

Basement Story

Austin Bunn

*A pitch black
volume of space.*

*I stagger through
the dark, some minor light.*

AUSTIN

The game
was called
Death.

 Seriously.

My twin brother
and I made it up
when we were boys.
One of us
would rig up the basement
with all kinds of spooky shit:
creepy notes,
written in ketchup,
like “YOU WILL DIE SOON”
and “SATAN IS HUNGRY”
and the big kitchen knives
and beloved stuffed animals dangling in nooses—
like my brother’s weirdly Jewish
plush dog named “Sam Brockamitz.”—

Then, the other brother
would open the door
*you couldn’t see anything
you never knew
what to expect*

and you walked down
into the basement
with a single book of matches
knives ketchup favorite things
hurt, destroyed, ruined.

And
you went
through the dark
very
slowly
and
you were
afraid.

At the end
you were supposed to
die
interestingly.

I die interestingly.

SFX: A phone rings.

Two years ago,
in early morning
my mother calls me—
Mom, mom
Whoab. Whoab... WHOAH.
Do you know what time it is?
I'll tell you what time it is, mom.
It's darkness o'clock!

I turn on a lamp.
The stage, revealed.
A series of floor lamps. A sheet
covers a tower of bureau drawers,
the height of a person.

She tells me
she'd sold it.
She'd sold our house
my childhood home.

The tremors from
the disease
made the stairs in the house, like,
impossible for her.
It was all too much space
to clean
to care about.
Our town has been changing a lot
anyway. New people, wealthy people.
I heard the realtor,
on her cellphone
—when she thought
no one was looking—
call our house,
“a tear down”.

A tear down.

And my mom asked me
to come home and
clear out the basement.
There were
some things down there
that she couldn't bare to see.

*I approach the sheet.
It glows from within.*

See ... the basement was the universe.
Dark and windowless and ours.
The beanbag, the TANDY computer
where I programmed my first videogame
“VIETNAM”
(which, no matter what, you lost automatically)

and the second long-distance phone line
—remember those?—
and Mom’s books,
her “missing” copies of *The Joy Of Sex* ...
Fear of Flying
and *The Naked Ape*
(which, actually has nothing to do with sex and was
really boring)
And let’s not forget ...
the Death game.

I should say:
Colin wanted to be there.
He lives in Chicago.
But he’s not allowed.
He has trouble ... adjusting.
He doesn’t like to remember.
Who he was.
Or what he did.

*I remove the sheet.
Beneath: the drawers,
spilling with crust.*

I think we all have our basement stories.
The story below the story.
The person
beneath
the person.

SFX: camp sounds.

It started in 8th grade.
Boy Scout Camp.
Also known as:
Hell In Shorts.
We both went.
And for two weeks

we watched the other kids
in our troop
light a camp fire
with hair spray.

Whoosh!

And drop daddy-longlegs
on the skillet.

Sksksksket!

Sweet!

“Pain Olympics.”
They called it.
But Colin,
Colin was great.
Thrifty, reverent, wise.
Naturally,
everybody
hated him.
In the middle of the night,
while he slept.
the other boys took his cot
set it in the showers.
And turned on the cold water.

*From the drawers:
Colin's Boy Scout shirt.
Soaking wet.*

I just watched—
like I watched
the Pain Olympics
and the comets of
fire that torched our
food—when
Colin woke up drowning.

I wring out his Boy Scout Shirt.

The next day,
when we came back

from
whittling
canoeing
whatever the hell
we did trying to grow ourselves up.
The tents of our troop
were all burned to the ground.

Whoosh.

Hairspray on plastic.
He learned it from them.

*I place
the shirt
into a backpack.*

“Sensory input disorder.”
That was the diagnosis,
I think they made it up.
Not, say: revenge?
Mostly,
he was stray voltage.
I became his caretaker.
Like, his ambassador to the world.
Like, you couldn’t just touch him.
He had to touch you first.
Or he went haywire.

A tennis racquet, discovered.

Around this time
my mother
started dating again.
This was four years after the divorce.
And Angus came into our lives
Angus was this big time
American Studies professor
at Rutgers
and his entire field of research

was The Jersey Devil.
The Jersey Devil,
which was this winged goat creature
that took first born children
and flew them to Atlantic City.

Like the *chupacabra*
meets Sinatra.

Angus looked like David Crosby
He had a moustache
and he only drank tea.
He wanted to teach us
tennis so badly
he *paid* us.

Racquet into the backpack.

I'm pretty good at tennis.
Thank you Angus.

And my mother
as you could imagine
fell in love.
One weekend
Angus had spent the night
in the morning,
he made us breakfast
with his dick
sticking out
of his pajamas
—a thumb in
burned grass—
and Colin and I
just stared.

(beat: the stare)

That afternoon,
Colin and I
we were in
the basement

listening
when he told
my mother
that he was in love
with two women at the same time
and maybe the other woman
marginally more than her.
It was complicated,
good complicated,
he wanted to explore
his feelings with this other woman
and we heard
our mother weep.

“I’m going to go make us
some tea,” Angus said.

And Colin
went upstairs—
where Angus
ruffled his hair
like he knew who
the hell
we were—

and Colin
poured
the boiling water
into Angus’s lap.

After that
after
the
uhm
[police]
he had a therapist
who made him keep
a diary.
a tape diary

I discover tapes in the cruff . . .

SFX: the tape diary recordings.

*“This is my diary.
And the first entry
will be about
hatred.”*

And he did.
Except.
See,
that’s me.
That’s my voice.
I kept it for him.
And nobody
knew
what he
was really
listening to.

*SFX: The Sounds of Horror,
people burning alive
screams, horrible
sounds.*

The tape goes into the backpack.

Which was this record
called “Sounds of Horror”
that had people
getting burned
getting buried alive
(until)
my mother came
into the basement
and found *The Joy of Sex*
and *Fear of Flying*
and this

map he'd made
on graph paper

The map.

of our school.
And all the Xs.
With names
next to them.
And, at the top,
“the death game.”

Map into the backpack.

My mother
fired the therapist
— I could stop
making the tapes, *finally* —
and she said,
where are the pills?
And they said,
there are *pills* for him,
but there are *places* too.

I don't know
what makes the difference,
why
a person turn out one way
and another person
(spun into the world
at the same time)
turn out another.
My brother is an inch
taller than me.
He is a lot angrier
than me.

Everybody
lives above
their own cellar.

I share mine.
The night before
Colin left,
he came into my room
and said,
“I’m afraid.”

And I’d never heard him
say that before.

So we lay on my bed
and I told him
the world
would be like
our game.
With all these traps.
And scary things that
people put there
for you.
Maybe even
you put there
yourself.
You’ve just
got to walk through
the dark

very

slowly.

I didn’t know what I was
talking about.
I made him a tape.
One I made walking around
our neighborhood,
pretending
I knew things
that I didn’t.

A discovery: the last tape.

And I found it.
In the pile
in the basement.
He'd left it behind.

And now
I have it
with all the rest of his
things. With me.

I zip up the backpack.

Recently,
a lawyer called me.
Colin hurt somebody.
Again.
And now they want
his whole story
the evidence
against him.
I told them
it was all there
in the basement.

At 17 Walnut Street.

Except the new owners
went bankrupt
halfway-through
their *teardown*.

So now,
there's just
a hole in the ground.

There's just a basement
open to the air.

And every last shadow
is gone.

*I run out.
A lunge of light.*