TIMOTHY
MCSWEENEY
HAS AN ENDANGERED SPECIES
FOR A SPIRIT ANIMAL.

BOX BOY.

BY AMY HALLORAN

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George had cardboard ribs. The rest of his body was regular flesh and bone, but his ribcage and sternum were brown corrugated cardboard. Every few weeks the cardboard dissolved, pushing through his skin in a sloppy mess. Without ribs to limit the size of his lungs, they threatened to explode.

Luckily, George's mother had enough sense to hold his chest when it puffed. Ages ago, George's uncle had died by bursting, ruining his living room. When George was born and she felt her son's soft chest, she knew she had to protect him. She didn't mind. George became her doll, sleeping beside her under her hand, spending his waking hours on her hip, tied into an apron.

George's mother took her charge in stride, but she was awed by the responsibility. Her hand was the only thing keeping her son alive. If she left him for a minute, his alveoli could stretch like infinite pastry dough. His lungs would fill with too much air and he would burst. Then she would find him like his uncle, decorating the living room in a million pieces. George became her shadow. When he got too big for her hip, he was never further from her than her left hand, which she kept inside his shirt.

George's father resented the proximity but what could he do? He was genetically accountable for his son's bad ribs. When the boy crowded their bed, the man took the nursery as his room, squishing himself into the unused crib. Looking at the balloons and clowns

on the wallpaper, he felt guilty and lonely, but the bars of the baby bed felt good against him. When he slept, he dreamt that the wooden bars were his son's ribs, pressing into him. The dreams sometimes tricked him into feeling happy. In his sleep, he clutched the wood, ready to make them into new ribs for his son. But soon enough he saw that he was a grown man in a baby's crib.

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George didn't know enough to be mad that he was different. He didn't want to be anyone but who he was, a part of his mother. Every seven days he molted his ribs and helped his mother scrape them into the garbage. He was a good boy, her company, her charm. Together they laughed at his funny chest, covered with mushy cardboard. It was just a joke.

George and his mother lived a long life, longer than his father, whom they buried in the cemetery when George was forty. The undertaker had trouble stretching the man long in his coffin; his legs wanted to curl up to his chest. Finally, the undertaker put concrete blocks on the body overnight. The next morning, the man was straight enough for the funeral.

The mother and son missed the man. His ghost snored, rattling the blinds in the nursery, and that was a small comfort to them. The sound was not unlike the noises that came from George's chest before an episode. The cardboard strips in his lungs fluttered like fat blinds in a breeze.

"Here comes a change," George said as his ribs pushed up, like a geographic event.

"You are your own planet, my boy," George's mother said time after time. "Constantly changing. I should take you to school, give the kids a lesson in biology and rocks."

"Yeah," George said, but they never went. They kept to themselves, to their circuits of shopping and visiting the library. When they weren't gathering supplies or preparing meals, George's mother read to him in the living room. She held the book in one hand. As always, the other hand rested on his chest.

People didn't judge their attachment. George was never a Mama's boy, he was Box Boy.

"Hello, Box Boy," said the librarian when he put his books on the counter for renewal.

"Hi, Box Boy," said the bag boys at the store. They wished they could be strange, too, like Spiderman or Superman or George. He was the town's own cartoon character, a hero. Everyone knew about George's uncle, and how George would end up, like him, as an uneven coat of paint on the ceiling.

George's mother worried no one would recognize his remains. She knew she would die first and he would go next, splattering her stiffening body and the furniture. She wanted her son buried with her. She made a sign and put it on the front door, warning all who might enter that if they found her dead, her son was gone too, in maybe too fine a spray to be noticed. The sign noted that George had a condition that made him dependent upon her.

By the time their deaths arrived, the sign was faded and illegible. But her fears were unfounded. People knew how George would go. And when he did, they knew how he went.

Though the will directed an exact path to the graveyard, there was speculation throughout the town about how to bury George. Could anyone gather George from the walls and floors and into a container? Why not burn down the house and carve a stone with his name along with the name they gave him?

Because of the will, said the lawyer.

The boys, grown and young, who admired George and his transformations, carefully removed him and his mother from the living room. They scraped the scraps of him into an urn that fit inside her coffin.

The undertaker, however, could never get her hand to rest at her side. No matter how he tried, it hovered over the urn, ready for George's next change.