to correspond to the severity of their crime, how long they had performed it, and whether they had tried to hide what they had been doing. Anonymous acts of kindness or charity were considered especially heinous, as it could take anywhere from a couple of hours to several years to figure who the perpetrator was. These cases took priority over almost all the others, since most everyone in the community found them particularly unsettling. At times like these everyone was careful to stay out of everyone else's business, which officials found was exceptionally bad for the economy, and it occasionally caused a business or two to go bankrupt.

Though the nature of each community disservice was almost always left to the discretion of whomever was being punished—though the community was always the final authority on whether or not they felt they had been sufficiently disserved—no one was entirely sure whether or not the same should be allowed for community service. They discussed this with one another and eventually asked the girl what she thought and what kind of service she would choose if she were given the choice. She said that she didn't know and everyone found this to be a bit of a relief, since they clearly hadn't taught her any better. There were dire consequences for knowing

better than the community, and the community occasionally prided itself on how little it actually knew.

As they tried to decide on what she should have to do, they came to the realization that community service was no different than the acts punishable by community disservice. The community seemed to enjoy the disservices provided to it, so getting rid of community disservice was out of the question. No one wanted to get rid of community service, either, so they decided that in order to keep it, they would simply rule that no one was actually allowed to perform it. With this in mind, it was suggested that instead of having her do something for the community, she ought to simply belong to the community. Since the sky belonged to the community and the girl had stolen the sky, this seemed reasonable enough. Thus it was agreed that as long as the girl chose to retain possession of the sky, she would belong to the community.

When it was agreed that she should become the property of the community, a new problem arose. If she belonged to the community, should she be allowed to keep her name? The community was split on this particular issue. Un-naming had been a controversial topic for years and everyone resented her for having brought up the problem again. You see, the community had decided long ago—long enough ago that no one could remember how long that ago was—that when something was given a name, it had to be kept. This had initially become a problem when it came to naming pets and children, as some members of the community had protested that there was no way for them to immediately know if they wanted to keep something that they had only just gotten. The community had created several solutions to this problem, though none had been accepted as law. First there was a one-year waiting period during which people could decide whether they wanted to name whatever they had gotten. If they named it within that period, it had to be kept. If it was kept after that period, it had to be named.

Though most found this agreeable, there were still a few who protested. Most of these people's complaints were about their children having turned into teenagers, and they argued that though they had wanted to keep the child, they weren't particularly interested in keeping the teenager and didn't feel like they should have to since it was no longer the thing that they had initially named and agreed to keep. The solution to this was the un-naming ceremony. If the community agreed that something had grown out of its name, then it could be un-named. When something was un-named, the community gathered together to witness the event. Although the ceremony itself wasn't strictly necessary, several people had thought that it would be a fun way of celebrating something without actually having to pay for it, and so they created the ceremony and required that the person un-naming something had to pay for the ceremony itself. They did this under the pretense that it would hopefully prevent people acting on caprice. Most people, however, were quick to offer un-naming as a solution, though—especially when things began to get dull around the community.

The next problem came with the un-naming ceremony itself. For one reason or another, when the community had agreed on the various requirements for the ceremony, no one had bothered to write any of them down. As a result, no one could ever agree on how many candles ought to be lit, who ought to be invited, if food ought to be served after the ceremony had ended, and whether or not singing and dancing were appropriate to the occasion. The girl suggested that they light fourteen, since she was fourteen, but this was immediately shot down, as someone made the point that then there would be no candles when there was an un-naming ceremony for something under a year old. And they couldn't very well un-name something in the dark.

The ceremony was short—partially because no one could think of a way to draw it out. Her head was shaved and her clothes were removed. They told her that she no longer belonged to

herself. At that moment she didn't belong to anyone, and all things that didn't belong were sent to the town hall for sorting. Sometimes these things found a place to belong; sometimes there was no place for them at all, so they would be locked away until a place could be found for them. If no place could be found for them, then they remained locked away until the storage room became too full for anything new to be locked away in it. When this happened, they either threw away everything that was currently in the room or sent things away so that they wouldn't have to deal with them anymore. They didn't like to send people away, because there was always a chance that that person might come back. And once something was gone, it should never come back. But no one ever came back, because no one ever left. The community found this agreeable.

She was sent to the town hall for sorting and everyone knew that she would belong to the community because there was nowhere else that she belonged. As soon as the girl was made to belong to the community and the excitement of the entire affair settled down, everyone began to look for excitement elsewhere. They doubted that they would find any excitement in the girl, as she probably wouldn't fall on someone's head, though there were a few hopeful people who would glance at her from time to time in the hopes that she would fall on someone and break into pieces. They had never seen a person fall to pieces before and they wanted to know what it looked like.

At night she was made to stand outside and look at the ground, because that was what the sky did and she was a part of the sky and a part of the sky was now her, so she had to do what the sky did. She looked down at night and eventually began to look down during the day. Very few people had a problem with this, despite the fact that it was impossible to see the shards of sky when she was looking down. No one actually wanted to look at the sky, they just wanted to have

the option of looking at it if they ever actually felt like looking at it. Occasionally a person or two would even comment on how down she looked and how good she was at looking down.

This went on for several weeks before something happened that the entire community disapproved of. People who weren't the community came into the community. (This really wasn't allowed, since there wouldn't be a community if outsiders stayed in it). These people, the people who weren't the community, lived in the east and had seen the holes in the sky, so they had come to find out where the sky had gone. The community didn't like this at all, because the sky belonged to the community and these people had no business asking what they had done with it. Just the same, the community preferred this to the possibility that someone might come into the community for no reason at all, because they felt that this quality ought to belong to them alone. Fortunately most people took one look at the community and immediately realized that they weren't going to find any help in it. This wasn't solely because the community refused to talk to outsiders, but also because they had no sense of direction, as their moral compasses had broken ages ago. As a result, it was easy to become even more lost after talking to one or two people from the community.

But these people weren't looking for directions, because they had known exactly where they were going. This caused the community immense distress, and when the outsiders asked the community what had happened to the sky, the community called an emergency meeting. Much of their concern stemmed from the fact that these people had a strange obsession with the sky, though they weren't sure why.

Finally they decided to just tell the strangers what had happened, or rather, someone had accidentally told the story and then everyone else had rushed to tell their own versions. Most of the stories had nothing to do with the missing piece of sky or the girl, but were instead their own

opinions on what had happened. Eventually the strangers were able to piece together what had happened—or something close to what had happened, because it was doubtful that anyone had actually known what was happening when it happened—and were horrified. They demanded that the community let the girl go, which the community argued against vehemently. But when the strangers threatened never to leave if they left the matter alone, the community decided that it really didn't matter all that much.

At first the girl was happy to no longer belong to the community, but then the strangers had left, leaving her unnamed and unsettled. Since she no longer belonged to the community, she didn't belong at all. When she was in town, she was ignored, and she was always in town because she had nowhere else to go.

The community kept the box labeled Firmament locked away in a corner of the town hall because they worried that someone else might get the idea that the sky was anything other than community property. They were still quite bothered that they had lost a small piece of the sky. Eventually they agreed that they ought to try to find the spot that was missing this piece of sky so that the community could continue to be angry that there was not something there that they could continue not looking at. It took several months, but eventually they announced that they thought they might have found the spot that the missing piece of sky had possibly occupied at some point in time. They took a few pictures of the spot and presented them at a meeting. Everyone agreed that the pictures were too dark and that it was difficult to tell if the spot was actually a missing piece of sky or if it was simply a piece of sky that was missing a star.

Eventually it was found that no one really cared about the issue all that much and that no one was really interested in even looking at the sky, much less carrying a piece of it around. They left the sky alone, just as they had left the girl alone, and went on to find something else to

be upset about. The girl took to standing in the square again, though now the community didn't care whether she looked up or down or if she even looked at all. She looked a different way every day, though no one could say which way she looked. And she stood there for a very long time.

Shards

Lane had perfected the art of breaking people. If there was one thing that he believed in, it was his own destructiveness. He had a knack for breaking the people around him and he was good at it. In fact, he was the best at it. And what was both best and worst about this was that he didn't even have to try. He was a natural, and breaking came just as easily as breathing. Lane could stop himself from breathing—if only for a minute or two. He had not been able to stop himself from breaking people.

Lane didn't break everyone. He only broke the people he loved. It was a slow process and sometimes he wasn't even aware of what he was doing until the damage was irreparable. Not that he would have been able to fix it. He wasn't good at mending things, just breaking them. He had broken things for as long as he could remember, and he imagined that this would continue until he was too old to remember.

It had begun with his mother, whom he could only assume was the person he had loved first. He wasn't sure how young he had been when he had first begun remembering how he had broken his mother. It must have been very early on, though, because those were the only memories that he had of her. No matter what he had done, he had always done it wrong or had been wrong in doing it. If he had cried too loudly, if he hadn't cried enough, if he had talked back, if he hadn't talked at all, if he had been hungry, if he hadn't been hungry for the right thing, if he hadn't been tired, if he had been tired at the wrong time.... Nothing had ever been right and his mother had always retreated to her own sanctuary so that she wouldn't have to put up with Lane's misbehavior. She had cried often. If Lane hadn't seen it, then he had heard it. It had always hurt him to know that he was hurting her, but it must not have hurt him enough to

make him stop, because he had never seemed to stop hurting her, and that was exactly what she had told him.

If that had been her only response, then maybe Lane would have been better at not breaking her. He had never learned, though, and it had always confused him when he had gone from being overbearing to not being friendly enough. On days like this his mother had cried that he didn't love her, and Lane had tried hard to remember the difference between being affectionate and annoying. He always seemed to guess wrong, which had usually led to more crying or complaints that his disobedience was too much. Sometimes she had done both at the same time, leaving Lane to sit helplessly as he had tried to figure out what he had done wrong. He had been bad at figuring that sort of thing out, but he had known that he was always wrong.

Lane had tried to say that he was sorry. Sometimes he had followed his mother around all day, just waiting for the right moment to tell her just how sorry he was. The right moment had never come and the words had never come out. Lane had spent his nights whispering 'I'm sorry' to himself over and over and over again. He had wanted to say it to someone. If he said it to himself a thousand times, then maybe he would be able to say it to his mother once. He hadn't been able to help but think that maybe he hadn't been able to say it because he hadn't actually meant it. Maybe he hadn't really been sorry. Maybe he hadn't been sorry enough to not break his mother. He had felt that he ought to have felt guilty for this, and so he had allowed himself to feel as guilty as he possibly could. He hadn't been guilty enough for his mother, who had told him that he wasn't trying hard enough or that he wasn't trying at all. That had made him feel even guiltier, but even that hadn't been enough. It hadn't been enough to keep Lane from breaking his mother. He had followed her around all day so that he could say this to her, but when he had opened his mouth, he had found that the words had already emptied out of him. He

had been sorry about that, too. Lane had learned to not long for his mother's love, and that, perhaps, had been the only thing that he had done right. Lane hadn't deserved his mother's love, even if she had had love to give him. Children like Lane drained their parents' love, so Lane had learned to live without it.

Lane hadn't managed to break both of his parents at the same time, and not long after having broken his mother, Lane had gone on to break his father. His father had known that Lane had broken his mother and he had frequently reminded Lane of this. By this time Lane's mother was long gone and Lane hadn't had any idea where she had gone. He had broken his father when he had asked where she had gone, and, in turn, his father had tried to break him. But his father hadn't been nearly as good at breaking people as Lane was. No one was better than Lane. Although his father had been able to break Lane a little, his every attempt to break Lane had broken himself more than it had broken Lane. Lane was not good at being broken, only breaking, and—though there were times that he felt otherwise—he knew this was the truth. Lane's father had told him that he broke people, and Lane knew that if he had broken his father, then his father must know that Lane broke people, so what his father said had to be true. By this time, Lane had known for a fact that he broke people. It had been at this point that Lane had broken his family apart completely.

He hadn't fully realized that his father was breaking until his father had actually broken. His father had broken so slowly that Lane had never fully recognized the damage until it had been done. Lane hadn't been old enough to leave then, though if he had been, he wasn't sure that he would have gone. He had often pondered which would break his father faster: staying or leaving. Lane had been taken away before he had been able to find out, but he was sure it would

have been whichever he had chosen. It wasn't the decision that had mattered; it had been the fact that he had made it. Just the same, he couldn't help but wonder.

From then on Lane's life had been a string of estranged friendships and defective relationships. He had broken his foster parents, though he knew that had neither been permanent nor complete. He had tried very hard not to break them, but somehow his distance had only hurt them. He had told himself that this was the safest way that he could live. He hadn't known what else to do, so he hadn't done anything else. He had turned eighteen as quickly as he could and then he had left them, hoping that maybe they would move past the damage he had done.

Sometimes he thought that fixing things had to be simpler than breaking them. He almost never broke someone immediately. It took time and intimacy and a lot of commitment. He was good at committing, so it was a pity that no one was willing to stick with him. Well, there had been one person who had stuck with him until the end. Rather, she had stayed with him until her end, which had come later rather than sooner and had devastated Lane when it had finally happened. He had been doing better. He had been so sure that he was doing better. And he had thought that Lucy had been doing better, too. She had never been reserved about her emotions before, so he had thought that when she had stopped expressing them, she must have been doing better. Almost all of her emotions before then had been negative, so he had thought that no emotions had been a good thing—or at very least an improvement.

It wasn't until she was gone that he realized that he had not gotten better; he had gotten worse. Before he had only broken people and then driven them away, but now he had been able to totally break someone, to push them past the point of no return. He hadn't even seen the fall, only the remains, leaving him to wonder what exactly had happened and where he had gone

wrong. If he had known, then maybe he would have been able to stop. But he had never been able to figure out where exactly he had gone wrong.

Her name had been Lucy and she'd had a knack for saying things that needed to be said, only she'd said these things at the worst possible times. This was why Lane and Lucy had met. Although Lucy had been fragile, there had still been a resilience in her that had prevented him from breaking her. For a while, at least. She had, at one point, likened herself to a teacup that had been shattered and then pieced back together. Her strongest qualities had stemmed from the parts of her that had been broken. She had had a lot of strong qualities when she had died. Perhaps this was why she had been attracted to Lane. A part of her must have realized that Lane would chip at her until she had broken. Maybe a part of Lane had known that she would let him chip at her until she broke. Lucy had wanted to be strong, so she had allowed herself to be broken. This had been something that she had told the broken people whom she had met. Most often she had seen them at funerals. It was at these funerals that she had been most unwelcome, because she had always managed to say the most inappropriate things possible. She had not been one to leave the truth buried, even if it had been an uglier piece that no one had wanted to see or have or hold. The things that she had said hadn't been wrong—she had rarely been wrong, but she also hadn't always been right.

Lane and Lucy had met at one of those funerals. Lane had gone because he had known the dead person, and Lucy had gone because she needed some sort of affirmation that she was alive. She had found it, not in the dead person itself, but the people who were attending the funeral. She had found life in these people—something Lane had never been able to fully understand. Lane had been one of these people, and she had found life in Lane. Lane had been quick to see the cracks in Lucy when she had first spoken at the funeral. He might not have

noticed them if she hadn't said anything at all. Her exterior alone had told him nothing and he might have overlooked her if she had kept to herself. It had been difficult to ignore Lucy when she spoke, and when she had spoken, people had tried not to listen.

She had meant well and he had known that. He rarely had anything but good intentions and he couldn't help but notice when others tried and failed as he did. He never seemed to hit his target and few people realized that he had a target at all. So when Lucy had stood in front of the casket and announced that the dead man would be happier without all of them, he had known exactly what she had been trying to say. And when several of the mourners had chased her away, Lane had followed her. Lane's relationship with Lucy had begun at that moment, because Lucy was unable to resist the fact that someone had actually gone after her. Lane had immediately seen the brokenness in Lucy, and Lucy had never been able to see Lane's capacity for destruction. Neither of them could see what the other saw in him or her, and somehow that suited both of them just fine. They couldn't imagine it any other way. Lane had loved Lucy and Lucy had loved that Lane loved her.

Lucy had hated herself more than she had been capable of hating anyone else. Most of her self-loathing had come from her interactions with other people, which had been characterized by her seeming thoughtlessness and the subsequent response of the person whom she had been talking with. Whenever something she had said had been taken the wrong way, she had often hurt herself more than she had hurt the person she had been talking to. That person's anger with her had never quite compared with the anger that she had felt toward herself. And even when someone hadn't been angry with her at all, she had dreamed up ways that she might have hurt them in order that she could hurt herself all the more. It was an endless cycle that Lane had found himself enamored with. She had hurt people as unintentionally as he broke people. He had

wondered if their similarities would keep him from breaking her. Maybe he couldn't break something that was already broken. For a long time this had seemed to be the case. But when it had happened, he had known that he must, in some way or another, have been goading her into it, because that was what he did—even when he had been so sure that he had been doing the opposite.

Her death had been three months ago, though Lane tried to pretend like it had been years. Decades. Something that had happened when he had been too small to remember anything clearly. But it had happened and he still carried the proof of it. She had left a blank note, because her words hurt people more than anything else. He kept the note in his coat pocket, because its emptiness hurt him more than her words ever had. He often wondered if she had known this. He often wondered if she would have said this at her own funeral.

He had gone to her funeral and not much had been said. Lucy had become so good at filling the silence, that no one was really sure what to say when she was finally quiet. One or two people had managed to find a few words for her, though they were the same lies said for nearly every dead person, and Lucy hadn't been able to explain the truth. Lane had tried to think of something that Lucy might have said, but in the end all he had been able to say was that she had tried hard. Somehow all that everyone had heard was that she had not tried hard enough.

Her death had been three months ago, but its effects still lingered. He tried to fight the fact, but the reality of Lucy, his parents, and everyone else fell on him freshly each day. He tried to abandon his old ways and eventually he succeeded. Lane would go on to break new people in new ways.

A Box of Rocks

He used to collect secrets. Sometimes they came to him, other times he would find them. The back of a mailbox, in between the cogs of a broken clock, among the shards of shattered egg shells, at the edges of dusty shelves. They were everywhere and he would gather each and every one of them, rolling them in his fingers as he inspected them, then putting them in a box with all of the others.

He kept the box under his bed, directly beneath his pillow. In the mornings he would pull out the box and brush it off, making sure that dust hadn't gathered on it. He'd pull some secrets to the top and move others to the bottom, organizing and reorganizing until he was sure that he remembered all of them. The secrets were never forgotten and there was never dust on the box.

He found the box in the same way that he'd found the secrets. It had been in his basement, a small cardboard box surrounded by other cardboard boxes of all sorts of sizes. He opened them all. His box had been the only one that was empty, so he took it. He filled it with secrets.

Sometimes he would show the secrets to other people. Strangers on the street would stop as he showed them a secret that he had found that day. He would tell them where he had found it and they would listen politely until he was done. He never told them whom the secrets had belonged to, and sometimes even he didn't know.

Occasionally he would let them touch a secret, but never hold it. He only showed them certain features of the secret, because it seemed wrong to show anyone all of the secret. Not everyone wanted to see them, but some looked out of curiosity and others looked because it was simply good manners. They usually stopped for the latter reason, but it made him feel better just the same. He only showed them to strangers. He knew a lot of strangers.

The secrets gave him a sense of knowing, the same sense that most people got as they grew closer to another person. It was both comforting and alienating. They made him more aware of what he lacked. He hid his own secrets inside of himself. He found that he held them better than the box could. Even so, some days the secrets would leak out of him.

“I think that I fall in love with everyone,” he once tells a woman. They share the same body of water—a lake overlooking a small plaza—on days when they need a something as much as a someone. She is a lonely housewife who can never seem to get away from her husband. She insists that she is not lonely, but he knows this is a lie. Lies are the only things that she insists are true. It confuses him, but at least he always knows when she is telling the truth.

“Not necessarily in a romantic sort of way. It’s like I give a little piece of myself to each person in my life. I can’t do that with everyone, though. It’s like my being becomes tied with theirs, and when they leave, I lose a part of myself. That’s why I don’t love anyone. I’m afraid of losing them and I’m afraid of losing myself.”

He doesn’t tell her that he lost himself a few years ago and hasn’t been able to find himself since. He’s worried that if he does, he might ask her if she will help him look. Besides, it’s embarrassing to lose oneself, much less admit it to someone else.

They talk to the other, but never respond to what’s said. The silence drowns their words. It prevents them from making a connection. They recognize bits of themselves in the other, and when they are together, it’s as close as they ever come to being alone. And after all, what good is loneliness if they are never alone.

On this particular day they are sitting with their backs facing each other. She is sitting on the railing between the lake and the plaza, and he is sitting on the concrete the railing is embedded in. They are never quite on the same level. It's an unspoken agreement, which is the best kind of agreement. It's the kind that you make with yourself as much as you do with the other person.

She likes to sit above him, because she says that her husband talks down to her. He doesn't mind this, because it means that everything she says goes over his head. At times like this he looks up to her. He wants to learn how to talk over people.

Whenever there is silence, he imagines that she blinks out of existence, and that her voice is the only thing that keeps her from disappearing permanently. When he goes a few days without speaking, he starts to wonder if he still exists. On one of these days he writes down everything that he is thinking. He throws it away when he's done, but keeps the pages that bear the indentations of his thoughts, because it makes just as much sense as writing them down in the first place.

"I want to go somewhere where it's warm in the winter. And where the leaves never fall off of the trees. Or where there are no trees for the leaves to fall off of," she says. "If I ever have a tree, I will pull all of the leaves off of it." He thinks this sounds reasonable. He wants to ask her what she'll do with the leaves. Instead, he throws a twig into the water below and watches it float in small circles.

"I don't love anyone," he says, but not loudly enough that she can hear him. He hopes that someday the words will actually mean something.

He sits there for several hours, listening to the silence or occasionally filling it. Eventually it starts to rain, so he gets up and heads back to his room, glancing behind him once

to see if she is still there. He's a little surprised to find that she is, but he leaves anyway, because they've never left or stayed because the other was or wasn't there.

The next time that he sees her, she's crying. Facing away from the lake, she's sitting on top of the back of a bench, so he sits on the seat of another bench a few feet away. He sits little further away from her than usual, because he doesn't know what else to do. He's noticed that comfort often involves touch. But she doesn't like to be touched and he doesn't know what it's like to be touched. What they do is more intimate than touching. She says that touching isn't intimate. If not touching is intimate, then he is the most intimate person in the world. No one is ever touched by him.

He doesn't know what to say, so he doesn't say anything at all. He doesn't like to waste words. He's never had very many of them and he thinks it would be a shame to use all of them on nothing at all. She has a lot of words, but she chooses to keep them to herself. He knows this because sometimes he can see them on the tip of her tongue. He thinks that she knows exactly how she wants to use them, but never when. This is why she has so many words.

He pulls a secret from his pockets and begins to examine it. It's one of his own. He doesn't have very many and he's glad for that. He has to carry around enough secrets without carrying around his own. He wonders if she would feel better if he gave her a secret. But secrets never made him feel better and the only ones that he can give her are his own.

He's never let anyone see his own secrets. When he gets tired of keeping them, he hides them and keeps them hidden until he can't remember where they are. Then they are forgotten. This secret is his favorite secret, though. It's one of his only secrets, because he hasn't wanted to

forget it yet. And even though it isn't as colorful or shiny or big as the other secrets in his box, he still thinks it's beautiful.

Eventually he gets up and sets the secret on the ground between her bench and his own. He thinks that maybe this secret isn't one worth keeping. He's already kept it for too long. He wonders if she will think the same. He wonders if she will notice it at all.

He doesn't see her pick up the secret, but he does see her sit down next to him. He flinches as she approaches. He's not used to having her so close to him. She sits on the opposite side of the bench, leaving a large gap between their bodies. The space between them leaves room for change, though. He's rarely welcomed change. Change has never been kind to him and they usually avoid one another. He wonders if this time will be different. If change comes, maybe she will help him with it.

She's holding his secret carefully. He tries to look at it without looking at her. It's not as difficult as he thought it would be. After a few minutes she places it in the middle of the bench. He doesn't touch it. He finds that he prefers to keep it between them. They don't say anything because the silence says enough.

For the first time, they are on the same level. For the first time, he touches someone.

One day she asks him if he will keep a secret for her. It's the first time that either of them has said something to the other, rather than at them. He's not entirely sure what it means, but he decides that he ought to think on it for a while before he tries it himself. He opens his hand instead.

“Yes.” He says it because it is the best possible answer to a question and he can say it without thinking. He wants to say no, because he’s tired of all the secrets that he has to keep. They’ve grown too loud and they keep him awake at night. He wishes she would ask for a secret instead, but he still says yes.

She reaches into her purse and pulls out the secret. It’s small, and smooth in some places while pointed in others. She drops it into his palm.

It’s heavier than it looks and he almost drops it. But he steadies himself before he can, which is good, because he’s found that people don’t like it when you abuse their secrets—even if it’s on accident. He always takes good care of secrets. It’s probably why he has so many.

She looks at him expectantly, as if she’s waiting for him to find the right thing to say. He doesn’t bother looking for it, though. He never knows where to look, and he always finds the wrong words anyway.

Instead he focuses on the secret. It has the same weight that he imagines her hand has. It looks like a secret, but it feels more like a promise. He hasn’t been given many of those, so he’s glad that it isn’t. He wouldn’t know what to do with it if it was. But he does know that he won’t speak around her again, because he’s never talked towards a person whose secret he keeps. Somehow it just feels wrong.

He stares at it for a moment, wanting to drop it or hand it back to her. He knows the things it will say to him and because of that, he knows that he would much rather listen to her. He gets tired of hearing the same meaning over and over again. He’d much rather listen to something that doesn’t make any sense at all.

Eventually he closes his fist around it, letting it poke against the pads of his hands. He doesn’t look at her until she walks away, and then he watches her until she’s gone.

He doesn't see her again after that. He hears rumors that she moved away, but no one knows where or why. He imagines that she moved into a forest, because it seems like a place where she would be happy. She liked to love the things that she hated. It's a secret he wishes he didn't have to keep.

In this moment, he's glad that he doesn't love anything.

Some days he wishes that he collected ideas. He could show them to more people. But he rarely finds ideas and they almost never come to him. He imagines himself putting the ideas in the box, then taking it places and showing it to the people he meets.

"Here are my ideas," he would tell them. Then he would show them the box that he takes everywhere with him. The one that he doesn't keep under his bed.

He would wait for them to be pleased or impressed, but then they would cock their heads to the side and say, "Oh, is that all you have?" They would open their purses or turn out their pockets, pulling out their own ideas. "These are the ideas that came to me today," they would say. "Sometimes I keep them, but sometimes I throw them away."

People never gave their ideas away. They had no trouble getting rid of them, but they were oddly possessive and would never share them, whether they wanted them or not. Once he found an idea in a trash bin. It was crumbled up and had one or two stains close to the edges. He pulled it out and carefully smoothed it. He planned to take it home with him, but a door slammed and someone came running out of their house.

“That’s my idea,” they said. “Give it back or I will call the police.” So he gave it back to them. He walked a few feet away, then hid behind a light pole to see what they would do with it. They crumpled it up and threw it back in the bin, slamming the lid on it with a clang. It made him sad. He stopped looking for ideas after that.

So instead he kept gathering secrets, because no one seemed to want to keep those and were usually eager to give them to someone else. But they made him feel heavy. Even though he kept them in the box, he still felt heavy.

Once or twice he tried to find the original owners of the secrets. He knocked on their door, holding their secret carefully so that they would know that he had taken good care of it.

“Here is your secret,” he said eagerly. “I’ve kept it for you for so long and it’s in such good condition. I thought you might want to see it again, and maybe keep it for awhile.”

They only looked at him for a moment, and barely glanced at their old secret. “I got rid of that ages ago,” they said. “Keep it. I don’t want it.”

He asked them if he could give it to someone else, because it was such a terrible burden (though he never told them that). But they always said no. And while he could try to hide the secrets or put them back where he had found them, he knew that he could never give them away without permission.

People are always giving him pieces of themselves. But not the important pieces—the ones that mean something. They give him the things that they don’t want back. The pieces that they never wanted from the beginning.

He remembers when he used to give pieces of himself to other people. Sometimes he would ask if he could have the pieces back. People would turn out their pockets, surprised that they had bits of him mixed in with the lint. They would shrug and give them back, leaving him to piece himself back together. He finds that he can't remember where many of the pieces went.

As he grows older, he stops showing people his secrets. He slips them into his pocket, fingering and memorizing their facets until he can put them in the box. He eventually starts storing his own secrets in the box, finding that he can't hold them as well as he used to. The box is never full, but that doesn't stop it from leaking.

At first it's a small trickle that barely stains a corner of the box. When he finds it, he traces its shape with his finger, raising it to his lips when he is done. It doesn't taste like anything.

Eventually the bottom of the box is coated in secrets. They ooze out of the cardboard and start to pool around the edges. Sometimes he tries to scoop them up and pour them back in, but they immediately come back out. He stops collecting secrets after that.

Not long after that, he starts finding new secrets in the box. He tries to hide those. He throws them in muddy puddles, or places them between the pages of books, or slips them in other people's coat pockets. They stain his fingers, leaving ugly marks that settle in the grooves of his fingerprints. When he gets home, he always finds them back in the box.

When he finally accepts that he cannot hide the secrets, he decides to hide himself. He doesn't have to do any work at all, finding that he is just as easily forgotten as his secrets had

been. He doesn't slip into the places that are hard to find, but into places that are in plain view, but rarely seen.

No one comes to collect him.

His absence took up about as much space as his presence. Eventually someone noticed and called the police. They searched his house and found pieces of him, but never enough to fashion another him. Everyone thought that this was best, though. It didn't seem polite to make only part of a person.

They cleaned out his room. Most everything in it was given away to people who deserved it more than he did, simply because they were living and he never had. His personal things—the things that no one had any use for—were packed into empty boxes that would be lost in empty places. When the floor was swept and the bed was taken away, they saw the small box. It was covered in dust and its thin walls showed its age or perhaps its misuse. It stuck to the floor stubbornly, but eventually they were able to pry it away from the floorboards. They opened it and looked inside, then closed it and didn't think about it again.

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