

QUAD



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Page 1 image: Greer Dauphin, *Void III*, graphite and charcoal on paper, 3 x 4' (.91 x 1.2 m).

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Paul Blom

EMPTY

When I walk into the kitchen to raid the fridge, I notice that the hamster is dead. Duane's just laying there on top of the woodchips in the little cage we leave sitting on the kitchen counter. His food dish is half-full, his water bottle half-empty. For all I know, he could be sleeping, but when I thump the cage to startle him, he doesn't stir. Not even when I open up the top and nudge him with my finger. I sigh and start walking down the hall to my little girl's room.

Her mother has decided she's getting old enough to begin playing with make-up. I'm still not so sure, but I keep my mouth shut, even now, when I find her standing in front of the mirror on her wall, struggling to brush on some eye shadow. The make-up is old, stuff my wife doesn't use anymore. The caked-on eye shadow makes my daughter's eyes look almost bruised. Her mother's gone grocery shopping, her usual Sunday chore, and won't be back for another half hour.

Standing at the threshold, I knock on the open door. "Sweetie, Daddy's got something to tell you." She turns to me and smiles, a clownish grin revealing bright red smeared along her lips as well as three of her front teeth. The fourth was exchanged with the Tooth Fairy a few days ago for one whole dollar. I force a smile and sit down on the edge of her bed. The sunlight coming through

The caked-on eye shadow makes my daughter's eyes look almost bruised.

Her bright yellow clock with the puppy dog face is grinning at us across the room...

the window is glaring against the pink-and-white bed sheets. As she runs over and climbs into my lap, I glance at the framed photos that rest on her nightstand, photos of me and my wife with our daughter, family photos at all the places a daddy is supposed to take his little girl.

"Do I look pretty, Daddy?" she asks me. In my moment of hesitation, she changes the subject. "Will you be at my soccer game next Saturday, Daddy?"

This startles me and I look her in the eyes. "Of course," I say, smiling the fatherly smile. "I'm always there, aren't I?"

She giggles and I'm sick of this waiting. "Honey," I say, slipping her hand into mine, trying to prepare myself for what's about to come. "Honey, Duane's gone." I pause, searching for comprehension in her eyes. I've never been any good at reading children. "He's dead, sugarplum."

Her bright yellow clock with the puppy dog face is grinning at us across the room as the second hand makes circuit upon circuit. She begins to cry and wraps her arms around me so tight she's pinching my love handles.

I should be crying with her. I should feel sad, not because some hamster has croaked, but because *she's* sad. The tears running down her face and smearing her make-up, the sobs that shake her body and cause her to gasp for breath, these things should be enough to make me shake as well. I should be touched, moved, something, anything. But I just can't seem to care. As I sit there, my arm wrapped around her, holding her, giving her something to cling to, I feel nothing. I kiss her forehead because that's what daddys do, and then I stare at the clock on the wall, the minutes slowly ticking past. The puppy dog is leering at me, and my stomach growls as I remember the leftover Chinese take-out in the fridge.