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**Half Out Where** Joseph Aguilar

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Winner, 2013 Caketrain Chapbook Competition

Tan Lin, Final Judge

**CAKETRAIN**  
[a journal and press]

# CAKETRAIN

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Box 82588, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15218

[www.caketrain.org](http://www.caketrain.org)

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Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN 978-0-9888915-8-6





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## **3 Meadows**

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Constant Meadow

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We view a film called *Mixed Occasions*. Your promise's corollary offers my body more business. We don the gloves we knitted. We sway in the laboratory. Our labors are brigades. I test the mattress but sleep on the rug. In the morning I pass out at the restaurant.

I am fired from the restaurant. We comb failure through fire. I lay a river. The stepfather gives me a dusting. I wear the gloves and stare into a pit on the internet. I watch you layer makeup from behind. The stepfather forces me into alcohol duty. We view a film called *Amygdala*. I suffer your tongue.

The boy latches to a newer heaven. They are magic in the window.  
The stepfather gives lavish commands. I choose one warrior from  
hundreds of boys. I layer on the makeup. I can't see out through  
my lack of fame. The stranger warns me I'll die one day.

We mix the mark. We lack enough ambiguity to farm the moment.  
My benefactor and sponsor kill each other. I toil with a troubled  
species inwardly. I apply the boy's cold cream in the dark. Nuance  
always lies. I am relieved by furniture. We graduate to softer and  
softer goals.

We can't find the main land. I ease your rudder to my lip. We listen to magic until I ratchet up your nerve. The stepfather shoves fruit in the freezer. The boy catches me together on the sofa downstairs.

You cringe when I promise the boy fruit. I hide from the step-father's blow. You deviate from your usual magic. You utter the sacred phrase in the house. You label each fold on your forehead. I am rehired at the restaurant to organize ingredients.

Time scuppers fear out. We anoint each other and are late to appointments. The stranger repeats his doubt. I remember halls where I swallowed the dark. I want to be seen with you. Outside flies the summer standard. I unburden myself of buttresses.

I catch you in the confusion of your teen age. I note the manner of your weir. The stepfather would hawk it if he could. It would be bottled and sold. I should gather gold. I should concede the stranger's prediction.

The television reveals what we were. I seek magic. I don't understand your handkerchief display or why feeling bribes our thought. The stepfather confiscates the gloves. I exist in the night at the restaurant where bells would signal crisis.

We view a film called *Final Beard*. You panic and hide behind language. Later you uproot greens and pretend you live somewhere hot. Outside you seem open to magic. You appear prone to faults. A plague sweeps us indoors where we only live on the internet.

I dowse water and mark its groove for gold. I remember how to erect a cone with no structure. You misconstrue structure. You try the path to the stranger's bench. You state your timid and familiar statement. The stepfather drools in the rain. The rain is magic.

We make light of the stranger's prediction. We view a film called *Finger Violence* 2. One manual instructs about magic emergencies and another manual assists with magic emergencies. The stepfather soaks in the salt of the tub. At night I drive until I'm drunk. We fall on our knees in the road.

We discuss the skull on the horizon named “the boy.” The stranger warns that an operation could fail. Still we wed our careers. I cradle your border. At the restaurant they ask if I am skilled enough to continue to work at the restaurant.

The stranger waits on my lawn. We play a mock play involving dolls. I have no patience for the boy today. I wear a sweater that repulses him. Your rifle is broken and you take the drum. Your drum is broken and you take a spouse. The stranger laughs at our plan. We are young. We are caught in machinery.

You run your clothes to streamers. You make a sacrifice. I haul the boy to the restaurant. I attend a dance where we pass so near an enemy I feel significant. The stranger warns to brace for robbery.

Our anatomy isn't good enough. The sun saddens the bench where I receive the stranger's wisdom. He keeps the worst quarters. I match the cape with the wrong pants. I am fired from the restaurant.

Gold becomes a philosopher. You stop for any criminals we know.  
Our alliance is a delicate sauce. We lie in the bed of the river I lay.  
Later you send me a gilt pin of a bee. You erect the pole as a souvenir.  
Magic may raise another boy.

Evening fog billowing around the restaurant makes you nervous. You rearrange the boy so you can see me better. I try to anoint you on the couch. I accidentally palm a sharp idea. We watch a film called *The Stranger*. On the road you unburden your fruit. I wonder what happens to gold panned only for fun.

Flesh catches painfully in the zipper. I can see the email approach from the roof. I try to appear aggressive. I wait underneath smoking while you hunt for the boy. We relocate the oven to the porch after supper. I dust the hospital for gold listening to a song with a terrible hammer solo.

I arrive carrying our gold. I can hear the stepfather drying himself behind the door. You suggest avoiding a disaster zone. The restaurant wishes to interview me for a position. The magic nears but never arrives. We are in gloves.





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Stapleton House

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## I

IN STAPLETON HOUSE, there are no rooms, only corridors: a gilded corridor, a humid corridor, a corridor of ice, a corridor to a corridor, a corridor that fans out to many corridors, a darker corridor to a brighter corridor, a corridor of payphones, a corridor with a floor of high-tensile-strength woven trampoline fabric, a cyan corridor, a corridor with a glass floor through which another corridor shows, a crimson corridor, a corridor marked like a tennis court and bisected by a net, a corridor with no floor and a rope bridge over the chasm, a gridded corridor, a corridor with a belt-driven rubber floor revving on, a corridor with World War II bric-a-brac displayed on glass-encased shelves recessed into the walls, a corridor of artificially warmed rosy pulsing synthetic flesh, a corridor of toilet stalls, a corridor full of low-slung ornamental

hammocks that disintegrate if sat upon, a corridor of refrigerators filled with meats and cheeses, a corridor with pillow-softened walls, a sticky corridor, a corridor of chandeliers, a corridor with a fine ankle-deep white sand, a sealed water-filled corridor that must be swum through, a soundproof corridor, a corridor of echoes, a mirrored corridor, a corridor fogged with rain, a lemon-yellow corridor, a corridor that slants down to stairs down to a burrow to an annex to a channel that spirals ever up.

One must move slowly through Stapleton House, as many of the floors are varnished or tile-laminated or moist or icy or sanded smooth or otherwise slick.

From the outside, Stapleton House appears to be a clean modernist structure built of interlocking pre-cast concrete block with light relief ornamentation and placed into the middle of a desert. The years of arid wind have worn the house's exterior etchings into unrecognizable geometrical patterns: a hint of a circle here, a trace of a pyramid there.

Stapleton House is 62 years old.

Stapleton House covers 15,000 square yards.

Stapleton House was privately subsidized by a benefactor named Stapleton. The names of its lead architect, structural engineers, assembly teams and other principals were expunged from public record as a contractual stipulation. Including labor, land,

property taxes, licensing fees, equipment rental and building materials, the construction of Stapleton House cost \$8,210,033.

Near Stapleton House, a creek full of graywater runoff cuts through sun-cracked ground, surrounded by piles of shale.

There are 317 wasp nests in the eaves of Stapleton House.

The mean annual air temperature outside Stapleton House is 68.7 °F.

The nearest city with a population greater than 30,000 is two hours away by car.

Earthquake activity in the area is 23% greater than the U.S. average.

In the six decades since Stapleton House first opened, it has not achieved anything near a sustainable profit margin, yet it stays fully staffed and welcomes visitors like me year after year.

## II

I GO to Stapleton House after you leave me for a vacation to the Pyrénées-Atlantiques to visit the house of your friend M. and M.'s father and brothers.

Long ago, in high school, M. had been an exchange student to whom you'd lost your virginity when he stayed for a time with

your family, and you kept in touch with him. M. is your close friend even now. You would tell me what you remember about him: M. has blue eyes, for example. In photos his father's house looks like a castle—in fact, it was used as a convent centuries ago—and it shows the accumulation of its age: ivy and creeping vines, stained glass, battlements, a clerestory, tapestries, banquet tables, paintings, trapdoors, busts of saints. The ocean is visible from the window of an ivy-covered turret. You would talk about it until I didn't want to anymore. You would revisit the subject.

I pay the ticket-booth operator \$100 for the day pass. It's a brilliant morning and the concrete surface of Stapleton House shines white. In the heavily padded lobby, the guard leads me to a brass door that closes behind me, and I am alone in a tunnel carpeted from floor to ceiling in lush red shag that swallows my footsteps. I reach my hand out to trail through strands on the wall and my hand comes away with a layer of dust on it. There is heaviness in the air, the smell of mold, and I wonder how often Stapleton House is cleaned. There are only the sounds of a trickle of water from someplace over the ceiling and a muffled circular saw chewing through wood and the light rattling of machines at work in other corridors I guess are far away.

I push myself through the corridor of ice on my knees to avoid injury. It leaves my hands red and shaking. I pull the sleeves of my jacket over my fists, like gloves.

I stumble through the corridor of darkness toward the light at the other side. It smells like a lawn.

When I enter the lemon-yellow corridor my shoelaces are grass stained. I imagine you in the pasture by the sea. The light of the sun shows the fuzz along the line of your jaw. Your forearms have more hair than mine.

I bypass the corridor of water for the corridor of burlap.

I vomit twice in my hands in the corridor of meat.

I sit exhausted in a wicker chair in the middle of the corridor of prisms. The refractions of light on the walls dizzy me.

I lay curled around myself in the corner of the crimson corridor. It is like a womb or a throat.

In the corridor of light, I must close my eyes against the brilliance and place my hand along the wall to help myself through. A high tone from the light keens my ears.

In the corridor of baths, the humid air has a stagnant edge that stays in my mouth. The wallpaper is peeling away. The floor shows mold in its seams.

In the corridor of payphones, I use my phone card to call the number you gave me. A man answers. I can barely hear him. M.'s father? M.? I ask for you.

“Bonjour?” Your voice sounds far off, tinny.

“Bonjour!”

“Hi!”

“It’s you! How are you? In France.”

“I got a message just now from M.’s three little brothers, all at the same time.”

“At the same time.”

“I can’t believe you called me.”

“Why?”

“We had to take the dog to a country hospital here.”

“Is he dead?”

“You don’t take dead things to hospitals.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Usually.”

“What happened?”

“Where are you now?”

“I’m in Stapleton House.”

“Hello?”

“I’m in Stapleton House. You know Stapleton House. I went out there.”

“...”

“Hello?”

“...”

“Hello?”

“The Japanese game show...”

“What?”

“Two times...”

“Hello?” I say. “Hello?”

“...”

Static crackles, gives way to dial tone. I hang the phone in its silver cradle, then put the earpiece to my ear again. Dial tone. I hang it up. I have pressure in my bladder.

In the corridor of thin aluminum, my shoes leave faint half-moons in the floor.

Finally, in the corridor of crystal, I have to relieve myself. I go in the corner. I run away from the pool as it spreads.

In a darkened corridor, the floor drops and I am plummeting down, down, down. It is a tube. My center falls away. I can't see. I'm upside down. I'm forward on my stomach with my hands out. I hear my scream. I tumble onto the padding of the lobby floor. The guard helps me to my feet.

Outside Stapleton House, the day is purpling into dusk and the dust of the desert spreads around its cholla, its leaning saguaro, its shale, its yellowed tufts of brittlebush fluttering gently in the wind. In the car, the leather of the driver's seat hurts my thighs through my jeans. I take off my jacket and I spread it underneath me to sit on. I start the car. The ticket-booth operator opens the gate for me. She raises her hand as I pass.

I can sense Stapleton House getting smaller behind as I drive into the hills, though I don't look in the mirror to see the second when it finally goes out from my line of sight.



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Her Ideas at Night

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Q: Three months?

A: The friend I want to tell you about, at night she might think to drop the printer on her head or drive the temple tips of her glasses through her eyes or pour the boiling kettle water down her throat, but when she finds out she has only three months left, I believe she will realize that in the extremity of her fixation on how she could die, she has not thought much about how to approach the days that have always been limited: maybe everything before came too easily, or maybe in her youth it seemed that month after month would arrive and arrive—sun, moon, sun, glass after glass of water, joints popping, hairs to pluck, sandwiches, doorbells, shampooing and handshakes—on and on until she would have to forcefully halt their arrivals.

Q: One month?

A: Three months, one month, neither fixed enough to let her see herself pressing through all possible vectors, weather weathering, plans swerving away from hope, each major event, each minor entertainment, each smell on the wind, though perhaps a month becomes easier to picture against another month already finished, like the month she spent lifeguarding at the Presbyterian summer camp where during the introductory meeting each staff member was told to throw a beanbag to another, and she caught hers from someone later forced home by a family emergency, and one morning they had been served pancakes with blueberries and the fruit felt too hard and too cold, and later she had not objected to being kissed on a canoe by someone whose face she can't remember, and on the last day of camp she had told a very small boy climbing the diving board he was too small to dive, but he ignored her and he dove in beautifully, and the light lit the water so completely that the body inside of it seemed to flutter apart.

Q: One day?

A: I would say she orders a seafood burrito at the place near the office and she stares at the pink or perhaps gray flesh of the shrimp tucked in the rice until she can't finish, and I would say she can't

envision what wild shrimp look like swimming in the water, or whether shrimp swim or only scuttle over the ocean floor, and maybe she gets lost in the vagary of what thrives in seawater and when she wants to imagine a shrimp can only picture a cartoon lobster hurrying across a cartoon beach with its cartoon claws up in attack, and she feels terribly apart from nature, and she decides to go home without telling anyone, and then she thinks the phone must be ringing, so she returns, but the phone is not ringing, and she searches the internet for shades of yellow and she changes her cover photo to the paler shade of yellow and she switches her profile picture to the darker shade of yellow, but the yellows seem too similar to each other, so she finds a shade of violet for the profile because she thinks that in complementary colors cool negates warm, though yellow and purple may not be the right pairing after all, and yellow can signify, depending on context, heaven, wheat, or jaundice, and purple might be royalty or a bruise, and anyway nobody notes the changes she has made.

Q: Five minutes?

A: I believe that she does not move, she decides not to move, I mean physically, but no inward movement either, no thoughts at all, motionless, though I believe she becomes aware of shaking more than slightly, actually quivering to her fundament, and the air

feels cold in her teeth, and gravity compels her like when she once stood outside in the dip of the lawn in her backyard, she may have been five years old, unmoving near the trees that held themselves up to where the top of them spread overhead, and she allowed her body no movement, even in the finest smallest parts, and she waited as the wind settled her hair over her shoulders, and she raised the long bones of her arms out to the sides, and when she took a breath I believe she tried to expand and contract her stomach with enough subtlety to not allow herself any flexing out, not visibly, this is what she has assigned for herself, and after a while it seems as though the air may thicken, even freeze slightly, the clouds may darken, the color of the grass may deepen, and though she does not let herself adjust her gaze to check, in her periphery she may see a scatter of rain, or snow, or fog, or leaves, or light, or the cells of her own eyes, the film of birth, and she strains out to the air with all of her skin, to move without moving, to open all of herself out to the world, and a squirrel hurries up the leg, up the trunk, and over the branch of the arm.





#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Portions of *Half Out Where* have previously appeared, sometimes in a slightly different form, in *HTMLGiant*, *Caketrain*, *Mothers News*, *Dreamboat*, *Web Conjunctions*, *Passages North*, *Elimae*, and *The Iowa Review*.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe Aguilar lives in Ohio and teaches at the College of Wooster.





Literature **\$9 US**

“To read *Half Out Where* is to walk warily through the fields of a helpless present, fated and fateful, where the possible and the magical flatten together under your very feet and the ground becomes rutted with sound that bucks and throws you. These poems and stories are distrustful, and with reason. They tighten and spit. But they haven’t given up on amplitude. They want you to see them, and they want to be seen with you.”

Kate Schapira, author of *The Soft Place*

“In Joseph Aguilar’s poem films and prose laboratories we farm charged moments. We oscillate inside their oracular machineries. We absorb in the flicker between pages such sonic precision and syntactical grace we are able predict our final five minutes of life.”

Eric Baus, author of *Scared Text*

“*Half Out Where* is a complex thing—beautiful, lyrical, and strange—that defies distillation or classification. Aguilar’s book redefines itself with every surprising page. Challenging, tender, and new, it will stay with you long after you finish it. A truly wonderful debut.”

Matthew Kirkpatrick, author of *The Exiles*

“A sentence is a unit of space and time. Joseph Aguilar knows this, just as he knows that within the unit of the sentence, time and space are malleable aspects subject to magical condensation, wormhole like associations, and reality-warping applications of grammar. The sentences in *Half Out Where* are like rays of light from a dying star that contain the history of an alien world, only the world is our own, and the aliens are us.”

Ben Mirov, author of *Hider Roser*

*Half Out Where* was the winning manuscript in the 2013 Caketrain Competition, as judged by Tan Lin.

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Cover image by Marta Macedo and Danny Ivan

