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the Collectors

MATT BELL



# *the Collectors*

*Runner-Up*, 2008 Caketrain Chapbook Competition

Brian Evenson, Final Judge



# *the* *Collectors*

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MATT BELL

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**CAKETRAIN**  
[a journal and press]

# CAKETRAIN

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## Homer Stands, Falls, Stands Again

HOW LONG HAS HOMER BEEN SITTING HERE IN THE DARK? A decade, a year, a day, an hour, a minute, or at least this minute, the one where his eyes pop open and his ears perk up, listening to the voice howling in the dark. Somewhere in the house, Langley is yelling for Homer to help him. Has, perhaps, been doing so for some time now. Homer leans over the edge of his tattered leather chair—the chair that once belonged to his father and has been his home since he lost his sight—then sets down his snifter, the brandy long ago emptied into the hollows of his throat. He stands, legs shaky at first, and for a moment he thinks he will fall back into the chair's ripped excess. He finds his balance, takes a step or two forward, then loses it, crashing forward onto the damp floor covered in orange peels and pipe ash, the remains of the only forms of nourishment he's allowed. Homer calls out for Langley, who calls out for him,

and together their voices echo through the twisted passageways and piled junk of their home. Homer's eyes long gone, everything has become touch, life a mere series of tactile experiences. He pushes himself upward, his hands sinking into the orange peels that litter the floor, their consistency like gums pulled away from teeth. He's disgusted, but has been for so long already that this newest indignity barely registers.

In a loud voice, he tells Langley that he is coming, but he doesn't know if that's true. There's so much between them, much of it dangerous, all of it theirs.

### 3 A.

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## Inventory

SOME OF THE ITEMS REMOVED FROM THE COLLYER MANSION include hundreds of feet of rope, three baby carriages, rakes and hoes and other gardening implements, several rusted bicycles, kitchen utensils (including at least four complete sets of china and several potato peelers), a heap of glass chandeliers that had been removed from the ceilings to make room for the piles and the tunnels, the folding top of a horse-drawn carriage, a sawhorse, a room full of dressmaking dummies, several portraits of both family members and early century presidents like Calvin Coolidge and Warren Harding, a plaster bust of Herman Melville, a kerosene stove placed precariously close to the stacks of newspapers in Homer's sitting room, a variety of children's furniture and clothing (despite the brothers being childless bachelors), the chassis of a Model T Ford that Langley had apparently been trying to turn into a generator, hundreds of

yards of unused silk and other fabrics, several broken clocks and piles of clock parts, one British and six American flags, piles of tapestries and rugs, whole rooms filled with broken furniture and bundled lumber. There was also the matter of their inheritance from their father, which included all his medical equipment, plus his thousands of medical and anatomical reference texts, greatly expanding the already large, impenetrably stuffed Collyer family library. All in all, the accumulated possessions of the Collyer brothers added up to over one hundred fifty tons of junk, most of it unremarkable except for the advanced state of ruin and decay that infused everything. More notable items are specified below, but it is worth remembering that all had long ago turned to trash.

There were also eight cats, an emaciated dog, and countless numbers of vermin. By the time Langley was found, the rats had eaten most of his face and extremities and the cockroaches were beginning to carry off the rest.

## What Was Done About Your New Neighbors

IT BEGAN WITH THE NEWSPAPERMEN AND THEIR ARTICLES, their tales of the gold stashed in your halls, of stockpiled gems and expensive paintings and antique jewelry. None of it was true, but none of it surprised you either. The reporters have never worried about the truth before, not when it came to you and yours.

So the articles run, and then *they* come: not your true neighbors, but these new ones who replaced them. The first brick through the window is merely irritating, the second more so, but by the third and the fourth you've had enough and board up all the windows. You have to go out at night and scavenge more wood, despite Homer's protests, his pleas for you to use the piles of lumber already in the house. He doesn't understand that what you've gathered already has purpose, is stock against future tragedies.

The bricks are just precursors, of course. There is a break-in, and then another. The first time you fire a gun in the house, Homer screams for two days, refusing to calm down no matter what you say. You count yourself lucky that he's gone blind, or else he might have come down himself, might have seen the blood soaked into the piles of newspapers bordering the basement door.

Afterward, you move even more bundles to the basement, stacking newspaper to the ceiling, layering it six feet deep. Heavy and damp and covered in mold and rot, you know that no burglar will be able to push his way through the newsprint. It is your family's history that they are after, the city's that will keep them out.



## How I Came In

I CAME IN THROUGH A HISTORY OF ACCUMULATION, through a trail of documents that led to you, Langley, and to him, Homer. I came in through the inventory of your home, through the listing of objects written down as if they meant something, as if they were clues to who you were.

Obsessed, I filled one book and then another and then another.

What I learned was that even a book can be a door if you hold it right, and I held it right.

When I arrived at your home, I did not climb the steps or knock on your door. Instead, I waited and watched and when you came out I followed behind you.

I watched your flight through the dark night air, watched as you pretended skittishness in the streets. I followed you from backyard to alley to dumpster, lingered behind as you

scavenged for food and pump-drawn water and shiny objects to line your halls. I watched you take each new prize and clutch it to your breast, and when you were ready to return, I followed you inside.

I want to tell you now that I am a night bird too, a kindred breed of crow.

Like this bird we each resemble, I am both a scavenger of what has happened and an omen of what is to come.

Despite your fears, I am not your death.

Despite this assurance, you will not be saved.

I promise you, I will be here with you when you fall, and when he fails.

After you are both gone, I am afraid that I will still be here.

### 3 B.

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## Inventory

THIRTY HARLEM PHONE BOOKS, ONE FOR EACH YEAR FROM 1909 to 1939: Individually, they are just another pile of junk, but read as a collection they are something else. The names change from Roosevelt to Robeson, from Fitzgerald to Hughes, a process that doesn't happen all at once but slowly, like the mixing after a blood infusion. By the 1920s, Miller and Audubon and Rockwell are gone, replaced by Armstrong and Ellington and DuBois. Read like this, they form yet another type of wall, one that is both harder to see and yet obvious enough once you learn the color of the bricks.

## Homer Hates the Weather in New York City

WHEN IT RAINS, WATER COMES IN THROUGH THE CEILING, creates trickling waterfalls that cascade downward from floor to floor, from pile to pile. The wood of every chair and table feels warped and cracked while nearby newspaper bundles grow heavy with mold and damp, their pages slippery with the ink leaking downward into the carpet. Things float in the water, or worse, swim, like the rats and cockroaches and whatever else lives in the high press of the stacks. Other floors are similarly obscured by the often ankle-deep torrents, hiding broken glass, sharp sticks, knives and scalpels, even the dozens of light bulbs Langley broke in a fit when the electricity was first shut off for nonpayment.

Once, Homer remembers, it snowed in his sitting room, the flakes settling on his face and his clothes. Even with the freeze in the air, he had only Langley's word to assure him it

was snow that fell that day. Reaching out his tongue, he feared he'd tasted ash instead, but said nothing as his brother laughed and refilled their snifters.

## Inventory

INSIDE MUCH OF THE HOUSE, THE ONLY NAVIGATION STILL possible was through tunnels Langley had carved into the piles of garbage that filled each room. Supported with scraps of lumber and stacked newspaper or cardboard, these tunnels appeared to have collapsed frequently, forcing Langley to start over or to create alternative paths to the parts of the house he wished to access.

Most of the tunnels were wide enough that a person could crawl comfortably through them, and in places even stand tall enough to walk in a crouch. Others, especially on the second floor, were much smaller. Langley might have been able to fit through them, but not the heavier Homer. The tunnels were the closest thing the house still had to doors, and beyond them were secrets that the older brother had most likely not shared in decades.

Langley once claimed to be saving the newspapers so that when his brother regained his sight he would be able to catch up on the news. It wasn't a funny joke, but Langley wasn't a funny man. The earliest newspapers in the house date from 1933, the year Homer went blind, and they continued to be delivered until weeks after the house began to be emptied and inventoried. Even allowing for twelve years of uninterrupted delivery, there were still far more newspapers in the house than anyone could have expected. They were stacked and bundled in every room, in every hall, covered the landings of staircases and filled closets and chests. Even if Homer had somehow learned to see again, this was never going to be the best way to rejoin the world.

## Homer Takes His Medicine

AFTER HOMER LOST HIS SIGHT, HIS BROTHER PUT HIM ON A diet of nothing but oranges, convinced that the fruit would restore his sight. Homer wasn't so sure, but he couldn't go out and get food himself—only Langley ever left the mansion, and even then only at night—and so Homer had no choice but to take what was offered. Every day, he ate a dozen oranges, until his breath stank of rind and pulp, until the undersides of his fingernails were crusted with the sticky leftovers of his meals. Langley told Homer that his sight would be restored if he could just eat one hundred oranges a week, but he couldn't do it, no matter how hard he tried. It was too much of one thing, a deadening of his taste buds as complete as the deadening of his irises, of his corneas, of his optic nerves which still sent useless signals down the rotted pathways of his all too useless brain.



## 2 B.

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# The Only Beasts You Ever Trapped

YOU STARTED MAKING THE BOOBY TRAPS AFTER THE break-ins began, and never stopped revising and improving this new class of inventions. You rigged tripwires and deadfalls, hid walls of sharpened broomsticks behind the moist surface of your newspaper tunnels. Poured loose piles of broken glass beneath intentionally weakened floorboards. Made other traps and then forgot them, until you were unsure about even your own safety.

More and more, you had to tell Homer that maybe the best thing for him would be to just stay in his chair.

The trap that got you was a trip wire in the second story hallway that leads from the staircase to the master bedroom. You were hurrying, and you grew careless for just one moment, just long enough to forget the tripwire that released the trap, burying you beneath a manmade boulder of your own design, a

netted mass of typewriters and sewing machines and bowling balls hung from the ceiling months before.

As the boulder crashed toward you, you moved fast, almost escaping. Only your right leg is now pinned and broken, but that's all it takes to doom you. You cannot see behind you well enough to know how bad the wound really is, but even through the mold and must you can smell the blood leaking from your body, soaking the already ruined hallway and mixing with the carpet's slick, wet slime, until it becomes impossible to tell which part of the mess is you and which is the house itself.

I D.

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## Homer Is Merciful

IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG FOR HOMER TO LOSE HIS BEARINGS and get lost, turning randomly at each intersection in the tunnels. Without sight, there's no way to check the few clues that might still remain, like the pattern on the ceiling or the moldings in the corners. He reaches out with his hands, stretches his fingers toward whatever awaits them, every inch a lifetime's worth of danger. This space is filled with tree branches, a bramble slick with rot and sticky with sap. Homer recoils at the sound of movement nearby—insect or rodent or reptile, Homer can't know which—and with his next step he catches something beneath his foot, the snap of vertebrae or else carapace muffled by the sheer bulk of the room. He stops for a moment to stamp the thing out, to be sure it is dead. Somewhere his brother moans in the stacks, and there's no reason for whatever creature lies beneath his heel to suffer the same.

## Justifying Your Gathering

WHEN YOUR FATHER LEFT YOU AND YOUR BROTHER AND your mother, he took everything with him. He took his medical books and his anatomical drawings and his specimen jars. He took his suits and his shoes and his hats. He took his golf clubs and his pipes and his records, and when he was gone, your mother scrubbed the house from top to bottom in her grief, removing every last particle of dust that might once have been him. He left her, and she eradicated him, and for twenty years he stayed out of the house.

And then he returned, disguised as gynecological equipment and ornate furniture bundled in the back of a truck, as something that could be bound into chests and sacks and bundles of paper.

He took everything that might have been yours, and just because it eventually came back doesn't mean you didn't hurt

during the years it was gone. Now you have him trapped, boarded behind the doors of the second floor, and he will never escape, not as long as you live. Every stray hair still clinging to a shirt collar, every scrap of handwriting left in the margins of his texts, all of it is him, is who he was. It is all that's left, but if you keep it safe then it is all you'll ever need.

### 3D.

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## Inventory

THE MASTER BEDROOM WAS FOUND FULL OF CORRESPONDENCE, tied into bundles organized by month and year. The letters begin in 1909, intensifying in frequency until, a decade later, there was a letter arriving almost every single day. After this peak, the correspondence slowly tapers off before stopping abruptly in 1923. The bulk of the unopened mail is from Herman Collyer, each letter a single entry in a series of entreaties dating from his abandonment of his family to the year of his own death. Whether Langley ever showed his brother these sealed envelopes is open to debate, but his own stance on his father's writings is more definitive: At the time of his death, each letter remained an apology unasked for, unwanted and unopened.

## Your First Hoard

WAS INHERITED, NOT GATHERED. YOUR FATHER DIED AND suddenly all his possessions were yours, spilling out of your rooms and into your halls. As if you knew what to do with the evidence of a lifetime. As if there was any way to sort the essential from the unnecessary. As if you could just throw away your father, or sell him to strangers.

And then, not long after your inheritance arrived, you started adding to the piles yourself. Homer didn't understand—of course he didn't—but that didn't stop you, because you knew that what you were doing could work, could solve the failure of your family, if only you gathered enough.

With enough raw materials, maybe you could build a better father, or else gather a mother up in your arms, like you do with all these piles of porcelain knick-knacks. Design a family from things best left behind. Replace birth with theft, life with

hoarding, death with destruction. This house is a body, and you and Homer move within it. Rooms like cells, floors like organs, and you two—like what, exactly? Pulses of electricity, nervous messages, the tiny sparks that one day might bring this place to life?

Listen—

Somewhere, Homer is crying again, isn't he?



## Where I Am in Relation to Where You Are

THE THIN BIOGRAPHY TELLS ME NOTHING, DOESN'T HELP ME penetrate past the birth and death dates, the one extant photograph, the mere facts of your father leaving you and of your mother dying and of the great divide opened between you and your brother by his blindness. I am divided from you too, by decades I could not cross in time. The only way I feel close to you is when I read the list of objects you left behind, because I know that in your needy acquisitions there is something of me.

Are you listening?

You need to breathe, Langley. *Breathe.*

I E.

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## Homer Remembers His Face

HOMER CRAWLS ON HIS HANDS AND KNEES, SEARCHING FOR signs of his brother, whose voice is like a cricket's, always out of reach, coming from every direction at once. Homer is hungry and tired and wants to go back to his chair, but for now he perseveres. His brother would do it for him. His brother has been doing it for him. On each of the thousands of days since Homer went blind, Langley has fed him and clothed him and kept him company—has kept him safe from the intruders Homer isn't supposed to talk about—and now on the day when Langley needs his help, he is failing. Homer's face is wet but he doesn't know if the wetness is tears or sweat or something else, something dripping from the ceiling and the stacks. He doesn't think he's crying but feels like he might start soon, might start and never stop. Whatever it is, he doesn't reach up to wipe it away. His hands are filthy, filthier than anything that might be

there on his face.

His face: Once, before his blindness but after he stopped being able to look himself in the mirror, Homer dreamed he was a man made of mud, a pillar of dust, some delicate creation just waiting to be dispersed or destroyed, protected only by his brother's attentive watch.

It was just a dream, he knows, not motivation or reason for staying in his chair as long as he has. Not the cause of his nothingman life. He even wishes he could go back, forget he ever left the chair, ever left the sitting room, ever reentered the world of pain that had always been there waiting for him. Now his bathrobe is torn, his hands and feet bloodied and bruised, and his face—

Over the years, he has forgotten his face, the shape of the thing, the angle of his nose and the thickness of his lips and the scars or lack of scars that might distinguish it from another. He has forgotten what it feels like to see a brow furrow in pain, to see a mouth contort in frustration and anger. He has forgotten, but he is trying to remember.

Whatever his face is, floating in the dark, around his eyes, it is wet again.

## Inventory

FOURTEEN PIANOS, BOTH GRAND AND UPRIGHT. A CLAVICHORD, two organs, six banjos, a dozen violins (only two of which are strung), bugles, accordions, a gramophone and an exhaustive record collection (including well-worn works by Paul Whiteman, Fred Waring, Sophie Tucker, and Blossom Seeley), two trumpets, a trombone, and what appears to have once been an upright bass before it was smashed to pieces. Both brothers were accomplished musicians, and it is easy to picture them sitting and playing music together, and later, after the lights went out and they began to fight, apart from each other, their only points of connection the accidental melodies they made in the dark.

I F.

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## Homer Plays the Piano

AFTER HOMER TRIPS OVER THE BENCH IN FRONT OF THE parlor's piano, he decides to sit down and take a break, resting his fingers on the keys. Wherever Langley is, he's quiet now too, or else something worse, something Homer doesn't want to think about. He feels bad enough for not hurrying, for not being able to find his brother and save him. His lungs ache and his ankles throb, the arthritis in his leg joints a lightless fire. He centers himself in front of the piano and starts to play, then stops when the sound comes out wrong. He sighs, starts over with more realistic expectations.

The piano is almost completely buried by the mounds of trash that fill the room, the heaps of paper and metal and wood, the objects breaking down again into their constituent parts. Homer's fingers move like gnarled ghosts, flickering over the keys, producing only an approximation, the memory of music.

The sound comes out of the piano muffled and muted. It does not fill the room but goes into it instead, Homer's fingers driving each note through the piled garbage and into the rotting walls like a nail, like a crowbar, like something meant to hold a thing together, like something meant to tear it down.

## Methods and Motivations

I'M SIFTING THROUGH THEIR POSSESSIONS, CRAWLING THROUGH the ruins of their lives searching for those lost, for remains, for the remains of a family. I am in the master bedroom, reading the letters they never read. I am in the parlor, wiping the grime off a generation of portraits. I am in the hallway, setting thousands of mouse traps all in a row.

I am on my hands and knees, scrubbing the floor without success, as if there could ever be enough soap to remove this particular stain.

There is so much to see here, but only in fragments, in peripheries. Every step across the floorboards brings this house of cards closer to collapse, and so I must move backward and forward in time, balancing the now and the then, until I have found what it is I am looking for.

I am a collector too, but it is not their possessions I have

clutched close and hoarded.

I am holding Homer's face in my hands, staring into his milky eyes, whispering to him as he searches in starved sadness. I am kneeling beside Langley like a detective, my bent knee slick with his blood, looking through the rote clues to discover what happened to him.

I am conducting an investigation. I am holding a wake. I am doing some or all or none of these things.



## The Last Crack in Your Foundation

YOU HOWL, HURLING YOUR BROTHER'S NAME DOWN THE corridor like a curse. For hours now you have heard his bumbling and still he is no closer to you, his blind search for you as failed as your own cursed attempt to reach the master bedroom. You picture him crawling forward on his hands and knees, unable to see through to the end of each tunnel, unable to know how much farther there is still to go.

You picture him trembling and paralyzed, unable to go on, and you are not wrong.

For years, he has kept to his chair in the sitting room, leaving you to deal with the collapse of the house, the danger it poses to all that you own. The house is both protector and destroyer, both safety and threat, and it is you who tips the scales, not him. It is you who braved the streets night after night to bring back food and water, to gather all the things

essential to your lives. Homer knows nothing of what you've had to do, how you've crept from one halo of lamp light to the next, avoiding the dark men who rule the streets now. You see their eyes sometimes in the dark, peering at you from front steps and street corners, hurrying you on your way through this ruined city that was once your home.

The pain is too much. This time when you scream, your brother answers. He's still too far away. The slow sticky warmth emanating from your crushed thigh has reached your crotch, your belly. It's easy to reach down and feel the slippery copper heat of your blood. There's so much, more than you expected.

You close your eyes. Not much longer now.

Even surrounded by all your possessions, dying is still so much lonelier than you expected.

Whisper your brother's name. Whisper the names of your father and your mother. Whisper my name, and pray that I might save you, but please understand that even though I have already changed the truth merely by being here, I will still refuse to change it that much.

XX.

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## Who Is Waiting for You and What Will Be Left Behind

RATS SCAMPERING. RATS CLIMBING. RATS DIVING. RATS gathering. Rats hiding in little rat holes. Rats gnawing on and rats gnawing through. Always assume that somewhere there is a rat gnawing.

Rats breathing out little clouds of hot carbon dioxide. Rats transmitting diseases. Rats rabid, making tiny foams in tiny mouths. Rats at home in your home. Rats making nests and planning to stay.

Rats surrounding you in the dark, making plans in their own language, all peeps and squeaks and chirrups and chatters. You don't have to understand the words to know what they mean.

Rats, watching you suffer.

Rats waiting to carry off everything, even your eyebrows and eyelashes, the lobes of your ears. Eventually, one will loosen your teeth one nibble of gum at a time. Rats will carry

off your fingertips and the fat in your cheeks. Rats are willing to eat the same thing for a whole month.

Rats, wanting some little bit of you inside of them.

Rats, carrying off more than a mouthful. Rats making more than one trip.

Rats getting closer, a thousand skittering sharp-clawed things moving like a brown flood, like a tide coming in, threatening to tear you away.

Rats, just waiting for you to die.

Rats, not willing to wait much longer.

I G.

---

## Homer Loses Faith

THE HOUSE BUCKS AND SHUDDERS, SETTLES OR SHIFTS. HOMER stumbles but doesn't fall down, knows that if he does he might never get up. He stops and listens to the creaking of the floorboards, the scuttle of the rats. Says, Langley?

Homer wants to yell his name again but doesn't. It's been a long time since his brother answered, and without sight there is no light and no marker of time. Homer doesn't know if it's morning or night, if a few hours have passed or if it's already been days. He's so tired and so alone, lost inside his own house, remade now in some crooked shape his brother has envisioned. Lacking the will to move, he thinks about all the things Langley tells him when to do, because he cannot tell himself: Homer, go to sleep, it's midnight. Homer, wake up, I've got your breakfast.

Homer, it's time to play your violin.

It's time for me to read to you.

It's time for a drink, time for a smoke, time to eat another orange.

Homer's so tired, and he just wants to be back in his chair, but for once Langley needs his help and Homer doesn't want to let his brother down.

The thing is, he doesn't know if Langley is still there to be helped.

2 F.

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## Your Weighty Ghosts

NO FATHER WITHOUT MEDICINE, WITHOUT DICTIONARIES,  
without reference texts full of once perfect answers slowly  
rotting themselves wrong.

No mother without silk, without satin, without wool and  
cotton. No mother without a closet full of shoes, a hundred  
high heels spilled out into a trapped nest of spikes.

No brother without a piano, without a bathrobe, without a  
chair, a pipe, a mouthful of oranges and black bread.

No self without these ghosts.

No ghosts, without—

No. No ghosts, or rather:

No ghosts, no ghosts except in things.

They surround you, press closer, waiting for the rapidly  
approaching moment when you too will be just a thing, an  
object, a static entity slowly falling into decay. That moment is

so close you can smell it, like the breath of rats, like the rot of oranges, like blood and dirt mushed into new mud.



4D.

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March 21 (Early)

I KNOW YOU WERE HURRYING THROUGH THE SECOND FLOOR hall because you finally knew what you needed to do to complete this place, to bring an end to the endless gathering and piling and sorting. You were hurrying because it had taken you so long already, and you didn't want to waste another second.

Even now, at the very end, you tell yourself that if only you could have completed your project then it would have been enough to stop all this. It could have been different. You could have taken Homer and left this house. You could have started over somewhere else, which is all you've ever wanted.

But you were hurrying, and you were careless, and now it's too late.

Your lungs heave, trying unsuccessfully to clear their bloody fractures. I wait, and when you're still again, I reach

down to touch your face, to turn it toward my own.

With my fingers twisted around the angle of your jaw, I say, Homer isn't coming.

I say, Tell me what you would have told him.

I can see the sparks dancing in your eyes, obscuring the last things you'll ever see, so I say, Close your eyes tight. You don't need them any more. Not for how little is left.

For these last few moments, I will see for you as you saw for him.

In the last seconds of your life, I will tell you whatever you want to hear, as long as you first tell me what I need.

I say, Tell me how to finish the house.

I say, Tell me what I have to do to get out of here.

And then you will, and afterward I will lie to you, and despite my whispered assurances you will know that I am not real enough to save you or him, and then it will be over.

## Homer Finds the Farthest Room

HOMER EXPERIENCES THE LACK OF GUIDEPOSTS, OF LANDMARKS, of bread crumbs. He knows his brother is dead or dying and that finding him will not change this, but even though he wants to turn around he's not sure how. He tries to remember if he climbed the stairs or if he crawled upwards or if he is still on the first floor of the house, just twisted and turned inside it. He tries to remember the right and the left, the up and the down, the falls and the getting back up, but when he does the memories come all at once or else as just one static image of moving in the dark, like a claustrophobia of neurons. He wants to lie down upon on the floor, wants to stop this incessant, wasted movement.

He closes his eyes and leans against the piles. His breath comes long and ragged, whole rooms of air displaced by the straining bellows of his lungs. He smells the long dormant

stench of his sweat and piss and shit, come shamefully alive now that's he's on the move again.

Somewhere beyond himself, he smells, if he sniffs hard enough, just a hint of his orange peels, the last of their crushed sweetness.

Homer opens his eyes, useless as they are, and points himself toward the wafting rot of his last thousand meals. He holds his robe closed with his right hand, reaches out into the darkness with his left. He puts one foot in front of the other, then smiles when he finally feels the rinds and tapped ash begin to squish between his toes.

He slips, and falls, and crashes into the tortured leather of his favorite chair. He pulls himself up. He sits himself down. He puts his heavy head into his hands.

3 F.

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## Inventory

IN THE LOCK BOX: THIRTY-FOUR BANK BOOKS, ALL FROM different banks. Irving Trust Company. Fillmore-Leroy. Liberty National. Park Avenue. Seaboard. Albany City Savings. Temple Beth Israel. Alfred Mutual. ABN. Alliance. Amalgated. American Bond and Mortgage. Jefferson Savings. Associated Water Companies Credit Union. Assumption Parish. Canaseraga State. Dry Dock. Eighth Avenue. Fallkill. Queens County. Glaser Mercantile. H&K. Village. Industrial Bank of Ithaca. Kings County. Manhattan Trust. State Dime Savings. Bank of Brooklyn. Oneida. Rockaway. Union National Bank of Friendship. Beacon Federal. Whitehall Trust. The Zurich Depository.

A total of three thousand dollars and eighteen cents. The very end of a fortune, kept in Langley's name, inherited by Homer, and then, after he died too, taken by the state.

March 21 (Late)

HOMER SQUIRMS ON THE HIGH THRONE OF HIS LAST DECADE, every pose the wrong one. His back aches and his legs jerk no matter how adjusts himself. Everything is physical, every craven desire a need for his brother, for his abandoned Langley. Homer would give everything away for a glass of water, would go into equal debt for a snifter of brandy or a pipe or even one of Langley's goddamn oranges. Anything that might bring relief. Anything that might bring with it absolution or forgetfulness. He licks his lips and tastes mud. He puts his fingers to his mouth and sucks and there it is again. His face, his beard, his clothes, all are mud. Homer puts his hand back in his mouth, sucks and swallows until it is clean. He repeats the process with his other hand, and then he cleans himself like a rodent, using his hands to bring the dirt off of his face and neck and arms to his mouth, where he devours it. Homer's throat

chokes shut. He closes his eyes to block out the last blurs of gauzy glamourised light that his blindness still allows. He is inside the house and the house is inside him, like a nesting of labyrinths. Lacking the tools to solve himself, he gives up, and while the process starts in this one second it will take weeks to finish. He does not cry out again. He does not beg. He does not want again, not for food or water or companionship. He could, but he does not. This life has been an abject lesson in the limits of wanting, and he has learned all he cares to learn.

## William Baker

WILLIAM BAKER BREAKS A SECOND-STORY WINDOW FROM atop a shaking ladder. William Baker peers into the darkness and then signals to the other officers that he's going in. William Baker uses his nightstick to clear all the glass out of his way. William Baker climbs through the window into the room beyond. William Baker gags but does not vomit. William Baker turns his flashlight from left to right, then back again, like a lighthouse in a sea of trash. William Baker thinks, Not a sea but a mountain rising from a sea, a new, unintended landscape. William Baker begins to take inventory in his mind, counting piles of newspapers, broken furnishings, books molded to floorboards. William Baker puts his hands to a wall of old newspapers and pushes until he sinks in to his wrists. William Baker finds the entrance to the tunnel that leads out of the room, then gets down on his hands and knees and crawls



through. William Baker passes folding chairs and sewing machines and a wine press. William Baker passes the skeleton of a cat or else a rat as big as a cat. William Baker turns left at a baby carriage, crawls over a bundle of old umbrellas. William Baker crawls until he can't hear the other officers yelling to him from the window. William Baker is inside the house, inside its musty, rotted breath, inside its tissues of decaying paper and wood.

William Baker disappears from the living world and doesn't come back until two hours later, when he appears at the window with his face blanched so white it shines in the midnight gloom. William Baker knows where Homer Collyer's body is. William Baker has held the dead man like a child, has lifted him from his death chair as if the skin and bones and tattered blue and white bathrobe still constituted a human person, someone worth saving. William Baker counts the seconds that pass, the minutes, the days and the years. William Baker thinks it took a long time for this man to die. William Baker has no idea.

## Artie Matthews

ARTIE MATTHEWS DOESN'T UNDERSTAND HOW A HOUSE CAN smell so bad throughout every inch of it. Artie Matthews thinks the garbage should have blocked the smell at some point. Artie Matthews smells it on the sidewalk, smells it in the foyer, smells it in the rooms he and the other workers have cleared and he smells it in the rooms they haven't. Artie Matthews wears coveralls and boots and thick leather gloves and a handkerchief over his face and wonders if its enough to protect him from what happened here. Artie Matthews has arms that ache and knees that tremble from yesterday's exertions as he climbs the stairs to the second floor. Artie Matthews throws cardboard and newspaper out a window. Artie Matthews throws out armfuls of books that reek of mold and wet ink. Artie Matthews pushes a dresser to the window and empties its contents onto the lawn below. Artie Matthews wonders who these clothes

belong to, wonders if there is a wife or a mother or someone else still trapped in the house, or if this woman left long ago. Her brassieres and slips and skirts fall to the ground. Artie Matthews watches another worker trying to gather them up before the pressing crowds can see them. Artie Matthews wonders why the worker is bothering, why anyone would worry that the people who lived in this house have any dignity left to protect. Artie Matthews thinks that what they are really removing from the house is shame made tangible as wood and steel and fabric.

Artie Matthews will find Langley Collyer, but not for two more weeks. Artie Matthews will find him buried beneath a deadfall of trash just ten feet from where his brother died and wonder why he didn't yell, why he didn't ask Homer for help. Artie Matthews will not realize that Langley did yell, did howl, did scream and cajole and beg and whimper. Artie Matthews will not be able to hear how sound moved in this house before all the walls and tunnels of trash came down. Artie Matthews will never understand how a man might cry out for help only to have his last words get lost in the deep labyrinth he's made of his life.

## Inventory

BESIDES THE LETTERS, THERE WAS ONE FINAL OBJECT FOUND in the master bedroom, hidden beneath a canvas tarp. It is a model, a doll house, a scaled approximation of the brownstone home. Inside, the house's smooth wood floors are stained and then carpeted, the walls all papered or painted with care. There is an intricately carved staircase that winds to the second floor, its splendor shaming its murderous real life counterpart. Tiny paintings hang on the walls, painstaking recreations of the smeared and slashed portraits found downstairs. Miniature chandeliers hang from the ceilings in nearly every room.

There are tiny beds, tiny tables and chairs, tiny pianos. There are even tiny books with tiny pages and a violin so small that it would take a pair of tweezers to hold its bow.

In the downstairs sitting room, there is a version of what Homer's chair must have looked like before the leather tore

open, before its stuffing leaked onto the floor.

This is a house without traps, without tunnels and stacks and collections that never seem complete.

In the absence of photographs, this is perhaps the closest thing to the truth of who these people used to be.

The wood floor around the model gleams, its surface scrubbed and polished, contrasting with the filth and rot of the rest of the room, left unprotected by the tarp.

Just outside this circle, there are dozens of prototypes for what would have been the model's finishing touches: Four figures, repeated over and over in different mediums. A man and a woman and two small boys, rendered from wood and clay and string and straw and hair and other, less identifiable materials. All discarded, cast aside, and no more a family than anything else we found lying upon the floors of the Collyer House.

4E.

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## Decay (After)

I WANTED TO LEAVE AFTER BOTH OF YOU WERE DEAD, OR AT least after your bodies were bagged and covered and taken out into the sunlight that awaited you, that had always been waiting. Instead, I am still here, walking the emptying halls. Without anyone to talk to, I become desperate for connection, for these workers tearing down your tunnels to see what you had become, what you might have been instead. I tap a new father on the shoulder so that he turns and sees the child's mobile hanging in a newly opened space, its meaning slanted by your own childlessness. I open a medical reference text to the page on treatments for rheumatoid arthritis or diabetic blindness, then leave it on top of the stack for someone else to read, to note what is absent, to see that nowhere on the page is the cure of the hundred oranges you prescribed your brother. I whisper explanations into curious ears, explain that what you

had planned to do with all these piles of lumber was to build a house inside the house, to build a structure capable of holding a family together, something the previous one had failed to do.

I try to explain to them how close you were, how close I am, how with just a little more help I could solve this puzzle, but they don't understand. They are not trying to understand you. They are trying to throw you away, and they are succeeding.

Before they finish, I go up to each nameless sanitation worker and show them a facet of your lives, a single dusty jewel plucked from the thousands you had gathered.

To each person, I offer your history of objects, an account that will clash with the official version, with the supposed facts already being assembled by the historians and newspapermen. I want them to see you as I saw you when I first came to this place, before I started telling your story to my own ends.

I finally leave just minutes ahead of the wrecking ball. All your possessions have been carted away to be burned, or else tied into garbage bags and discarded. What took you decades to acquire took mere weeks to throw away, and now all that you were is gone. Despite the many opportunities to take whatever I wanted, I have left all of your possessions behind, with only a few exceptions: I have taken one of Homer's orange peels, with hopes that it might help me see, and I have taken the makings

of one of your traps, on the off chance that it might protect me better than it did you. I have left everything else for the historians and garbage men to do with what they will. The workers just want to throw you away, but the historians who follow will want something else altogether. They will gather you into inventories, into feature articles and well-researched biographies. They will annotate and organize. They will hoard the facts, organizing them into timelines and tight paragraphs of passive prose, then publish their theories in journals and books before reciting them on television shows and in packed lecture halls. They will collect more of you and Homer than anyone should need or want, and then they will collect some more, never satisfied with what they have, always greedy for more facts and more theories.

Once, I wanted to be just like them.

Once, I too built a trap for myself out of a few obsessed pages, and when I fell in, it crushed me too. Sometimes, I am still there, calling out for help to anyone who will listen.







Matt Bell is also the author of a previous chapbook, *How the Broken Lead the Blind*. His fiction has appeared in *Conjunctions*, *Meridian*, *Keyhole*, *Barrelhouse*, *Monkeybicycle*, and other journals. He lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan, with his wife Jessica, and can be found online at [www.mdbell.com](http://www.mdbell.com).





“‘Even a book can be a door,’ suggests the narrator of Matt Bell’s *The Collectors*. What you’ll find behind this particular door are two shaken and shaky brothers losing their tenuous grip on reality, slowly filling their house with decades of booby-trapped detritus and precious trash. *The Collectors* is a compelling portrait both of the way a heated mind can come to recreate the world and of how fascination with such a mind can end up being its own sort of trap. A wonderful, obsessive novella.”

Brian Evenson, author of *The Open Curtain* and *Last Days*

“Matt Bell makes of the pathology of the miser, hoarder, or packrat an emblem of the obsessive life and makes his reader understand how the compulsion to collect may be only the mind’s seeking to construct for itself a refuge from an intolerable and otherwise inescapable reality. Bell’s fiction excites pity for those who live, as though walled up, in ruins of their own necessary construction. I admire *The Collectors* for the certainty of its prose and its unflinching observation of a most profound alienation—envying the first; fearing the second; and unhappily aware that artifice—no matter how splendid—is inadequate to ameliorate the despair.”

Norman Lock, author of *A History of the Imagination*

“Matt Bell’s lifesick pair, Langley and Homer, shell-shocked under a pile of newspapers, are disquieting, hilarious, and—in that strange way that makes Beckett’s and Kafka’s characters so urgent—entirely recognizable. Bell has written a beauty.”

Deb Olin Unferth, author of *Vacation*

*The Collectors* was the runner-up manuscript in the 2008 Caketrain Chapbook Competition, as judged by Brian Evenson.