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STUCK



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for James Alan McPherson

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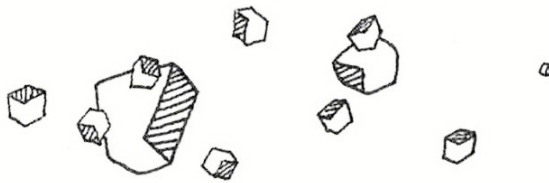
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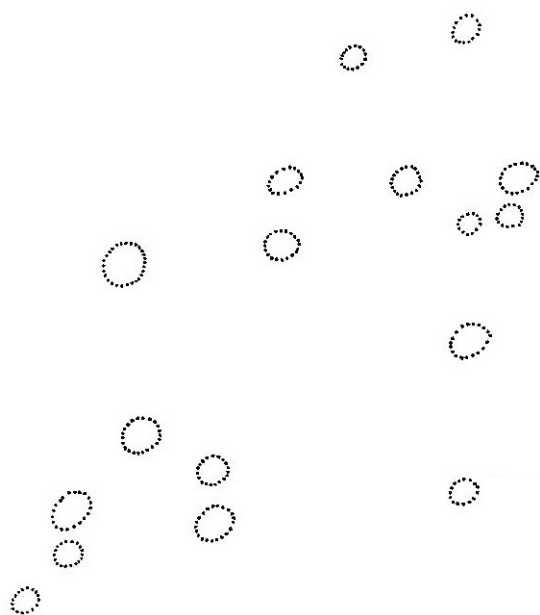
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THE CROCODILE
Leanna Petronella

Steer your lily pad to the crocodile. Rub her knobby ears.
Stroke her long savage nose, that old swamp dolphin.

This is the listless mud
of another bad idea. This is another toad trapped in thorn cradle,
rocking madly through the midnight.

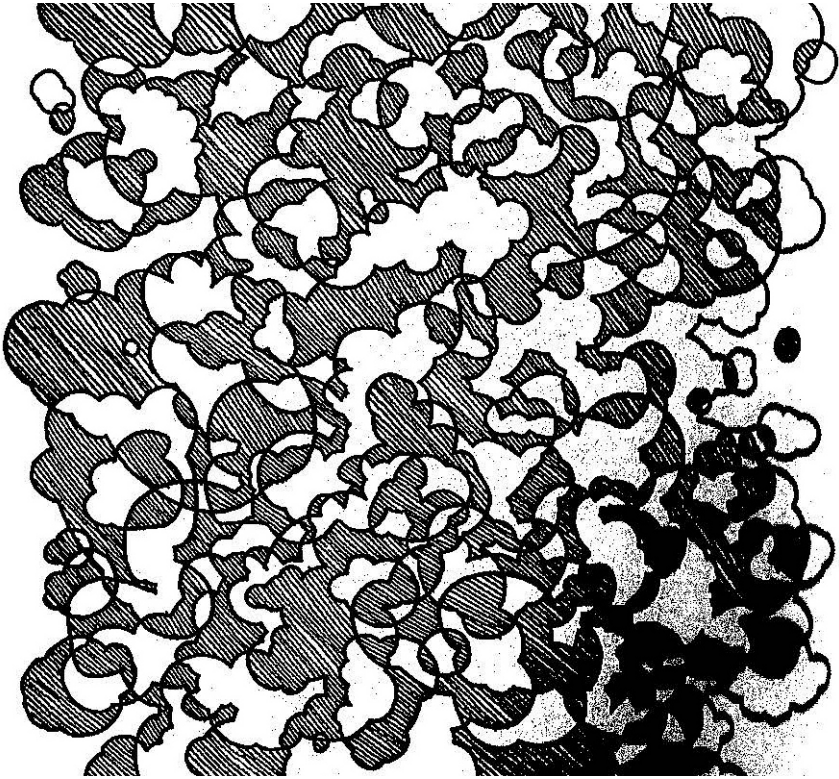
Just follow the crocodile.
She is so fresh-faced dinosaur. She is so grass cheeked
and snake lovely. She doesn't even have a voice,
but oh, how she pricks herself up and down her jaws,
as if her own private question marks were rows and rows of teeth.

The crocodile knows how she sounds.
But she doesn't see how the fireflies have dimmed,
 until all of them are gone.
She thinks that an owl is tree bark clawing into bird,
and underneath her cloak of scabs,
she is tender, white, and green.

The crocodile bursts into juice.
A fisherman floats by and throws down a line.
He catches brain after brain and strings them loosely together,
 rebuilding the crocodile.

When the crocodile's blood clots, it looks like spinach.
When small bright lizards dot the bank,
she is a swollen angry dream.
She's changed into her lime dress for you.
She's swaying in the mirror, with her camouflage butter thighs.

Will you place your arms around her
or touch her muscle wrapped in fat?
She is a mottled shoulder pushing through the weeds.



THE SCREW THAT HOLDS THE WORLD TOGETHER
Collin Blair Grabarek

Eins

In time I melted my bullet into a screw. Slot head, naturally. Cone point, of course. And screw purists will gasp at this: *non-regulation in size*. Das ist richtig! A large, fat screw. The sort Americans put in the necks of their movie monsters, though mine was not for necks. I used it to hold the world together. But here I've already gotten ahead of myself.

Where and when did this bullet meet me? Where: In the kneecap. When: On 22 January 1944, when the Allies surprised us at Anzio Beach and the air stank of scorched grass and rocket fuel. The bullet announced its arrival first with pressure, then with grinding pain, and it continued to announce its arrival for a long while.

It ended my time in the war, that bullet. Also, it relieved me of several kilos. In a field hospital somewhere near the Gustav Line, a doctor I do not know but do hate put a saw through my thigh.

—Did you save the leg? I asked the nurse through morphine haze when I awoke.

—No, Private Schornhorst, but we saved the bullet.

—You are angels.

—I said the *bullet*.

—You are humorless angels. May I take the bullet home, for a souvenir?

(That, too, I intended as humor, but damn that Dummkopf of a nurse, not moments later she handed me a smushed metal mushroom flecked with brown swirls of my own blood, nestled in a clean white box.)

Soon they sent me home to Frankfurt and Hitler thought better of living and the war ended in Europe. Celebrate, Deutschland! Die Sonne scheint für dich. Or okay shield your eyes, lower your eyes and hunch along like your team lost some important football match, only stop glaring at me so. Do you think *my* smiles come easily? Do you know what *I* have lost? On top of the leg?

Oh, but I knew they could not help it. They missed their Führer and his big ideas, some of them. The others missed parts of their city bombed to ashy ruin, or their families. I felt just like them, despite my best efforts to hide the fact, for I had lost *very* much. Specifically three things: mein Papa, meine Mutti, und meine kleine Schwester.

But never mind that. Never mind the terrific cavities in our hearts, for we had much to cheer over. Welcome to Frankfurt! Willkommen in der schönen amerikanischen Zone. (Only mind your step around the rubble.)

What a wonderful capitalistic American Yankee fantasy we lived in 1946. For me, the American Yankee fantasy meant projectionist work at a local movie house. The theater was so near my flat that I could hobble to work on my crutch. And fringe benefits? Let me tell you! In lieu of my first few paychecks, I took home a 35mm projector and old, faded reels of my favorite films (horror, mostly—I liked monsters the best) with the promise of more reels to come.

How lucky I was. How happy. Ich bin glücklich! I told myself as I rocked in my rocking chair and watched my movies in the comfort of my own flat. Ich bin glücklich! as the monsters flickered on the pink and flowered wallpaper of my living room and the projector chattered and I yelped at the frights. Ich bin glücklich! as I listened to the flat above, to some married man's baby squeal for him or his wife who loved him. Some unlonely married man with two legs. Before long I developed a rhythm.

Rocking forward: Ich bin

Rocking backward: glücklich.

The one thing to break that rhythm? My landlady, Rosaline Heffelfinger. Like me, Rosaline was just twenty-three years old, but the war had bestowed upon her a position of great power. Her father had owned the building before der Führer shipped him east to work in a munitions factory in 1943. No one heard from him again, and Rosaline's mother failed to recover from the loss. Rosaline would never explain further than that, just: Mother failed to recover from the loss. Who knows what that meant? I never saw her mother, but I saw Rosaline quite often.

She wore her brown-blond hair pinned this way and that. So many pins! Her hair dipped and swooped in strange ways because of them. I believe she owned but one outfit: a yellow, ankle-length dress, a yellow sweater, and a pair of yellow-sequined shoes. Strange that amongst those yellows, her eyes gleamed pale blue. Also, her teeth lined up as straight as magic (and not yellow in the least, thank God). So schön, ihre Zähne! I could smell them even, a smell like pure chalk. At least those teeth provided me some sublime pleasure whenever she would barge into my flat and interrupt my movies and demand I do this or that.

—Oliver, pay the rent, please.

—But Rosie, I believe I have three days remaining on the grace period.

—Oliver, come meet your new neighbors, please.

—But Rosie, it's getting close to the film's climax.

—Oliver, how can you watch these movies all the time? Get outside for once, and go for a walk, why don't you? You'd have a lovely face if you let a little color into it. And stop calling me Rosie! My name is Rosaline!

I admit cruelty on my part. At this point in my life I did not yet care for Fräulein Heffelfinger—how could I, the way we bickered?—and I knew she despised that American icon, Rosie the Riveter. As Rosaline explained it, Rosie Can Do It only when the men are out firing guns at each other. As soon as the soldiers get bored and come home, Rosie the Riveter turns into Rosie the

Baker-Washer-Vacuum-Mother. Weak weak weak! Whereas Rosaline owned this building now, no matter what. Even when her father came home, she would own the building. She often warned me that, when her father returned, he wouldn't take it well, losing the building to his daughter, but tough luck for him. If he wanted his building he should have come home directly. Besides, he should be glad enough to have survived the war.

So Rosaline would interrupt me now and then. I see now how unfortunate it was that both of us had such challenging personalities, and that both of us approached challenges with aggression. Were it otherwise, we might have saved ourselves quite a lot of mutual annoyance. For during the early years of our acquaintanceship, the one thing we ever *chatted* about was horror, and even on that we found cause to argue. She obsessed over H.P. Lovecraft, though I despised him.

—What's there to dislike? Is it you'd prefer to sit there like a toad in front of your movies instead of putting forth a little effort and reading?

—Effort? Effort? Tell that to Lovecraft. He never describes anything. Every creature is too horrible to imagine. Every landscape is beyond words, with its non-Euclidean geometry. Where is the horror in that? Hidden, is where.

—You're right. Watching debonair Lugosi suck on some young woman's neck is *much* scarier. Ha! I can spy on teenagers at the park to see that. No, H.P. is a master.

She pronounced his initials with their German names: Haa Pay. Another source of infuriation.

Many times after she left I would stand at my mirror and look for the loveliness in my face that she was so fond of mentioning. The sharp slant of my nose played well against my tight cheeks, I suppose. But one eye seemed noticeably larger than the other, and its brown not so rich. I find it amazing how some people's company can leave you feeling more alone.

I lived this way through 1946.

I lived this way through 1947.

One day in 1948, I found myself holding a knife to my collarbone because my teakettle stopped whistling. I mean permanently. My teakettle *broke*. Imagine that! How does a kettle even work, that its whistle might break? I examined the kettle while it boiled away in silence. I peered into the spout as if it were a microscope and nearly poached my eyeball. The affair left my nostrils swampy.

Alas, I could not fix the kettle. I had lost it. I tried to cram it into the closet in my mind where I keep the things I have lost, but I could find no more room for it. Papa took up half of the closet himself (you could not call him a skinny man), and though meine kleine Schwester was petite, she had brought along every last one of her toys. I thought to tuck the kettle into the pouch of Mutti's apron, but our old mailbox already filled it. The closet smelled of stale tobacco, frying lard, and watered soil. And so I found myself rocking again, only this time with a knife at my collarbone. No more Ichbining forward and glücklichling backward for me.

I would have done it, too. I would have plunged the blade straight down behind my collarbone, down down until the tip popped my heart. But as I stared dead-eyed towards my pink and flowered wallpaper, I happened to discover the source of all misery and isolation: The world was coming apart at the seam!

Ach. Slow down, Oliver. I've gotten ahead of myself again. I must first explain the events that resulted in my owning such severe despair, and in turn this flat, and in turn pink and flowered wallpaper. So let me recall the story of Princess Marie Alexandra von Baden:

from The USA Yankee Number One Newspaper, Buddy
January 29, 1944

KRAUT PRINCESS AMONG BOMBING VICTIMS

Along with a bunch of civilians and most of the animals at the Frankfurt Zoo, Princess Marie Alexandra von Baden was killed in Frankfurt, Germany,

this morning, in an air raid courtesy of our American Eighth Air Force. We got her good, boys! In the saddest sorta way...

Our bombers came in low, just darin those goons in the Luftwaffe to do, well, something, but they kinda didn't. Sure they worked up a few fighters, but the Mustangs took em out easy as pie. There was such little flak we got REAL low, so low you could see all these people lookin up at you and, boy, it kinda made it hard to bombs away, but oh well.

BLAM! Bombs start goin off like the Fourth of July. There goes a building. There goes another. Things are fallin down all over the place, and we're so low you can see the people watchin us and runnin and runnin.

And right before we drop the bombs who do we see but Princess Marie Alexandra von Baden, and she's not runnin for cover like everyone else (so low you can hear em screamin, buddy). No, she's just strollin along in this long white dress, this huge dress for such a thin gal, and the dress so white her long brown hair looks black against it. Strollin prim and proper, with these attendants around her so spooked they're doing their best not to scam and leave her in the dust. And one of em says (so low you can hear em *talkin*, buddy) that Gee lady, maybe we oughta speed it up a little. But he's speakin Kraut of course. And she says No it isn't befitting of her class.

Like she's royalty or something! So we HAD to drop the bombs. Hell, we had to drop em on HER. Which was sad 'cause the course we set to nail her took us right over this neighborhood, and one of the bombs may've got Marie but the rest cut a long line through this neighborhood, and we heard a lot of civilians bought it, includin this one family—man, wife, little girl—named Schornhorst or something where the bomb that hit their house split it open so bad even

people cowerin in the cellar would've got blown up (and did), but luckily they all died so that luckily they all died TOGETHER. Real lucky, the bunch of em, buddy.

Okay okay, some of these details may not appear in the history books. But I believe the events in this story to be, more or less, fact. Thus, I blame the Americans for my family's demise, but I also blame Germany, and oh! how I blame the Princess. That damned Princess. Her damned attendants. Why didn't they take charge? Why didn't they pick her up and *run*? Well, I hold my own theory, but we will get to that. For now, the important part is that an American air raid took place on 29 January 1944, and the people I said died died. The important part is that the Princess was there.

As for me, I had been in the field hospital near the Gustav Line for seven days when the air raid happened, and I received word about my family on the same day I began my journey home. To Frankfurt, I mean. My actual house was at that point spread over a kilometer.

I purchased a flat in Fräulein Heffelfinger's building. It had become vacant the day after the air raid, when the previous tenant, an old widow with questionable mental stability, declared it her duty to fight the Allies and wandered off. They found her floating bloated in the River Main two days later. She had joined assorted flotsam, a poor ruined wallaby from the Frankfurt Zoo, and a crumpled Messerschmitt fighter to form a pitiful dam against the stone pillars of a pedestrian overpass.

Also questionable? The old woman's taste in décor. The walls of her flat suffered beneath paper a spineless shade of pink, with little white-petalled, yellow-centered flowers dotting it. An enormous radio, the wood scarred and the lacquer peeling, slouched in one corner. On the mantle sat a porcelain duck with too-human eyes and a porcelain angel with too-human eyes. (Between them, I placed the little box that held my bullet.)

A sofa the color of rot complemented a simple wooden rocking chair, the only beautiful piece of furniture in the flat.

Hand-carved! That chair might have saved the living room, but oh! the kitchenette. Yellow splotches stretched across the diamond-patterned linoleum flooring. A layer of thick grease smothered the electric range. And the cabinets! The ludicrous woman had covered them with the pink and flowered wallpaper as well.

The smell? Moist and woody.

The temperature? A sweltering 27 degrees. Always.

Imagine yourself living there. What would you do? If you are like me, you would fall to your knee(s) at the mantle and pray to the angel for deliverance from such horror. And when that failed, you would say what the hell and try praying to the duck.

After three years of that and nothing else, you would wonder what good the world was anymore, even with its *amerikanischen Kapitalismus und keinem Führer*. For just as you'd thought for some time, all the bombs and the bullets damaged Things irreparably. Then you would find yourself with a knife at your collarbone and desperate. Then you would notice a strange seam in the wallpaper, not a spot where one sheet has come unglued from another, but a seam *in a single sheet*. Right near the ceiling. So you would go to the wall and stand on the ball(s) of your foot(s), and when you peeked into the space behind the drooping wallpaper you would hear nothing but disorder and see nothing but the jagged red light of chaos. You would know you had found the seam of the world and that maybe—*maybe*—you could mend it.

Zwei

Several years before the war (I believe I was eleven), Papa decided it would be good for me to spend a year in New York City with my uncle Rudolph. He shared a three-room flat in Brooklyn with two friends from the paper mill. I rarely saw any of them.

On most days I escaped the flat and watched cheap cinema with my few American friends. There I discovered horror movies. *Dracula. Frankenstein. The Mummy.* Lugosi. Karloff. When the movies ended my friends and I would buy strings of firecrackers from the Chinese and slip them through the open windows of old ladies' flats. Rat-a-clap! How they screamed. How we laughed. America will make you crazy.

And you see the sounds coming from the tear in the seam of the world were *the sounds of America*: Rat-a-clap-honk-whooooobroadstriiiipes-cough-watchwhereyou'regoin-pow-pow-extraextra-pow. That's not all, though. Behind the seam blared the siegheil sounds of das Dritte Reich, too. And more still. Something else. What? What? I couldn't tell. I pressed my ear to the tear. I stood on my tiptoes until my leg quivered and the muscle of my thigh locked into a blinding cramp. I listened.

Finally I made it out. The laughing voice of Princess Marie Alexandra von Baden, low and soft, lurked below the other ruckus. If only she had run! If only the attendants had carried her!

My leg gave out. I tried to balance on my crutch to no avail, and the back of my skull broke my fall.

As I lay sprawled on the floor, my mind tumbled. I returned to Anzio at the moment the Allies arrived, when the SHHH-CRACK! of Allied rockets woke me at two in the morning and everything fell to frenzy:

Pull on pants pull on jacket ah yes helmet und (Scheiße!) remember your rifle. Out of the barracks with the rest of the 29th Panzergrenadier Division. Only the 29th Division. Only my division. No no. Wait. Think. Not the entire division. *Only my company.* The rest of the 29th sent off long ago to guard the Gustav Line. Only my company to guard the beach.

(Denke denke!)

Think. Stay calm. Move. Stumble (to where?) through high grass and low shrubs. Sand. Men-half-dressed whirl like sand in high wind and they might blow into my eyes, irritate my nose. No

moon but fires rage on the beach. Rocket fires. Just enough light to see the warships the warships the warships as they bob black on the waves and the landers, troop-filled, are coming, heading to shore.

(Mein Gott mein Gott!)

Sand glows red. Some voice says come to order. Whose voice? Mein Gott. SHHH-CRACK! Only us to defend Anzio. Only us only me not enough. The voice says dig in men we'll hold them off as long as we can.

(Nein nein!)

Look right look left see Tor Caldara squat and round on the bluff above the sea. Brick tower black brick in the night. Dark too dark too many landers. Rocket smoke stings nose. Fall back men!

(Was was?!)

Men bodies in black gun metal shines. Now PR-R-R-R-RAP! go machine guns—deutsche machine guns—white tracer bullets streak towards the sea. Air hangs hot as breath. Face sweat pit sweat crotch sweat. Look right look left see Tor Caldara, black tower on bluff. SHHH-CRACK! PAP PAP PR-R-R-R-RAP! Dug in dirty fingernails, fingernails howl. Flare high and bright, as white as angels. Allies swarm shore like angels. PAP PAP! Too many landers, too many angels. Fall back men!

(Renne renne!)

Look right look left see Tor Caldara hands ache clutch gun black tower on bluff. Atop black tower stands black... figure?... FLASH flare figure white as angels.

As I lay there on the floor of my flat, my head scrambled, the voice of Rosaline pulled me back to 1948.

—Oliver, what happened? I heard the loudest thump. God, are you hurt?

That voice. I could almost see the words passing through her spectacular teeth. But I couldn't speak. Cast back to Anzio I had noticed something I overlooked in 1944. Something peculiar high on the bluff. The Tor Caldara, that medieval tower of stone,

loomed black there, and atop it perched a figure. A woman stood on the tower, and in a flare's white fury I saw her there in full illumination. I saw *her* there. I saw her *there*.

Yes, it is true: *Princess Marie Alexandra von Baden presided over the battle of Anzio*.

Drei

I had suspected for some time that things had gone awry in Germany. My fears arose, I believe, in 1940, when I was seventeen years old. That film der Führer loved so well, *Der ewige Jude*, had just been released. I have few fond feelings for documentaries, but Papa und Mutti had seen it, so I got tired of being left out of conversations about the terrible Jews this, the beastly Jews that. Myself? I didn't care one way or another for Jews. Or maybe I disliked them a little. I always noticed them in groups, roaming together, which disturbed me. But I disliked gute deutsche Jungen as well, those packs of toughs that might knock off your cap for the hell of it. I never cared for groups of any sort. Especially ones that left you out of their conversations and, hence, nervous.

So I attended a screening of *Der ewige Jude* mit Papa, at the theater in which I would work before long. Papa was more than happy to see the film for a second time, and as the house lights dimmed he leaned in close to me, so close I could smell the tobacco smoke that clung to his fat mustache, and he whispered:

—Now you will see a *real* horror movie.

And he was right! It *was* a horror movie. From the first violin strains of the score I felt at home. I settled into my seat and watched the images jerk across the screen. I watched as the terrible Jews scuttled about in the streets of the Polish ghetto and marveled at the use of contrast, how light and shadow played off the Jews' faces to give them sinister shadows in the hollows of their cheeks. I watched as a scene of the beastly Jews scabbling

about their filthy homes was paired with footage of rats scurrying from a sewer grate. What metaphor! So wunderbar! So kunstvoll!

But the film proved sluggish. I grew bored at so much of the same. At times I glanced at Papa and found his eyes fixed on the screen, his eyes pale in the silver light, his mouth raised in a slight smile. Once when I glanced at him he was turned to me, yet with the very same expression on his face. I forced myself to smile back and returned to the film.

Then at once, true horror appeared. Ach du liebe Zeit, meine defekten Augen! It couldn't be true. It couldn't be, but it was. There on screen stood the great Peter Lorre, a scene from Fritz Lang's *M*, and our guter deutscher Erzähler slandering him. Accusing Lorre of the crimes of his character, assigning to Lorre—the *great* Lorre—the black heart of a child murderer.

I leapt from my seat and pointed at the screen.

—Lies, I shouted. Lies, it's a fake. It isn't real.

The crowd began to murmur. A young lady took hold of her young man's arm, her eyes frightened. Papa clutched my hand.

—Ollie, he hissed. What's the matter with you? Do you hear what you're saying?

—Papa, do you hear what *they're* saying? I hissed in return as I thrust my finger towards the screen once more. Do you hear the way they talk of the great Lorre?

—Quiet! from somewhere in the crowd.

—Yes, quiet! from somewhere else.

—I won't, I shouted.

Already Papa had risen. Now he dragged me towards the rear of the theater. As we went he apologized to those we passed. Entschuldigung... Entschuldigung... Entschu— Was? Ja, ihm ist unwohl... Entschuldigung. To hear him go on like that. It filled me with madness.

—I am not sorry, I shouted. I am not sorry or sick or any of it. It's you who are sick.

And now I directed my accusing finger around the theater, at the wide-eyed crowd.

—Will you punish the great Lorre for his character's crimes? Will you punish him for masterful acting? Has he fooled you so well? Innocent, the great Lorre. Innocent!

We burst from the theater and onto the street, and Papa's palm crashed into my cheek. Then once more.

I tried to slow my breathing. I have always struggled with this problem, this tendency towards over-excitement.

—What sort of display was that? Papa said. I have to drag a boy of seventeen from the theater like some ill-mannered child?

I said nothing. The sky hung blue and cloud-speckled above. In the street before us, no automobiles passed. A bell chimed far off—not the steady toll of a church bell, but the clatter of a dinner bell.

Papa bit his lip and tugged at his mustache. He inched his hand towards my shoulder, hesitated as if his touch might crumble me. Tears began to well in my eyes. Tears for... the great Lorre? Papa? Deutschland? I can't say for sure, but when Papa's hand came to rest on my shoulder, my tears held off.

Not two weeks after that, a knock came at our door.

—If it's a salesman, Anna, let me handle him, said Frau Hilda Zedler.

Frau Zedler was a friend of Mutti, visiting for afternoon tea and talk.

—Behave yourself, you bad thing, Mutti said.

The two giggled.

When Mutti answered the door, she met a young and smiling man in a smart hat and gray coat. From my room on the second floor of our home, where I often sat and watched people pass on the street below, I had seen him park his black car. Even when he emerged from the car, he had worn a smile.

—Hello, Madam, I heard him say to Mutti. Is your husband here? And how about your son? May I come in?

—My son is sick with fever, she lied.
—So I've heard. How about your husband?
—Who is it, Anna? Frau Zedler called.
—We could make arrangements for our son.
—Yes, I'm sure.
—We are not without means.
—Yes, I'm sure.
—Who is it, Anna? Frau Zedler called.
—Please, sir.

—Is your husband here? And how is little Ingrid?
Starting in kindergarten next year, yes?

I recounted this history to Rosaline after I discovered the seam of the world. She had just helped me into my rocking chair and was boiling water for tea. I rocked as I told her the story. The back of my head pounded as if it were being struck with a ferocious hammer. As if the hammer delighted in its task.

Rosaline watched me with drawn lips as I hurried through my tragic past.

—And so, I concluded for her, two weeks after the smiling young man arrived, I received word that I had been called to the army.

Rosaline nodded and stared at her glittering yellow shoes.

—You were very lucky, she said.

—Lucky? I said with a grimace. I was seventeen. I wasn't even eligible for conscription.

—Oliver, they could have thrown you in prison. They could have made you disappear. They only drafted you a few months early.

—Untrue.

I staggered from the chair, and dizziness descended upon me. I leaned hard on my crutch and massaged my temples.

—Untrue, I repeated. That is Lovecraft thinking. If it requires too much imagination, leave it alone. Give up.

—H.P. is a master.

Haa Pay. I began to hobble about the room in anger.

—Rosaline, it was the Princess.

—Which princess?

—Princess Marie Alexandra von Baden.

—The one who died in the air raid.

—Yes. No.

I shook my head and hobbled.

—I'm not sure, Rosaline. I think she is still alive. Or perhaps she was never alive. She is coming after me, don't you understand? She's a monster, and she's coming after me. She orchestrated it all, sending me to the army and taking my leg and my family and everything. I've just discovered it. Just before you arrived. *She was there at Anzio*. Just moments ago I had a knife at my throat, Rosaline. Yes! A knife. I was going to end myself because of her. She is punishing me. For what, for what?

I clutched at my hair, for that always seemed to help the desperate men in my movies. A look came over Rosaline's face. She looked as if I had just opened my mouth and sprouted vampire fangs. A tight look, surprised and almost betrayed, the features drawn together: her eyes, nose, and mouth huddling close for protection. Of course she thought me mad. *Verrückt*. Dangerous, even. A dangerous madman.

Then something changed. The anger in her face did not disappear, but it shifted its weight. It turned a little and craned its neck. Rosaline's eyes grew wet.

—Is that true? she said.

My heart kept a wild pace.

—Yes, I said. Yes, I don't know why, but I see now that the Princess is after me. I don't under—

—Stop it, Rosaline shouted as the tears spilled over the dam of her eyelids. I don't mean about that. I mean about the knife. Is that true about the knife?

I blinked.

—Yes, Rosie, I said as I pointed to the knife that I'd set on the mantle.

She stared at the knife for a moment, then lunged from the sofa and grabbed my rocking chair's armrest. She shook and twisted the chair so that the back of my head throbbed worse than ever before.

—Don't you dare, Rosaline screamed and cried. Not ever. Not ever. Stay. Don't you dare. Not ever. Don't you ever call me Rosie. Don't you ever leave.

The chair rocked without rhythm or order. Forward back forward back back left forward right forward right right. So:

glück
 bin
 ich
 lich
 bin
 glück
 lich
 ich
 glück
 bin
 lich
 ich
 glück
 lich
 ich
 glück
 ich
 lich

is what I thought as the chair jittered about, and I started to laugh. Oh! the hilarity of it. To think that it took the threat of suicide to make Rosaline and I grasp the thing we wanted, to speak honestly to each other.

—Don't you dare laugh, Rosaline said, and the shaking began to subside. Don't you dare.

I took Rosaline by her wrists and guided her to the front of the chair. I couldn't stop laughing and looking at her teeth between sobs, and at the mucus that ran aus ihren liebenswerten Nasenlöchern and across her upper lip to join the streams of her tears, and at those blue eyes, and at so much yellow. So schön! So schön!

—It's okay, Rosaline. I can maybe fix everything.

I turned her about by her hips.

—Do you see that tear in the wallpaper? I said. I have discovered something there. I have found the seam of the world, and I must repair it.

She sniffed.

—The seam of the world? she said.

—I must repair it.

—Repair it.

—To keep the chaos inside. To trap the Princess forever.

She sniffed. She stared at the wall. I turned her about by her hips.

—Do you understand? I said. Do you see what I have to do?

And I added:

—Think of how proud your father will be, when he hears his tenant saved the world.

Rosaline said nothing, but her mouth hung open a little. I reached up to her. She bent forward to meet me, and I plucked one of the pins from her haphazard hair. I placed the pin in my own hair. Verrückt indeed, yet it worked.

—Okay, she said.

And now she bent forward even more, and she rested her head on my shoulder, and she placed one hand on my knee and the other where my knee should have been. For the first time since she arrived, it was quiet enough to hear the rush of steam spewing from my poor, whistleless kettle.

Vier*Teil A: Glue*

Do you remember Frau Zedler? She was the one visiting Mutti when the Princess began her terrible campaign against me and sent that smiling young man to knock at the door of my home. Frau Zedler's husband was called Ehren, and I had known him some in my childhood. Papa and he had gotten along well, for they both adored Eintracht Frankfurt and followed their football matches with uncommon zeal. As it happened, Herr Zedler owned a hardware store not far from where my old home had stood. It was to this hardware store that Rosaline and I ventured in search of a way to mend the seam.

At the start of our journey, the thought of patronizing Herr Zedler's store pleased me. I had not seen him since the war, and to visit einen alten Bekannten made the world I remembered feel almost alive. Yet my enthusiasm soon fled at a sprint (my enthusiasm still had two legs, you see), for the store lay across town from Rosaline's building, which meant that to travel there I had to cross the River Main, journeying towards the battered hull of Saint Bartholomeus' Cathedral, my old home, and a Frankfurt I no longer recognized.

A cluster of medieval buildings had huddled around the cathedral once, but the Princess changed that. She and the Americans cut a swath of destruction through that section of the city, reducing our past to rubble and ash. In the war's aftermath, modern, dull structures with their modern, dull architecture sprang up in place of des romantischen Stadtbildes of my youth. Passing by there, I felt as a forest creature must after a terrific fire has razed its woodland home. The saplings that spring up from the blackened earth do not ease the creature's sorrow. It is insufficient to know that those saplings may someday be viewed with as much veneration as the grand trees of yesteryear.

So the trip to Herr Zedler's store was an unhappy one. Neither Rosaline nor I spoke once we reached the bridge

that spanned the River Main. Instead she took my hand, and we soldiered on with our heads hung, admiring the sidewalks and streets and shoes until we stepped into the safety of Herr Zedler's store.

What an impressive site! Aisles upon aisles of *things*. Who knows what all was in that store. We were so enamored of the place, its polished and gleaming floor and its smell of grease and wood shavings, that we didn't notice Herr Zedler himself, until he cried:

—My God, it's Felix Schornhorst's boy.

—Herr Zedler, I cried in return.

He lumbered from his post behind the front counter and trapped me in a monstrous hug.

It is almost impossible to believe we had overlooked him. Herr Zedler is an enormous man, though far from intimidating: a doughy giant free of discernible muscle. He wore a full beard cropped close. His beard held onto the black that the rest of his hair had exchanged for gray.

After brief introductions, Herr Zedler grinned at Rosaline.

—You are a lucky young woman, he said. Most young men would be out watching football, drinking beers late into the night, but not Ollie. Ollie never cared for football. An odd boy, but one who'll always have time for his sweetie.

—Actually, Rosaline began, we are not quite—

—Please please, Herr Zedler said and placed a finger to his lips. I've heard this sort of nonsense before. Now what is it you need? We don't fit rings here, you know. Ho!

And would you believe that not once during our reunion did Herr Zedler mention the death of my family, or my missing leg? I could not even say if he *looked* at the empty place beneath my thigh. Peculiar, that man. Nevertheless, his lack of acknowledgment did not bother me. On the contrary, I felt pleased about it.

We bought every variety of glue in his store. Over the following weeks, we tried them all, but the wallpaper always peeled free in a matter of days, at best. Rosaline suggested that damp wood was to blame. I assured her that chaos was the culprit, and Rosaline said ah yes, that could be.

Now do not let Herr Zedler fool you. Do not suspect for a moment—und Entschuldigung, here I feel I *must* get ahead of myself—that some sun-drenched romance was fated between Rosaline and me. The world would hold nothing so wonderful for us. Yet our friendship *had* changed. She agreed to watch horror films with me, and I allowed her to recite Lovecraft in my presence. We made it a weekly rendezvous: Lovecraft from five to six, dinner from six to seven, and films until we couldn't keep our eyes open. Of course I humored her, as much as it pained me, whenever she mentioned how well her father would like this or that movie. Her nose would scrunch in satisfaction each time I said:

—Keep the title in mind. He's welcome to watch them when he comes home.

So it went. Every Friday Rosaline arrived at five o' clock with her book. She no longer knocked at my door, but she always kept her eyes on her sparkling shoes until I greeted her. By then my kettle would be steaming at full boil, silent of course, but not so lost a cause as I had once feared—only demanding of a little more attention.

As the tea steeped, we chatted about this or that, and then we took our seats on the rot-colored sofa. Before she began, Rosaline made sure I could see the words on the page. You had to see them, she said. It mattered what they looked like. When once I suggested that I might as well read the book myself, she scoffed:

—I know how H.P. intended it to be read. Only a devotee could.

Haa Pay. I smiled.

On that day we had our hopes pinned on an industrial-strength epoxy. It had held for eight days. The wallpaper clung

to the brilliant chaos, a valiant show, and I could barely hear the sounds of America and das Dritte Reich and Anzio and their master, the Princess, coming from the wall, and only when I placed my ear to the tear. (I had a bad habit of doing this.)

So many glues had failed. Even the pride of America, the sensational new Elmer's Glue, held for only a day. (Trotzdem danke, amerikanischer Kapitalismus; you tried your best.) But now this. Eight days! I was so giddy at the prospect of victory that I felt only slightly despairing at the thought of another fifty pages of *At the Mountains of Madness*. Mein Gott! how long could one story be? Or had we finished that one already...?

She had read for an hour when I happened to glance at the seam and saw, to my horror, what appeared to be the corner of the paper curling free. I bit at my fingernails and stared at the pages, but I couldn't focus. It was impossible. At six o' clock, when the reading ended, I couldn't have told you what drivel she had just fed me. Sweat clung to my brow. I felt the eyes of that duck and the eyes of that angel trained on me, waiting to see what I might do next.

—So what did you think? Rosaline said when she finished. Did you like it for once?

I hazarded a glance at the seam, and I let forth an awful cry. Rosaline yelped. She started with such severity that the sofa's rotten springs creaked beneath her.

—It has happened, I said.

I pointed a trembling finger towards the wallpaper that had curled back on itself, broken loose from our careful gluing.

Rosaline begged me to try not to think about it. We would devise some other solution in the morning.

Try not to think about it?

That night I ate alone. That night I watched *The Invisible Man* (not one of my favorites, I decided), distorted across the wall on which the mantle hung so that I wouldn't have to look at the seam. The projector's light gleamed against my porcelain creatures and fell dead against my bullet's box.

Teil B: Tape

Lebensraum is what der Führer had been after. He promised it to all Germans, space and space and space. I remember that, as my family and I huddled around our radio to hear der Führer's serrated voice wailing about Lebensraum this and Lebensraum that, the idea had sounded very nice indeed. But I know now that Lebensbaum seems no nicer than Leben itself. Keep your Lebensraum, bitte, my flat is just fine, thank you.

In fact the flat could have stood to be smaller. Sometimes I imagined the walls folding in on each other, over and over, until the space was reduced to little more than a closet, free of distractions save for my movie projector and my rocking chair. Of course the seam of the world would be there, but in my imaginings the seam was intact. On occasion I imagined Rosaline in the closet with me, my rocking chair replaced by the sofa, and a lamp in the corner for reading.

Such was on my mind the day after our mighty epoxy's defeat, when Rosaline and I set out to Herr Zedler's hardware store again. I dreaded the thought of reliving that previous, sickening journey to the store, of revisiting the fallen city. Yet Rosaline averted the impending gloom. I credit her with that. As we crested the stone bridge that spanned the River Main, our chitchat subsided as my eyes fell on the ragged cathedral. A boat's horn bellowed somewhere down the river, and my hand tensed in Rosaline's. The day had grown hot and gray, and Rosaline's palm felt slick against mine.

—Maybe a film in which Dracula battles the Great Old Ones, Rosaline said.

Her voice was calmer and smoother than ever before. I snapped my eyes towards her and pulled free from her hand. I half-stumbled on my crutch.

—What was that? I said.

—Yes. Lugosi's Dracula at war with H.P.'s Great Old Ones.

I squinted at her. My face shivered with rage. What a ridiculous thing to say. *Idiotisch!*

—Hmm, yes, that could very well work, she continued with a steady nod.

She repositioned one of her pins, which created an even more surreal sweep to her hair.

—Ah! she exclaimed with a gasp. Lumbering Karloff would play the perfect Cthulhu.

With that I clutched at my hair and tore into a foaming rant. To think! What hideous abuse of celluloid. The great Lugosi, the immortal Karloff subjected to Lovecraftian tripe. On and on I went, extolling the cinematic virtues of *Frankenstein* and the subtle brilliance of *Dracula*. Rosaline parried with defenses of her Great Old Ones, their incredible power and the ease with which they could crush the likes of Dracula.

—Let alone the Other Gods, she cried. I would like to see you *try* to put a stake through the heart of Azathoth.

Which set me off again. She wore a slight smile, but she let me make my case. For a while at least. Suddenly, she placed her hand over my mouth. I could taste the salt tang of her skin.

—Enough of that, she said. We're here now.

Sure enough, we stood before the entrance to Herr Zedler's store. A sign in the window boasted half-priced ball-peen hammers with the purchase of a five-kilo box of carpet tacks.

We left Herr Zedler's store that day with a bag full of adhesive tapes, sorts I'd never even heard of. For four weeks Rosaline and I read Lovecraft, ate dinner, screened movies, and witnessed tape after tape fail to repair the world. As the failures mounted, my despair grew deeper than ever. It seemed nothing could subdue the Princess. Even the latest craze, Scotch Cellulose Tape, could not win the day. *Trotzdem danke mal wieder, amerikanischer Kapitalismus...*

—My father could fix this if he would simply *get* here, Rosaline said. He was the building's superintendent, too, you know? Remind me to mention this to that overgrown snail when he returns.

—Of course, I said. Of course I will.

Teil C: Nail and Screw

Herr Zedler asked me to tell him again what I was trying to repair.

—The seam of the world, I said.

—A bit of loose wallpaper, Rosaline said.

Herr Zedler expressed surprise at the epoxy's failure, and at that of the various other glues and tapes.

—The chaos is to blame, I said.

—The wood's a bit damp, Rosaline said.

Herr Zedler laughed. He leaned forward on the counter.

—The seam of the world. I'll say it again, Fräulein, you have found yourself an odd one. I remember him as a youth. Go on, Fräulein, tell me: What should a young man be doing on his weekends? If he's not playing football, I mean.

Rosaline blinked.

—*Watching* football, is what, Herr Zedler said. There's always a match happening somewhere in this city. But Ollie? Never! Eternally at his movies, that boy. Always movies. Never football.

—With due respect, I could never find the narrative in football, I said.

Herr Zedler scowled. He tapped a pen against the counter, click-clickclick-click-click, and the scowl melted into a smile.

—There is your problem, Ollie. There doesn't have to be a story behind everything. Celebrate the goal for the goal, the win for the win. Mourn the loss for the loss. It's only something that happened. Things happen apart from reasons all the time. Have you tried nails yet? What about screws?

We returned to my flat with a motley assortment of nails and screws. Rosaline filled the kettle and began to boil water while I spilled the bag on the living room floor. Then we sifted through the lot of them. Rosaline concentrated on the nails while I handled the screws. Every few moments, I would catch her eye, and we would grin at each other.

We were fumbling ahead at this point. What did we know of screws and nails? Who could need so many sorts of them? This was amerikanischer Kapitalismus at its most absurd: an endless variety of minutely different fasteners. And I realized the horror of it. What good had come from endless types of glue? What good had come from countless species of tape? It was no different from Anzio. We could not stop the invasion, then. We had no hope. Most of our forces, most of my *division* even, were away from the beach, tricked by the Allies into thinking the assault would come later, or somewhere else, or *something*; we fools we Dummköpfe! Yet still we put up our miserable little stand. We invented a new sort of warfare, a simultaneous retreat and defense. (Nein nein!) We'll hold them off as long as we can. (But renne renne!) Fall back men! We had no hope. We had no hope in the face of swarming angels, in the face of the Princess. Yet we lobbed shells and fired bullets and dug in, some of us, *even as we retreated!* It made no sense. It was all the same. A handful of shells, a barrelful of bullets, an entire aisle of glues and tapes. What difference would nails and screws make? (Nichts nichts!) If a shower of amerikanischen kapitalistischen Bomben couldn't stop her, then what were glues and tapes and nails and screws? What were those but endless chances to fail and fail again?

I felt panic, or something like the spirit of panic, embrace me. I could feel its long and icy fingers slide across my ribs to meet and join at my sternum. I could feel its chin on my shoulder. A woman's fingers. A woman's chin. *That* woman. Die Prinzessin, der Todesengel, der Panikgeist.

I thrashed with a scream, but I could not shake free. Rosaline put her hands on my wrist.

—Oliver, what?

Rat-a-clap-honk-whooooosebroadstriiiipes-cough-watchwhereyou'regoin-pow-pow-extraextra-pow-siegheil-siegheil-siegheil-jüdischeSchweine!-siegheil-SHHH-CRACK! the Princess sang to me now.

—Oliver, what? Rosaline cried again.

Yes, I could see it. The sounds of America *were* the sounds of das Dritte Reich *were* the sounds of Anzio *were* the sounds of the Princess. *The Princess, all of them.* And I could see her walking through Frankfurt while the sirens wailed. I could see her attendants begging her to move faster. I could see the bombs pounding craters into the street behind her, closer and closer, then FLASH! consuming her and still going, pounding on. (Halt halt!) Pounding on. A building collapses with a roar. Then another. Then another. Then an innocent home falls victim. Then another. And I can see my home, and I can hear the propellers drone as the plane draws ever closer to the ground and the SHINK as the last bomb slips free from the bomb bay, and I am riding the bomb and I begin to whistle or the bomb begins to whistle, and the bomb wobbles down down and I can smell the years of rain soaked into the roof of my home, and I punch through the roof and I punch through my bed and my blanket catches on my face and I sweep it away and I punch into the kitchen and I punch through the floor and I punch into the basement and—

So low you can hear em shiverin.

SHIVERIN, BUDDY!

—Which is the best? I shouted at Rosaline.

She shook her head with her wide blue eyes. I clambered towards her.

—The nails, the nails. Which is the best?

Rosaline froze for a moment, then glanced down and chose a nail five centimeters long with a broad head. She thrust it towards me, and I snatched it from her.

With Rosaline's help I hopped to the seam of the world, but ach du meine Güte!

—A hammer, Rosaline!

—Where do you *keep* your hammer?

—I do not *own* a hammer.

—Then how would you expect me to—

—Find anything!

Rosaline shuffled about the room, her hands clasped at her waist. Her sweater had slipped from one shoulder to reveal skin. She hurried to the mantle and tossed the porcelain duck to me. I smoothed the wallpaper, placed the nail at the loose corner, and crashed the duck into the nail's head with all of my might. The duck shattered on impact. Porcelain dust scratched at my eyes. I howled and pounded at the nail with my fist to no avail. Blood flowed from my palm. Still I pounded. Then Rosaline appeared beside me with her thick Lovecraft volume, and she hammered away with the book's spine while I steadied the nail. The first strike sank the nail's tip into the wood.

—More, I shouted. More more.

She panted as she beat at the nail, driving it deeper into the wood with each blow. Then the wood accepted the nail's entire length, and the nail's head pinned the paper in place.

We stared at the metal dot on the wall, our sole defense against the madness behind the paper. We panted together now.

—It won't hold, I said.

—It might.

—A temporary fix.

Though a true fix, thank heaven. I could no longer hear the Princess. I could no longer feel her against me.

—Oliver, your hand, Rosaline cried.

She took my hand and held it up so that I might see the wound: a slice at the base of my thumb that bled far more than its severity deserved.

—We'll have to stop the bleeding, she said.

—I have towels in my bedroom.

She led me to the bedroom door but paused with her hand on the knob. She trained her eyes on her shoes.

—Is it, is it all right if I come in? she said.

Of course it was. We entered the tiny room, and I made for the closet. Rosaline flipped on the overhead light, its sconce adorned with a number of translucent, plastic flowers in green and blue, another testament to the old widow's questionable taste. (Danke mal wieder, meine liebe Frau, danke.)

I pressed the towel to my hand and watched Rosaline take in the room. Her mouth hung open a little (so schön, ihre Zähne!).

—It is an attractive room, she proclaimed with a solemn face.

I cannot say what appealed to her. The salmon pink walls? The wooden bed-frame with its towering posts and its rude carvings of... doves, perhaps?... gracing the headboard? The enormous vanity, its mirror bordered by an oval of bare light bulbs? Or perhaps that overhead light. Remarkable, that one.

I sat on the edge of the bed, my head hung. Sweat dripped from my nose.

—I don't know how to stop her for good, I said.

Rosaline sat beside me. She sat no more than five centimeters away from me. The mattress sighed.

—Maybe, she began. Maybe she'll just go away somehow.

I pursed my lips. Innocently, ich verspreche es! I pursed my lips for contemplative purposes, as the heroes in my films often do. But before I could contemplate anything, Rosaline's lips had met mine.

Fünf

A smell of burning forced the sleep away. As I came to consciousness, an image of the Princess bobbed in the dark corners of my mind, somewhere near my closet of loss, and sank into the blackness. Perhaps I had been dreaming of her, I can't say for sure. But as the Princess receded, the smell gripped my

mental warning sensors and squeezed. I flung myself from the bed and sent Rosaline's arm wheeling from my chest.

—What? Rosaline grumbled.

I took my crutch and cast open the bedroom door and hobbled into the living room. I sniffed the air like some dog. I was naked, also like some dog. Silly. Ludicrous. I had charged off naked to save the day.

In the darkness, the burner's orange glow seemed more intense than a glow could be. And on it, stalwart, squatted my poor mute kettle. In the recent ruckus we had forgotten about it, and it had found no way to call to us.

Thin, tangy smoke seeped from beneath the kettle. I tried to pull it loose from the burner, but the electric coil held fast. The water had boiled off. The thin metal of the base had grown superheated and melted to the coil. I yanked as hard as I could, and the coil pulled free from its socket. I examined the bottom of the kettle as the coil cooled from orange to black. Mein unglücklicher, erbarmenswerter Teekessel. Dead and gone at last, and with no room left in my closet of loss.

—What smells so terrible? Rosaline said.

She stood in the bedroom doorway naked, her arms crossed over her breasts. Her eyes were puffy with sleep and half-closed. Her hair, loosed from its pins, hung free for once.

—My kettle is no more, I said.

Rosaline sniffed and gazed about the flat as if she couldn't quite believe where she had woken to find herself. She paused. She fluttered her eyelids. She turned to me, her brow twisted in consternation, still baffled.

—Has it come loose? she said.

—No. Stuck fast. I've lost a burner as well.

—The nail, she said. I mean the nail.

Kettle met floor.

I shrank back.

It could not be, but it was. *The Princess had repelled the nail.* It hung in the drooping paper, turned in such a way that its

mocking tip pointed at me. And why not? Why not? Why not mock this one-legged fool, dieser nackte Hund mit seinem toten Teekessel? I could see the red light faintly. It shot from the tear in curling lines, like whips of chaos, like unnatural tendrils.

I shrieked. I took one leaping stride forward, but my foot landed on the kettle, and I toppled to the floor.

Rosaline came to my side to help me stand. Her breasts hung loose and swayed as she stooped to take my arm.

—Calm down, she said. Nothing is broken that can't be mended. Nothing is ruined.

I jerked free from her grasp.

—No, Rosaline? Not ruined?

I staggered to my feet and hopped away from her until my back slammed against the front door.

—Not ruined? I said.

Now I hobbled to the bedroom and began to dress. I pulled on my trousers—to hell with my shorts—and a sleeveless undershirt.

—Not ruined? I said.

I hurried to the center of the living room.

—Make sure you tell this to Ingrid when you see her. Tell this to Papa and Mutti. Tell this to my leg and my teakettle.

I turned to the tear in the seam and raised my crutch. I shook it like a club and hopped, my sad war dance.

—What else is it you want? What have I done?

—There's nothing, Rosaline said.

I glared at her.

—There's nothing at all, she said.

I shook my head. Trottel! Dummkopf! I lunged and took my box from the mantle. I retrieved my bullet and held it high.

—Nothing, you say? Then what is this?

—They shot you.

—*She* shot me.

—The soldiers.

—*Her*.

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—It is.

He hurried forward. As I clambered up off the sidewalk, my knee popped. The morning hung cool and wet around me. The gentle sun shone. I extended my hand in greeting as Herr Zedler approached.

—My God, you're bleeding, he gasped.

I studied the oozing gash on my extended hand.

—So I am, I said.

In the stark back room of his store, Herr Zedler ran the tap until the water flowed steaming, and he stopped the sink drain. He dissolved powdered soap in the water and lowered my hand into the solution. With a clean towel, he scrubbed the blood from my stinging skin, his brow tight in concentration. When he finished he wrapped the wound in gauze and fastened it with a ring of *meinem alten amerikanischen Freund*: Scotch Tape. As he worked, I explained to him why I had come, and for what.

At the close of my tale, Herr Zedler scratched his black beard.

—But Ollie, *what* did you say it's for?

—The seam of the world.

He placed a hand on my shoulder and pursed his lips. I did not surprise him with a kiss, but I did remember a kiss, and it made my stomach clench.

—You think odd things, Herr Zedler said. You think too much altogether. Someday you'll have to come to a football match with me. Promise you'll come with me, and I'll make this thing for you.

I laughed.

—Always football with you, I said. How can you find time for Frau Zedler?

He scratched his broad nose and frowned.

—Frau Zedler died in the air raid, Ollie.

I held my breath. I closed my eyes, and Frau Zedler shuffled across the darkness and squeezed her way into my closet

of loss. To my horror, just before she slipped inside and closed the door behind her, I noticed amidst my closet's clutter the sparkle of a yellow-sequined shoe.

Herr Zedler must have seen the pain on my face, for he embraced me then.

I moaned a bitter moan. Ach! that closet. Frau Zedler. Rosaline. How terrible. I had thought the closet full. There must have been room for my kettle after all.

Acht

And so I melted my bullet into a screw. Slot head, naturally. Cone point, of course. And screw purists will gasp at this: *non-regulation in size*. Das ist richtig! A large, fat screw. The sort Americans put in the necks of their movie monsters, though mine was not for necks.

I returned from Herr Zedler's store to find my flat made up. The clothes I'd left behind folded and placed on the bed. The bedding straightened and the sheets turned down. The nails and screws cleared from the floor. The shards of the duck swept away. The kettle-burner monstrosity vanished. The defeated nail plucked from the drooping wallpaper.

The entire flat tidied by Rosaline.

Rosaline gone.

From a distance I eyed the seam of the world, and I wondered how dire the situation was. Might the seam split at that very second? Might the lot of that chaos spill out in an instant? Might the world come apart moments before I could save it? It might. But the seam appeared to be dormant. It appeared that way. Torn, yes, but no more so than it had been when I first discovered it.

Still, I squinted suspicion at the offending wall. I fingered my new screw, my new weapon, where it waited in my pocket.

Die clevere Prinzessin, it could be a trap, a false calm. How could you help but feel threatened in a flat that reeked of burning?

And yet somehow my other task, the task I had learned when I glimpsed that sparkling shoe in my closet of loss, seemed still more urgent than the seam of the world.

So I took a small chance. Ein kleines Risiko. (It would only take a minute, after all.) I left the screw in my pocket, hobbled down to Rosaline's flat, and knocked on her door.

I waited.

(—Ticktackticktack! sagt Herr Zeit.)

I knocked on her door.

I waited.

(—Ticktackticktack! sagt Herr Zeit.)

The door jerked open. Rosaline had re-pinned her hair, donned her yellow outfit. Her jaw tightened when she saw me. She raised her chin so that she had to gaze down at me.

—I was wild with anger, I said. I didn't mean a word of it. Please forgive me.

Rosaline still as a statue, as a porcelain angel.

(—TICKTACKTICKTACK! sagt Herr Zeit.)

I swallowed hard. I nodded, and I hurried up the steps to my flat.

The screw Herr Zedler had forged for me was a wicked thing, the tip sword-sharp and the head wide and flat. As I drew closer to the tear, I could hear the sounds of America of das Dritte Reich of Anzio of the Princess clamoring behind the wallpaper. I stopped before the tear and tried to think of something heroic to say. The sort of thing you say before you drive the stake through Dracula's heart. Before you bash away the Wolfman's life with your walking stick.

But no words would come to me, and I did not mean to wait around any longer.

I took up my screwdriver and my screw. The red light flashed and licked about. With a grave smile, I began to smooth

the paper. The sounds grew fainter and fainter. My palm slid across the paper (langsam langsam!), and I closed my eyes and relished the feeling. Just damp, the paper. The slightest, sweetest grain. And now the sounds faded altogether.

As I held the paper in place, I sighed. I positioned the screw at the rebellious corner. I pressed with all of my strength until the tip sank into the wood, and I fitted the screwdriver's blade into the slot.

Half a turn, and the screw sank with ease.

Half a turn, and the screw sank deeper.

Half a turn, and the screw caught on something and bit.

Half a turn, and I could hear the Princess squeak and groan.

Half a turn more, and the screw's head met wallpaper.

Half a turn more and half a stubborn turn more, and my hand trembled with the energy I sacrificed to my task. The screw tick-ticked, tick-tick-ticked as it struggled to turn, and then CHINK! the blade came free. The screw clung tight to the paper. The deed was done.

Yet as I pulled my free hand away from the paper, I froze. I could not look away, nein. Die *clevere* Prinzessin. Through the tiny hole my futile nail had made the previous night, the red light of chaos glared at me. And I could hear the awful sounds—faint, yes, but there nonetheless. *There all the same.*

Tell me now: What could I do but laugh myself to tears?

Neun

If you visit the Frankfurt Zoo, you will learn that no more than twenty animals survived the bombs of 1944, but I wonder. Perhaps the animals used the tragedy as a diversion. Perhaps they allowed us to believe they were blown to bits, cast into the River Main like that pitiful wallaby, while in fact they

bounded and lumbered and crawled and slithered to freedom when the Princess rent apart the bars of their cages. At times, I imagine escapees all over Germany. A tiger's growl amidst Black Forest pines, a monkey's whoop down some Berlin alley. Ah, yes. I wonder.

I wonder because the Princess opened the door to my closet of loss somehow. On the morning after I repaired the world's seam, I found my closet empty save for a baby doll *meine kleine Schwester* had left behind. The people, the things; they were gone, the lot of them. But not from my head, no. I see them from time to time as they bob without aim in the blackness, my family and Frau Zedler and so much more. The Princess, as well. And calling from that hole in the wallpaper, I can sometimes hear the old sounds. Extra extra! Pow! Dig in, men, we'll hold them off as long as we can.

On the Friday after my closet went empty, Rosaline arrived at five o'clock with the thick Lovecraft volume clutched to her chest. She marched to the rot-colored sofa, sat, and adjusted the pins in her hair.

—I'll start the water, I said.

—You have no kettle. Sit.

I obliged.

—And if you speak even a little, she said, you will be sorry.

Jawohl, Fräulein Heffelfinger.

I sat no more than ten centimeters away from her. She began a story we had read together once before, and I spoke not a word. I endured the whole obscure and unsatisfying thing. (Who writes so many *correspondences* as these characters?)

When she finished her reading, Rosaline placed the book at her side and turned to me.

—Now you will cook dinner for me, she said.

Jawohl, Fräulein Heffelfinger.

I heated a Polish sausage I had planned to eat alone, boiled a few spears of white asparagus. We ate together on the

sofa, or rather Rosaline ate and I pushed my food about the plate. From the hole in the wallpaper, I heard the muted honk of some American car's horn, and I winced.

Honk honk. Hooooooooooooooooo

—Rosaline? I said to drown out the horn.

—Quiet, Oliver.

ooooooooooooooooonk.

Ach, so ist das Leben! Until Rosaline let me speak once more, I would have to endure the Princess's taunts, the sounds reminding me that while I had weakened her, I could not destroy her altogether. I would have to be patient. Can you believe that? Was für eine komische Idee: Oliver the Patient. And you will of *course* grasp the necessity of my telling myself then: Don't get ahead of yourself, Oliver. For once, *don't!*

I crammed the length of an asparagus spear into my mouth. Scheiße. Viel zu viel Salz.

Rosaline cut her length of sausage into seven equal pieces and then, one by one, forked them into her mouth. She stared at the wall as she chewed, at her plate as she swallowed. When she sliced through the asparagus spears, her knife screeched against the plate. She held the plate across her thighs, and with each little motion she made, the oily pink juices from the sausage trickled here and there.

Once she had finished her dinner, she nodded.

—That was lovely, Oliver, she said. I believe we will watch *Dracula* again tonight.

Jawohl, Fräulein Heffelfinger.

She washed the plates while I loaded the reel and positioned the projector just so. The sofa's springs groaned as she laid on her side across both cushions. She bent her knees slightly, one hand between her thighs, one hand under her pillow.

—You may sit in the projectionist's rocking chair, she said.

Jawohl, Fräulein Heffelfinger.

The projector chattered to life. A great white rectangle captured the wall, and the film began, the first frames empty. I turned out the lights. The opening credits appeared. They said (mehr oder weniger):

CARL LAEMMLE
P R E S E N T S

“DRACULA”

BY BRAM STOKER
FROM THE PLAY ADAPTED BY
HAMILTON DEANE & JOHN L. BALDERSTON

A TOD BROWNING PRODUCTION
PRODUCED BY CARL LAEMMLE, JR.

—The mountains at the beginning of this film, Rosaline said, are not so horrifying as the Mountains of Madness.

Jawohl, Fräulein Heffelfinger.

I smiled. I took my seat in the projectionist’s rocker, and I began to rock. Ah, mein geliebter Schaukelstuhl. My admirable and sturdy friend. My hand-carved guardian angel.

I rocked forward: Ich bin

AUTHOR'S NOTE

For storytelling purposes, I have conflated two Allied bombings of Frankfurt: the bombing on January 29, 1944, during which Princess Marie Alexandra von Baden was killed, and the bombing on March 18, 1944, during which the Frankfurt Zoo was destroyed.





ESCAPED ZOO ANIMALS

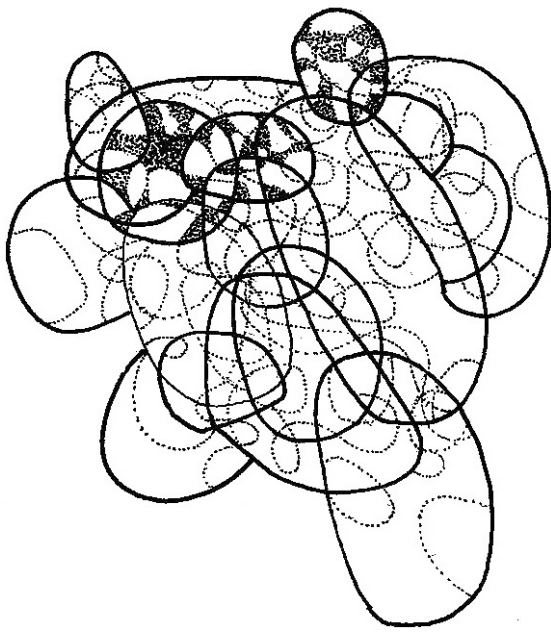
Dean Young

A few weeks after the explosions,
the streets still smell like burnt memos
but everyone is people-colored again.
I watch a couple break up over gelato,

her sniffing and digging with that tiny, pink
plastic spoon in a way that says When
this gelato's gone so am I. A few pigeons
stagger around like drunk barristers. I'm sweating

from helping some guy in white tails
change a tire. We both knew an explanation
would be pointless like why the ice skates
and gorilla mask in his back seat. Do not

approach the hyena but do not run always either.
With my father it was the same, a guy dressed
way wrong going somewhere it just got
a lot harder to get.



CROESUS AND THE GREAT DUCK

Walter Flaschka

Uncle Piers ran the biggest voodoo curio museum in Naples, Italy—the Naples, Italy located in northwest Tennessee. He was being run out of business by a lean, upstart voodoo curio museum in the same town, and so he filled his '69 Cadillac with what he told us was a very tart and vibrant collection of *piquancy*. There was so much of it, he said, it dribbled out the windows, leaving curls of pungent, peppery magic—fucking *magic*, boys—that licked across the highway and infiltrated nearby SUVs, changing the probabilities of the rabbity soccer moms within.

Piers's general plan, he told us later, was to nest with his dead brother's widow and her son-and-a-half. Meaning Mom and us boys. He thought maybe he might bang her. Meanwhile he would sell his museum pieces to British collectors, and finish training his ducks for hotel work.

We knew something was wrong when Mom opened the door and reeled back, hand over her mouth. A man identical to Daddy stepped into the living room. His hands were out. He wore wood-soled work boots and a thigh-length kimono with no belt.

"Really? *Really*, Piers?" Mom said.

"What? What?" The man turned to Croesus and me. I backed away, and Croesus got ready to pinch his oxygen tube and knock himself out.

"Oh! I beg your pardon," the man said. He circled his arms once, and pulled something invisible apart with his fingertips. Then his hands dropped and his kimono closed, and the tension ebbed from the room. "I was performing my Halo of Revulsion. I did not mean to drive you from my embrace." He sounded stiff and formal, like he was putting on a voice.

I stared, slowly remembering an uncle. Being the youngest, I remembered the least about when Daddy's family

stopped visiting. Croesus remembered him better, and shook his head.

“Toolkit, bring the cleaver from the kitchen,” he said. “The one we use for intruders.”

“Intruder? I am your Uncle Piers!” His hands spread again, which threatened to reopen his kimono. “You must be my nephew. The dying one, right? You’re dying?”

Croesus gave him a stony look. “Not fast enough.”

“You can now celebrate!” Uncle Piers swooped in and took Croesus by the cheeks. “You have met me. Before you die, you have *met* me!”

He looked so much like Daddy I wanted to hug him, stilted voice and all. I worried that he would sense this, and carefully made my face go blank. Mom approached, eyes down, and wrapped one of Daddy’s ties around Uncle Piers’s waist. Uncle Piers said, “Mmm. Schermer is *in* this necktie. Nice choice, Mandy. Flavorful.”

“Piers, are you sure you can do this?” she asked softly. “Can you hold up your side of the plan?”

“Of course! I raced down here for no other reason. Also, my ducks are in your garage.”

“Is that code for something, Mom?” Croesus gave his laugh, which was really a cough-and-swallow. The doctors called it a productive cough. “His *what* is in your garage?”

“My ducks.” Uncle Piers sat on the loveseat beside Croesus’s nest. “They are my meal ticket, so please let’s send our good thoughts toward them, and also our table scraps. If they bite you, and they will, please be properly terrified. They like to project menace. They have dinosaur ancestors.”

I trotted to the garage door and looked through the window. Boy, would Croesus be pissed. Our lawnmower-hovercraft project had been pushed aside to make room for the gang of ducks. Wires, bolts, and cheap pumps were unceremoniously scattered to the corners by little duck feet. The birds honked around like overgrown bicycle horns, knocking into each other and dropping crap on the floor.

“Croesy,” I groaned. “The ducks killed our hovercraft.”

“Our dream is larger than a bunch of waterfowl, Toolkit.”

“Boys!” Uncle Piers leaned back on the loveseat and spread his legs. His white thighs were like magnets for our eyes. “Do not *fret* over the ducks. The ducks will serve me, as all ducks do. What you must *understand* is that I am to become your new daddy, for I have something exceedingly rare. I have elephant placenta.”

“I can’t listen to this,” Mom said. She left down the hall. “Toolkit, Croesus is yours.”

We turned back to Uncle Piers. “Boys, placenta is your go-to organ. In Africa, whence our most functional modern magicks originate, the placenta is considered an unborn twin. It gets a name, last rites, and a family burial. It gets its own coffin. These placentas are garnished with herbs and bracelets, and their piquancy inherits to the living child. Nice to think that we *all* have our own useless sibling, isn’t it? One who might as well be stillborn for all he can contribute to the world.” Uncle Piers gave Croesus a friendly pat. “Just like your daddy, who wound down like a pastry timer. I will receive all that was once his.”

Croesus glanced at me. His eyes had that squint to them that I knew, so I keyed Mom’s secret code on his pain-management box. It blipped and gave him another taste of morphine—Croesus called them comfort suggestions. Before the week was out, we would have a little ceremony, and switch Croesus off the pain-box entirely. From then on, we would pour painkiller directly into his IV bag.

Uncle Piers continued, “Placentas are the most useful bits of meat, especially if you want nookie from a grieving older woman. I say older, but I only mean pre-menopausal. Still menstruating, like your mother. Here’s how it works: shave off some placenta and put it in a dish the grieving woman will eat; do this as you read aloud a certain poem by a favored poet; put a nasal whine at the end of each line, like you’re lifting a car. The woman of your fantasies has to be in the next room, at the edge

of hearing. Result: her imagination will be captured, and then you can Romeo all over her Juliets. Only the cry of a child will awaken her to the world again.”

He leaned back and puffed. His legs reopened: lily-white thighs with the brown, vaguely fungal organ in the middle. This is how I finally internalized the message, widely repeated in Tennessee, that private parts are shameful and disgusting.

Uncle Piers gave us an expectant look, but I was minutes away from having an answer. Luckily Croesus took over. “Uncle Piers,” he finally said. “Usually we don’t see so much of you.”

“Oh, well, you’re dying, you know. I wanted to be here at the end, as I was at the beginning. And it dovetails nicely with some business I have in town. Here, Toolkit.” He handed me a sign and a painted wooden box. “Put these in the bathroom where your mom can see.”

*When Replacing Your Daily Tampon, Mandy
Remember DO NOT “Flush it Down!!”
Put It In This “Bejeweled” Chest →*

The sign was heavy, backed by poster board. It looked like it had been professionally produced.

“And now I must light candles in your dead father’s study, to ask his forgiveness.”

For some reason, he had pencil-thick porcupine quills stuffed into his kimono sleeve. When he stood, a few remained hooked in the cushion, where they projected like arrows. Mom discovered them the next day, when she opened the senator’s letter and collapsed into the seat.

* * *

Uncle Piers trained his ducks in the mornings, sold his museum pieces in the afternoon. At night he cooked dinners. The first night, we didn’t want to be left alone with him, and we were

trying to keep Mom from going out to ambush a congresswoman at a fancy restaurant. Croesus was rehearsing some sort of fit, either breathing or seizing or both, since nothing *I* did ever slowed her down.

She finally paused when Uncle Piers came home. He had a bag of onions in one hand, celery under his arm, and of all things, the slack body of a rabbit dangling out of his coat pocket. “Yes, it’s *lapin à la cocotte!* Toolkit, I need a bottle of *Châteauneuf-du-Pape* from my room.”

I watched the rabbit’s little arms swing like tassels when Uncle Piers moved. Death had transformed it into something much less magical than a bunny. Now it was merely a complicated fold of fabric, like a rag doll that Uncle Piers was going to tear apart and empty onto our plates. He cooked it for two hours. I really didn’t want to eat something so obviously dead, and Croesus had long since turned indifferent to food—but we both sat up when Piers brought the wide, shallow dish into the dining room. The smell was like a week’s worth of TV dinners all rolled into one.

“We never use that dish,” I told Uncle Piers. “Or that table.”

“Help me over there,” said Croesus. I leapt to obey. Croesus, eating!

The stew was as rich as chocolate sauce, dotted with pearl onions that tasted like wine and which popped when we bit down on them. The little knots of rabbit meat swerved into flavors we’d never tasted before: not chicken, but somehow also not beef. Uncle Piers explained every detail: the shallot rings, dusted in cornstarch and deep-fried in sesame oil, put some crunch into each bite. He poured the wine, saying, “If you can describe it, you can imbibe it.” It matched the rabbit so well that it might have been skimmed off the top of the stew as it simmered. We asked what duck tasted like, and he shook his head.

“Those ducks are going to save my life. The Peabody is a famous, fancy hotel where trained ducks walk in lines all over the place. To the lobby, the pool, the icemaker. The hotel is recruiting more ducks for the *Beau Peabody sur le Prélèvement Renforcé* resort they’re opening on the Mississippi. So I’m training up my *armée* on the other side of the border, like guerillas. Do you know how much one duck is worth to them?”

I shook my head.

“A *lot* of money. Enough to get me back to Africa to open the Naples, Italy, Tennessee College of Magic, Angola Extension. Perhaps even enough to win me another elephant placenta. Thus, you must not disturb us while we train.”

Uncle Piers’s training was not effective. Once, I wandered down to the garage and found the ducks striding in an orderly circle, quacking by the cat food bin and nodding to the lawnmower-hovercraft as they did their turns past the water bowl. But when Uncle Piers appeared, they scattered like pool balls. He waved a baton. He issued orders, which turned sarcastic and bitter when unheeded. The ducks ignored the marching music.

He saw me watching. “I hear distractive, piteous whining from upstairs. Is Mandy crying?”

“It’s Croesus. He wants to boss me around, like always.”

“Yes. When people are dying they delight in watching you work. If you’re not dying, then you don’t need to watch me. Shoo.”

Croesus heard me coming back up the stairs.

“Toolkit! Where are you? I need to tell you something!”

He was always imagining something about the fake school he attended in his head. It was that time of day, after the nap and before the tragedy of lunch. I went to the closet in my room and shut the door.

“You know that girl Evangeline? The one I danced with at the Dark Soiree?”

I pressed my hands to my ears.

“Turns out she’s not some bullshit fangirl after all. She’s really a vampire and so is her brother—they proved it!”

I shook my head in the dark.

“We’ll have to say goodbye soon, Toolkit. I’m turning. I’m going to be a vampire with Evangeline, and I will live forever.”

* * *

We were at dinner sharing one of Uncle Piers’s dishes, a grouper that explained what would happen if meat were butter and had the crumbly wet texture of a tart crust. Uncle Piers made me match the wine, while Croesus selected the digestif. Uncle Piers was moving into seafood and clear sauces, he said, because of Mom’s weight. His last girlfriend had gained so many inches she’d started hating him.

“She snuck out of the house the *day* I was to introduce her to Leofrick’s eighth *Nether Delight for the Lady Faire*. It is the first recorded mention of prolapse in Welsh. She knew I was planning it and still she left! The secret is all in how you address the pudendum—”

“We don’t have that talk at the table,” Mom said, and for once she didn’t seem distracted or angry. I watched her closely for a smile, and her eyes met mine... and then Croesus ruined it as always.

He said, “Um,” and everybody froze. “Uncle P, can I just say one thing? Can I say that it’s not looking very good for me? I won’t give you the whole story, but I’m very sick. I’m on the edge of systemic collapse. I’m only eighteen. I’ll be gone like a dropped nickel.”

Uncle Piers beamed at him warmly. “That’s an analogy worthy of a poet!”

At the edge of my vision, the oval of Mom’s face turned down. I could not look at her directly.

“Uncle P,” Croesus persisted. “You know about magic stuff. I don’t believe in it, but you do.”

“I almost feel as if you are leading up to a question. Like a sherpa guiding pilgrims—”

“I don’t have to die, do I? Can I stay alive somehow? Uncle P? Can I live? Can you do something? I want to stay.”

Mom’s shoulders were shaking over her plate.

“Croesus.” Uncle Piers’s face was grave. Croesus was already sinking back into his seat, eyes down. “Of course I can save you. You don’t have to die at all.”

Mom’s head jerked up. She didn’t look happy at the news.

“Really?” Croesus said, and laughed (coughed-and-swallowed).

“*Piers.*”

“I still have some elephant placenta,” Uncle Piers explained. “Grate it over your corpse, say some words, spread some seed, and your body awakens—like a second puberty. Of course, an elephant from the placenta’s family in Africa might get sick or die, but that’s just the trade-off. There are trade-offs everywhere in magic and in life. You only need to finish out your suffering, to keep the books balanced, and then we can reanimate your corpse. We will move quickly, since the brain unlatches first. Too long under and you will emerge featureless and jejune.” He turned to Mom and seemed to notice her look. “He will be very nearly the same, Mandy. College, wife, kids: it’s all in reach. I will require remuneration.”

“You bastard.” Mom’s voice was hoarse. “Stop talking now.”

He drew up, offended. “I will not. Can you silence the wind?”

“You’re telling a dying child he can live a normal life.”

Croesus’s face had hardened, and even his head seemed shrunken. He glanced at me and I knew he wanted me to gun his pain-box, to put him out for the rest of the night. I ignored him. *Let him deal with something for once.*

“He will *not* be completely normal,” Uncle Piers said. “There will be stiffness after he dies.”

“Stand up,” Mom said. Uncle Piers lurched to his feet. “Go to the family room.” She gave us a hard glance. “I’m going to kill him. Don’t take my fish.”

She didn’t actually kill him, but she got close. What started with screaming broke into sobs, then shifted into an angry back-and-forth. We watched them in the reflection of the empty fish tank, but they were much less interesting than the incredible food. I tried to eat slowly. Croesus dipped and licked his spoon, over and over again, until he saw something that made him freeze. “What the hell?”

The two reflections, Uncle Piers and Mom, were grappling by the bookcase. Uncle Piers had a fistful of Mom’s hair, and was savagely pulling her head back, leaning over her, lowering his mouth toward her—

“Nooo,” I said. “Ew, ew, ew.”

Croesus grabbed my hand. “Shut up. Don’t say anything.”

Uncle Piers delved into Mom. We could hear them breathing like band saws. Her mouth was a long gash reflected in the fish tank’s glass. She looked young and hungry, but distorted, like a bad T-shirt transfer. Uncle Piers seemed to want to snap her spine, and she seemed to want it too.

I saw Croesus smiling. “Mom can do better,” I told him.

“Of course she can. Don’t you see? It’s the goddamned elephant placenta. It really works. She would never in a million years do that with him. He really can bring me back after I die.”

Croesus smiled at me full-on, the first time in a year. His eyes were wet, and I could decipher his look: all these out-of-reach mysteries of life, like a party behind locked banquet hall doors, and the sudden knowledge that you could soon push through.

“It’s a lot more like a fight than I imagined,” Croesus said. “You can tell she hates him on some level. Most levels.”

In the reflection, Mom’s face and hands were tight and full, as if bloated by venom. Her movements were fast and puppet-like. “How do we stop them?”

“The cry of a child,” Croesus recited, and he sank a fork into my forearm. I screamed, and immediately the reflection of Mom peeled herself off the reflection of Uncle Piers.

* * *

We had no TV, no cable. No fresh vegetables until Uncle Piers showed up. We had to make Daddy’s cancer money stretch to cover Croesus’s cancer money. So Mom slept on the floor by Croesus’s bed, then cleaned and moved him in the morning. Then it was laundry or phone calls, and then the ordeal of lunch. It usually ended up in Croesus’s puke bucket. Afternoons were either doctor visits or looking up politicians online. Dinner, dishes, changing sheets, and flexing Croesus’s limbs. All the while, his bitter voice fixed blame for every millisecond of agony. It was like he just never stopped dying. Mom kept an album of his baby pictures outside his door.

She was pulling my breakfast burrito out of the microwave when I said, “I had a dream about Uncle Piers last night.”

She yanked it away from me. “Piers entered your dream? What did he say?”

“He said Croesus is dying and I am the important kid for once. I should be getting the attention and the resources. Now that Croesus has reached his lifetime insurance limit, he’s going to cost us all of Daddy’s cancer money. And...” I waited, but she was merely listening. Why did I think I could tell her such horrible thoughts? “And he said you only gave birth to me so I could donate bone marrow and organs to Croesus so he could live longer. And that’s why I’m called Toolkit.”

She threw the burrito down and stalked out of the room. For the rest of the day it was nothing but shouting and carnage with Uncle Piers. Alternating with sex.

* * *

Croesus's bag of painkiller rested on his stomach, and the action of his knees as I carried him down the stairs squeezed it directly into his arm.

I wanted him to be impressed at how I'd grown. Able to carry him all by myself. But when I listened to his excruciated mumbling, he was saying, "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you," with every step. At the bottom of the stairs he saw my face and said, "Man up, Toolkit." He kissed my cheek. "There's me, and then there's me, and then there's me. If you don't like one of someone, listen to another of them instead."

I dropped him on the sofa with the walkie-talkie and went to the garage. Parts for the lawnmower-hovercraft were scattered across the floor, but the main engine framework was too heavy for the ducks to displace. They had already incorporated it into their intrigues, gossiping with their heads through the chassis, worrying at the tubing like little mechanics. Telling Croesus over the radio what I was doing, I rapidly reconnected the carburetor and the air filter. Given the propensity of our projects to burst into flame, I squeezed only a single bulb of oil-infused gasoline into the tank. The ducks gathered in the corner to watch and comment.

"Engage," Croesus said. I pulled the starter. The engine spun but nothing happened.

"I don't hear anything," Croesus said. "*Engage*, you duck-fucker!"

We didn't have much time. Mom and Uncle Piers were due back any moment. Croesus was too frail to be downstairs, and I'd be in trouble if they found him on the couch.

I pulled again, and the engine roared to life. The hovercraft worked! This was so unexpected that I hadn't battened it down. It easily lifted off its blocks and hit the concrete floor at a slant. The blades sliced the concrete with a shower of sparks, and then our smooth-running hovercraft transformed into a howling blender of death.

It skittered into the crowd of rapt ducks. There was not even enough time to squawk. Heads flew from shoulders. Wing bones snapped like celery stalks, entrails sprayed into the air and landed on the floor in an ugly ragout. Some of them were sliced into layers, their pert, ducky bodies fanned across the floor like a card trick. The walls were coated with arterial ejaculate.

“Oh, no,” I said, when the engine wound down. “No, no, no.”

“I heard the engine! What happened?”

“Croesy, I’m screwed. The hovercraft went apeshit on the hotel ducks.”

Was that Uncle Piers’s car shutting off in the driveway, with its whinnying alternator belt?

“Uncle P and Mom are home,” Croesus said. “I can see them through the window. They’re climbing into the back seat together. Anyway, the ducks don’t have to be dead.”

“From where I’m standing, it seems like the ducks *do* have to be dead. It’s duck soup down here.”

“Uncle Piers’s big chest upstairs. Look under the old hourglass: there’s a bundle of letters from that doctor in Angola he talks about. He showed them to me. One of those letters has the incantation we need.”

Croesy’s voice on the radio unerringly guided me to the necessary locations. Eventually I was back in the garage with a bouquet of herbs and the mummified Frisbee of elephant placenta.

“Sprinkle the plants over the ducks,” Croesus told me. “Okay? Now, take the elephant placenta and scrape some off with the cheese grater.”

I snowed placental flakes over the stew of ducks. Still nothing.

“Hold the walkie-talkie up. Okay, here goes—” Croesus hawked some phlegm and began reading from the sheet. *Calendar mentator; token mace and broken face*. Nonsense. Words that rhymed but had no other reason to go together. Phrases you’d hear

echoing off the walls of an insane asylum. It went on. *Make a mock of the curl; cut the lock off the girl.* It wasn't about the words; it was about the sounds themselves. The sounds were somehow conserved from breath to breath, and they persisted in the air until they showed up again in the list, reviving the harmonic. *Suleiman's head inherits to my man Manfred.* The harmonics hit the lowest registers, buzzing in the air and tightening my diaphragm. Sweat dropped into my eyes and I tried to blink it away. The floor was full of motion.

"Croesy..." I dropped the elephant placenta and felt something pull it across my feet.

He finally finished.

"Put the walkie-talkie down and get out of there," he said. I leapt to obey. "I skipped the last part where I was supposed to jack off. The ducks will just have to enjoy life without that."

I backed into the kitchen, and then raced to Croesy's couch. If the air was thick in the garage, it was solid around his nest. Croesus was taking hits off his oxygen tank.

"Magic is weird," I said. I waved a magazine until the air was breathable.

"Magic is *piquant*," he said, and grinned.

On my way back to the family room, I had closed but not latched the door to the garage. We heard a creak, now, in the kitchen. There was a muffled sound—a bottle knocked across the kitchen floor. The beads hanging over the washroom door tinkled. Something was moving through the house, slouching nearer to us.

"Get up here," Croesus whispered.

I slipped onto the couch next to him, and pulled the comforter over our heads. Our limbs entwined, my face nested in his throat. I tried to ignore what he had become. He used to keep me safe, but now he was nothing but kindling I could hold in my arms. We heard the noise together.

Step-drag. Step-drag. *Growing nearer.*

The brass poker-and-brush stand next to the fireplace fell over with an explosion of noise. It cracked into the coffee table directly in front of us. Croesus bolted upright, screaming, and the comforter fell away.

I couldn't help but see it. At first I didn't understand, and it took a moment for its outline to resolve in the semidarkness. It was a patchwork of duck parts, amalgamated into a duck-shaped *something* that was larger than most dogs. Its multiple wings were dwarfed by the oversized body. Eight legs supported it on the floor. The creature was preternaturally still, like the giant inappropriate doll that a relative gives to a toddler. Its four heads turned sideways, eyeing us.

Its mouths opened, and its voices hit me in the pit of the stomach. *Quaaack*.

Its wings gave a flap and it lunged across the coffee table. Then a rectangle of light fell across us all: the front door opening.

"Great *Duck!*" Uncle Piers burst into the room wearing nothing but a Robin Hood hat and trousers caught around one ankle. "Ssaal Ssaal!"

The Great Duck belched like a steam engine and leapt onto the coffee table, horribly agile despite its bulk. Croesus writhed in terror, too weak to do more than hock a stream of phlegm all over himself. The duck's eyes stared into his, and it gathered itself for the final stroke.

Uncle Piers vaulted over the couch and onto the duck. They slid together off the table, a bouquet of flailing limbs. Then Uncle Piers clawed his way up, hands pulling at the heads, while the duck bashed him against the fireplace. It cracked him against the mantle.

"You are not the stuff of terror!" Uncle Piers spat blood. "I laugh at your useless beaks!"

The Great Duck answered with a frustrated honk; it was all hostility with no real weaponry. It lumbered around the dining room table, knocking Uncle Piers against chairs and cabinets.

Its heads pulled in different directions, and rifts appeared at the edges of each impacted duck part on its body.

Uncle Piers slugged it between the heads, and pulled his hand back with a gob of meat. "Drumstick!"

He did it again. "Breast!"

A great convulsion wracked the duck's frame, rattling Uncle Piers like a paint shaker and audibly flapping the loose skin of his ass in the air. When Piers's feet landed on the tile floor, it became a land war. He dug in with his toes and pressed the Great Duck back like a mighty sumo wrestler. The duck quacked from a place of deep concentration, and Uncle Piers answered with an effortful fart. The seams of the duck's body slowly pulled open.

Finally, the Great Duck lost its courage and retreated. Its legs spun on the fireplace brush, and it careened off Croesus's dinner stand, knocking it over. Uncle Piers followed, wheezing insults.

"Send it to the kitchen," Mom said. Her voice was so calm that I had to glance over. She was easing Croesus's head back so he could breathe again. She wasn't even watching the fight.

Uncle Piers chased the creature into the kitchen, where it hit the cabinets and burst apart like a bad idea. So now we had a mess in the garage *and* the kitchen. Uncle Piers stalked back into the room, breathing hard, hair kinked out. He looked inflamed and unhale, like an apocalyptic prophet made out of pizza dough. In one hand he held a soggy, depleted membrane of elephant placenta. In the other, he held a tremendous speckled egg.

"Nice, Piers," Mom said, finally looking up. "Of course you have a hard-on."

But before he could prepare a justification, it was gone, obscured by damp, bloody feathers.

* * *

The next day, Peabody hoteliers visited to evaluate Uncle Piers's ducks, and he ended up serving them *canard à l'orange*

instead. They were captivated. Try these duck buffalo wings. And this country *pâté*. All from the same son-of-a-bitch duck. What texture, what piquant flavors! They hired him as Executive Chef for the new resort. Free housing, plus one dependent.

Croesus was too weak to leave his bed, and I could easily avoid him. Whenever I ignored him, he was reduced to a querulous thread in the air, like a cobweb that I could walk through. He alternately begged for morphine and threatened torture. *Just be quiet for an hour, for once in your life*. Mom looked away from me, and left rooms when I entered, so she wouldn't have to see these thoughts in my face.

One night I passed Mom in the hall. She was standing still, her eyes on a dust bunny on the floor. The close, dark air was filled with groans and sobs, as if there were a slave galley on the other side of Croesus's wooden door. Her eyes skated away from mine. "You should..." She glanced into Croesus's room. "No, just go to bed."

So I didn't see him die. And Mom, who had jacked him with one hundred twenty doses of morphine and held him as he shut down forever—she hadn't been able to prepare the way with all those politicians she'd ambushed. The next morning she was the most famous mother in America, and the police took her away, first to jail and then to prison.

* * *

"This would all be different if you'd used the last of the elephant placenta," I told Uncle Piers.

"That is speculation. The duck was greedy and didn't leave much, and neither did Mandy's despair. In any case, by morning, when you found them, it was too late."

He was helping me pack my room. I would be moving with him to the Delta. This had been the arrangement all along, he said. Mom would sacrifice herself for Croesus, and then the living son would inherit to the living brother.

“Croesus would have come back—and then Mom would have stayed...”

Uncle Piers nodded thoughtfully. “If we had stirred his body in with the body of a condor, which is a giant Californian bird, he might have come back with wings.”

For some reason, his answer made me want to cry. “Or a camel and an ostrich,” I said. “Croesus could run fast and never need to drink.”

THE HUMMINGBIRD

Leanna Petronella

Blasphemous Pinocchio scrap.
Liar, growing your long nose out like a needle.

•

After hospice left,
my mother successfully killed,
we threw most of their things away.

Morphine down the toilet.
Wheelchair flung on our lawn.

We kept the IV machine, though.
We turned it into a hummingbird feeder.
The silver pole and bag swayed in our yard.

•

To make a hummingbird,
explode several peacocks.
Bottle whichever shimmering droplet
flees the feathers and pieces of beak.

•

One of my mother's friends
saw a hummingbird hovering by the funeral home.
She said, "Look, girls, there's your mother."

My mother is not a hummingbird.
Her dead body is in a vase.

PETRONELLA

To destroy a hummingbird,
jam nail scissors hard into the back of its head.
They will come out of its face, a death-beak.

•

My mother loved hummingbirds,
if I am going to speak the truth.

Watch, I will hold one in my hands and squeeze it
so I can carefully draw her blood with its beak.

•

And my stinger comes out of my mouth.

•

And I wear one as a necklace now, Frida Kahlo knows.
Shiny green brain of the albatross.

•

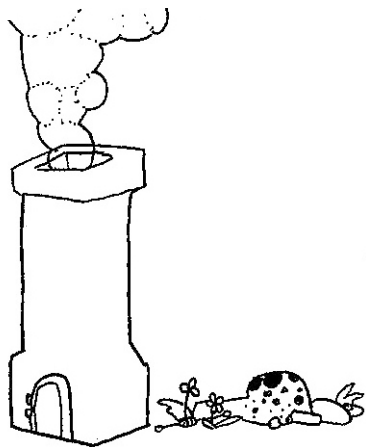
And I am a grown woman now, yet here I sit,
in my pink dress and red high heels,
zooming foil birds through the air,
humming to myself.

•

My mother died for hours.
We watched quietly.
It was raining.

We opened every door
to let the birds in.
They settled on my mother's arms.
They were oily blue and green like paint.

A palette with its low empty eggshells misses them terribly.



PROFESSOR FIRE'S CHARM

Adetokunbo Abiola

When Kalejaiye heard Professor Fire's advert on radio in June, his wife, Funmi, warned him against charlatans who led innocent and hardworking people in Akure astray. Any time he spoke to friends about the professor in Funmi's bar—a bar smelling of fresh fish pepper soup and marijuana smoke—Funmi said Kalejaiye's sins needed to be washed clean by the blood of Jesus Christ.

“Can't you see nothing good can ever come from Professor Fire?” she told him. “Can't you see most of what he claims—long life, prosperity, miracles—are lies? These are not things you buy from the market.”

Kalejaiye and his best friend, Olowo, snickered at her from their bench at the back of the bar, nudged each other, and stifled giggles about women and their many misconceptions. Kalejaiye told his wife she was in no position to advise him. She visited witch doctors such as Doctor Pellar to boost her business, yet nothing good came from the trips. Could she not see Doctor Pellar lied to her? What made her think Doctor Pellar was better than Professor Fire?

While he and Kalejaiye conversed, Olowo continued sipping from his bottle of Star, chanting incantations to arcane deities, and getting drunk. Later, he touched the breasts of the bar girl, Yemi, who slapped him, sparking a quarrel. Kalejaiye pacified Olowo, persuading him to go outside. Olowo gaped at Yemi's breasts, then staggered into the evening.

Kalejaiye followed him. In the street, women sat behind large pans balanced over glowing coals, tending to balls of bean cakes bobbing in hot oil. The aroma of the frying bean cakes permeated the street, while people called out to make purchases. Here and there, children hovered around the women, tending to the fires.

Food vendors darted in different directions in the nearby market, attending to customers. A boy selling bread shouted: “Bread, twenty! Twenty naira!” A young girl selling plastic bags of water moved on the street. “Pure-water, pure-water,” she called. A preacher slid through the gathering darkness, ringing a bell. “Repent,” he cried, “for the kingdom of God is at hand.”

* * *

Some weeks later, Kalejaiye and Olowo sat in attentive silence as Professor Fire’s newest advert, about longevity, played on the transistor radio at Funmi’s bar. “PROFESSOR FIRE, POWERFUL TRADITIONAL DOCTOR; DIRECTOR GENERAL OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE IN AFRICA; ONLY TRADITIONAL DOCTOR WITH LONGEVITY CHARM TO CURE CHOLERA, MALARIA, AND DYSENTERY.” The two friends nodded and agreed Professor Fire was different from the “second-hand” herbalists teeming in the streets of Akure. He was more colorful and had more credentials than they.

Kalejaiye and Olowo were so enraptured that Funmi banged her hands on the counter, reached for the radio, and switched it off.

“Have you people forgotten this is a bar?” she asked. “How much did Professor Fire pay you to advertise his name? If both of you don’t behave yourselves about this charlatan and crook, I’ll stop bringing the radio into the bar.”

Kalejaiye turned to her and said: “It’s a good idea if you stop bringing the radio here. Olowo will have nothing to do other than touch Yemi’s breasts and buttocks. If she slaps him ten times there’ll be ten fights. Prepare for more quarrels here simply because you don’t like Professor Fire.”

“How can I like him?” Funmi asked. “Don’t you know Professor Fire buries people’s destiny in the ground? I’ve even heard he makes love to young women in the cemetery. He does

it to renew his powers. If you fall into his hands and don't obey him, he'll send dangerous spirits after you."

"How do you know?" Kalejaiye asked. "Have you been to his clinic?"

"God forbid. What am I going to do there? His story is all over Akure. He made love to Falilat, Chief Daramola's daughter, by the cemetery. Today, she's as thin as a broomstick, while the professor has grown as fat as a pig. He used Falilat to increase his magical powers."

"It's a lie," Kalejaiye told her. "The problem with you women is that you listen to too many rumors." After saying this, he pushed his wife out of the way and switched on the radio, but the professor's advert had come to an end.

* * *

Olowo was the first to raise the idea of actually visiting Professor Fire's clinic. It was on a balmy Friday evening at Mama Destiny's bar on Alafia-Ayo Street. Olowo sat on a bench and bent his head over the table, his bottle of beer untouched. After a while, he raised his head, and Kalejaiye saw the whites of his eyes appear as though they were covered by a thin film of blood. His face looked dull, and he was in a rare passive mood. As Olowo stared out the bar, he tapped a finger on the table and bit his lip.

"I'm not happy today," he said. "In fact I'm on a beer fast. That's why I've not opened the bottle."

"Did your girlfriend jilt you?" Kalejaiye asked.

"No," Olowo said. "Fayemi has gone to Professor Fire's clinic. He wants a charm to make him live long. Why should I be different? Who wants to die?"

Fayemi belonged to their circle of acquaintances, all in their early forties. Kalejaiye considered him a very good man. Fayemi drank only six bottles of beer at a sitting while drunks like Olowo consumed at least ten bottles. Everyone in Kalejaiye's

circle smoked at least twenty sticks of cigarette a day, but Fayemi was satisfied with just eight. While most of Kalejaiye's friends drank throughout the day, Fayemi only drank in the evening. Kalejaiye was impressed that such a levelheaded man as Fayemi would visit Professor Fire's clinic.

As the days went by, he noticed that his other friends had gone to the clinic. Agbalagba—the freelance photographer who could drink a carton of stout at a single sitting—went a day after Olowo. Chief—a pleasant dark-skinned man who said “God is good” whenever he was drunk—was the next to go. Biodun, who never said anything when he was drunk, went after Chief. The last to go was Olominu, who had elaborate facial scars and said “I'm suffering” when he had not smoked a stick of cigarette for the day.

Within weeks of Kalejaiye's conversation with Olowo, some of his friends made a show of ignoring him at Mama Destiny's bar because he had not gone to Professor Fire's clinic. When Kalejaiye approached, they took their bottles of beer to different tables, laughing loudly, as though Kalejaiye did not exist. Kalejaiye would sometimes take his drink and join them. When he sat in their midst, they became silent as though an intruder sat among them.

In August, when Kalejaiye sat at Fayemi's table, Fayemi took his drink and moved. A week later, Gbenga snatched his cigarette packet from Kalejaiye when he wanted to take a stick, which would not have happened before. Gbenga had made Professor Fire's clinic his Mecca. Kalejaiye complained, but his friends replied only indirectly and with reluctance. Kalejaiye knew Professor Fire had come between them.

When they were with each other, Kalejaiye's friends were boisterous and happy. Kalejaiye could see them in Mama Destiny's bar, smoking and gulping beer as though it were water, flirting with the bar girls. They would tap each other on the shoulder and wink in a conspiratorial manner, the sense of something earned passing between them.

Privately, Kalejaiye felt betrayed by his friends. Still, he wanted to join them at their table, drinking beer, smoking, and laughing at the breasts of the bar girls and others on the streets of Akure. He wanted their eyes to brighten and light to shine on their faces when they saw him. He wanted them to include him in their circle, and was pained when they did not.

Previously, he had made it his regular routine to see his friends at the bar after work. Due to their attitude, he stopped the practice. Rather than go to bars, he played ludo near his office until the time he went to visit his wife. If he did not play the game, he visited his mother, who lived on Oke-Aro Street.

Sometimes he simply strolled. During this period, he discovered a new bus stop from where buses travelled to places like Benin City, Warri, Ekpoma, and Port Harcourt. Written on the flanks of the buses, bold letters proclaimed PEACE AND HAPPINESS MOTORS, LET THEM SAY EXPRESS, GOD IS GOOD MOTORS, and GOOD NEWS TRANSPORT COMPANY. Standing beside the buses, touts announced, "Benin City! Benin City!"

In September, when he could no longer bear his pain, he went to Olowo and announced that he was ready to go to Professor Fire's clinic. When he strolled into Mama Destiny's bar that evening, his friends ululated and congratulated him. "He has come back. He would rather live long than die early," they sang. Fayemi began praying and thanking God for Kalejaiye's decision to leave the land of sin and darkness. Beer bottles and cigarette packets appeared from different directions, and Kalejaiye again felt at home.

"How can you think of going to Professor Fire for anything?" Funmi asked when she learned her husband wanted to visit the clinic. "Have you forgotten the professor is an animal in human skin? If he gives you a gift with the right hand, he takes it back with the left. He might even take your entire hand. If you want to live for seventy years, he'll give you a charm that will make you last only for seven days. If anything goes wrong,

don't come to me. I won't be able to help you. You allow your friends to lead you astray."

"Nothing can go wrong," Kalejaiye told her.

At Mama Destiny's bar the next day, a drunken Olowo planned the trip to Professor Fire's clinic with Kalejaiye. Hunched over his bottle of beer, Olowo said: "Professor Fire will ask you how long you want to live. If I were you, I'd choose seventy years. All of us did. The charm gets bad if you put it in a calabash of water. And you always hang it around your neck."

But when he got home, Kalejaiye told Funmi that Olowo was a fool for asking for seventy years when he could ask for a hundred. He wondered why Olowo and his other friends were so unimaginative. Had they drunk so many bottles of beer they did not realize their missed opportunity? Kalejaiye wrote them off and planned to ask for the charm that would make him live for a hundred years.

* * *

Professor Fire's clinic was located in a large walled compound surrounded by patches of overgrown grasses strewn with old bottles and plastic bags. It was in the center of the city, and it had a sign that said, "Professor Fire, Ph.D., certified doctor by Melbourne University, New Zealand." Remembering that someone had told him Melbourne University was in Australia, Kalejaiye hesitated, but Olowo dragged him toward some shacks built of palm fronds at the back of the compound. Kalejaiye saw many supplicants who had traveled from afar sitting on benches and chairs. Red flags with white crosses were hung on tall bamboo poles around the compound, and an Indian-sounding music drifted from the main building.

Kalejaiye and Olowo sat on two seats in one of the shacks. All around men and women looked mournful and were silent. Flies buzzed around the shack, and the heat was stifling. Kalejaiye smelt blood, boiling beef, and cigarette smoke in the air.

Kalejaiye had, of course, been to the clinics of other witch doctors, but Professor Fire's clinic was as confusing to him as the bars in the center of the city. He had seen the painting of Jesus Christ on the fence surrounding the compound and now noticed a shrine placed near a wooden crucifix by the gate. Though Kalejaiye knew these things should not warrant enthusiasm or encourage his desire to live for one hundred years, he still felt his breath quickening and a surge of heat on his brow.

After a while, a woman with a long Rasta hairstyle came to their shack. As soon as she came in, Kalejaiye thought she smelled as though she had not taken her bath for days. He saw two flies circling her head, while her red blouse and skirt had holes in them. Kalejaiye supposed she was the professor's wife, or a priestess.

"Come tomorrow by ten," she told Kalejaiye and Olowo. "Professor is too busy to receive visitors today."

That night, Kalejaiye had a terrible dream. Professor Fire stretched out four hands and gave Kalejaiye a giant crucifix, a calabash containing cowries, a bowl of blood, and a broom. As soon as Kalejaiye took possession of the gifts, he was pursued by a swarm of tsetse flies. He jumped over a pond and fell into a crocodile-infested river. As he sank into the water, the crocodiles swam toward him, while the tsetse flies buzzed around his head, one of them biting him on the nose. Just before he drowned, Funmi appeared, grabbed his hand, and pulled him out of the river. Kalejaiye woke up sweating.

Despite the dream, Kalejaiye followed Olowo to Professor Fire's clinic in the morning. The woman with the Rasta hair—Professor Fire's ninth wife, Kalejaiye found out later—led Kalejaiye and Olowo to the professor. He wore a long beard and his eyes were red and his hair was jet black and bushy and his jaw was square. He wore a flowing red garment with a white cross, was bare-footed, and sat on a mat, holding a gong.

Kalejaiye was surprised by his appearance. He had expected a man in his seventies, but the professor could not

have been more than forty. Kalejaiye was uneasy—Professor Fire’s voice sounded loud and strong. It sounded like those of the streetwise hustlers who gathered at Old Garage to harass unwary pedestrians. Kalejaiye associated him with men who hustled with their lips rather than their charms.

The man filled Kalejaiye with confusion, and the feeling made him remember his dream of the previous night. But this confusion did not threaten Kalejaiye’s desire to live for one hundred years. He knew, also, that while he might be free to pursue his greed, he was not free to exhibit it. He wondered how he could hide it.

“Welcome to my clinic,” Professor Fire said in a loud voice. “The wind did not just blow the two of you here; it is destiny that brought you to me. You’re standing in front of a man who spent eleven months in his mother’s womb instead of nine. The two extra months were to prepare me to give mankind miracles and prosperity. I’ve seen a thousand spirits and didn’t die. I promise you’ll get whatever brought you here.”

After Kalejaiye told him why they visited, Professor Fire hit his gong to the floor and began to scream in Ikale and Akure dialects. He got to his feet and began to dance, the string of cowries tied around his ankles clashing. He stamped about the room for five minutes, stopped, and sat down on the mat, chanting in his esoteric language. When he finished, he stared at Kalejaiye, his eyes as red as ripe pepper.

He said the length of years a man could live with his charms were seventy, eighty, or one hundred. He took his goatskin bag from a nearby chair and brought out strings of cowries. He told Kalejaiye a string containing seven cowries represented seventy years, eight eighty, and ten a hundred. When a person chose seventy years, they would also buy a BMW and complete a twenty-room mansion. If they chose eighty, they would buy the BMW and build the mansion with the assistance of their children. When they chose a hundred, their grandchildren would buy them the car and build the mansion for them. Kalejaiye could choose

eighty or a hundred, but Professor Fire would prefer that he chose seventy.

“So how many years do you want to live?” Professor Fire asked.

“One hundred years,” Kalejaiye said.

Professor Fire paused and frowned. He looked as though he wanted to say something but was holding himself back.

“A hundred years?” he asked, as if confused. “Are you sure?”

Kalejaiye nodded.

“In that case you’ve chosen well,” the Professor said, tight-lipped, a sly smile to his face. “I myself chose seventy years, but a hundred years is also good. You’ll have young ones who will send you money through Western Union like other good Nigerian grandchildren.” His voice rose. “They will be around when you get to the evening of your days. They shall marry into very responsible families, and they will bring you a lot of goodies.”

“Thank you, Professor,” Kalejaiye said.

“Here’s the charm,” said the Professor, giving him the string containing ten dirt-encrusted cowries, but not looking into Kalejaiye’s eyes. “Always put it around your neck. It must not touch water in a calabash or it loses its power.” After paying the Professor an exorbitant fee, Olowo and Kalejaiye left the compound.

“You should have asked for seventy years,” Olowo said, but Kalejaiye waved him away.

When he walked into his house in the evening, he had the full assurance he would live for one hundred years. However, when he lay on his bed, he hoped his greed had not shown. He hoped it had not revealed itself to Professor Fire, who was trained to see and feel such things. He hoped that it would not be obvious to people who walked along the streets of Akure. If it did, it could be dangerous.

* * *

Kalejaiye knew something was wrong a day after he started wearing the charm. It was a balmy evening. Funmi, who had stopped talking to him because he'd gone to Professor Fire's clinic, had gone to the market to buy some foodstuffs for the bar. Kalejaiye used the opportunity to stroll along the street. Since he felt confident he would live for a hundred years, he smoked a stick of cigarette—the first time he had ever done this on the road.

He thought he was having a dream the moment he saw the vehicle. Policemen sped toward him in their rickety blue Peugeot 504, their rusty guns poking out of their car windows. Trying to dodge the vehicle, he fell into a nearby gutter. As he got to his feet, one policeman shouted: "If you move, I shoot!"

"What have I done?" Kalejaiye asked.

"You'll soon know what you've done," one of the policemen said.

He got out of the car and marched toward Kalejaiye. Before he'd gotten the charm, Kalejaiye would have taken to his heels, wanting to avoid police trouble. But since he would live for a hundred years, why bother to run? The policeman grabbed him by his trousers and dragged him toward the car. Kalejaiye shouted that he had done nothing wrong but the policeman continued pulling him toward the car. When they got to the open door, the policeman pushed Kalejaiye inside and got in. The car zoomed off. At the police station, the policemen charged Kalejaiye for wandering, smoking in a public place, and resisting arrest, even though Kalejaiye had followed them without a struggle. After they finished the paperwork, they threw Kalejaiye inside a cell.

Two hours later Funmi came to the station, smelling of tomatoes and pepper, crying, saying that the arrest was caused by Professor Fire, and that Kalejaiye had not been the same since he'd met the charlatan. "What has Professor Fire got to do with this?" Kalejaiye shouted after she effected his bail.

"*Oluwa gba mi*, God save me!" Funmi wailed. "You never used to shout at me. You never used to snore or talk throughout your sleep. A little black bird didn't use to sing by our window

from morning till night. All these things happened overnight for the first time in ten years. It's because of Professor Fire."

When Kalejaiye got to Mama Destiny's bar later in the day, he told her about the new events in his life. Mama Destiny frowned and said they were not coincidences. She invited him to her church—a white-garment affair—so the pastor could take Kalejaiye to the mountain and break the spell cast on him by Professor Fire.

The next day, Kalejaiye again sensed that something was wrong. He was cooking, since Funmi had gone to the bar. He poured kerosene into the small stove on the table and lit it up, tears brimming in his eyes from the acrid smoke of the flame. As he wiped his face, he heard the door opening. Before he turned, he felt a hard rubber kick on his leg and someone yelled: "Hands up!" With bleary eyes, Kalejaiye saw a tall heavily built man by his side.

"Don't move," the man said.

He dug a rifle barrel into Kalejaiye's spine and pushed. Kalejaiye fell against the stove, and the hair on his face singed at once. The flame danced and leapt higher in his eyes. Something crashed to the floor of the kitchen. Fear he hadn't felt in years overwhelmed him, and he pleaded with his unknown attacker.

The man stopped poking Kalejaiye with the rifle barrel. As Kalejaiye turned from the stove, smoke and heat in his eyes, he remembered the charm, and reckless confidence surged into him. He jumped at his assailant. When the volley of bullets exploded in the room, Kalejaiye fell to the floor, his hand accidentally sweeping the stove from the table. Red sparks fell on top of his head, and then he heard nothing.

An hour after the attacker left and sympathizers filled the apartment, Kalejaiye went round the room, assessing the damage. The expensive cell phones he had placed on the windowsill of his bedroom were missing, as well as a purse containing a lot of money. The robber had also taken a Parker Biro, a packet of razor blades, and Kalejaiye's prized cigarette pack.

As people commiserated with him, he pondered whether his enemies—known and unknown—had cast a spell that would make him prone to problems from policemen and armed robbers. He wondered whether he should not go to Professor Fire for explanations.

Just as he was thinking of this, Funmi entered the room; someone had told her she should come home, that her house was on fire. On entering, she nodded to neighbors, who had trooped in to say *pele*—sorry—and snap their fingers and shake their heads. After a long moment, she gestured to Kalejaiye to follow her into the bedroom.

When Kalejaiye met her inside, she told him to sit down, that she had something to say to him. She said that confronted with so much trouble in the past few days, she had persuaded Olowo to take her to Professor Fire for explanations. At first, Professor Fire had not wanted to speak because he had no business with Funmi, but Olowo begged him and he cooperated with her.

According to Funmi, Professor Fire had given Kalejaiye a charm to make him live not for a hundred years but for ten days. The professor told her Kalejaiye had been greedy in asking to live for a hundred years when he was told to ask for seventy. The charm he'd given Kalejaiye would speed up his life—so all the terrible experiences he should have had in a hundred years would occur in ten days, ending in death. But Kalejaiye could remedy the situation by neutralizing the effects of the charm. If Kalejaiye failed to do so, he had only eight days to live.

“I know you don't like Professor Fire,” Kalejaiye told her. “But why do you have to lie against the poor man? What has he done to you?”

“I'm just coming from his clinic,” Funmi said.

“It's a lie!” Kalejaiye shouted and stood up.

Funmi grabbed his trousers and fell to her knees, telling him to destroy the charm, that he had only eight days to live. She reminded him how she had told him months ago Professor Fire could not be trusted, that Kalejaiye should have nothing to do

with him. He was now in serious trouble because he'd disregarded her advice.

"Perhaps you're the one casting this spell of misfortune on me," her husband told her. "You want me to hate Professor Fire by force. If that's your plan, you'll fail. God will defeat the devil."

He brushed away her hands and headed for the door. Before he got there, Funmi got up and held his shirt. Kalejaiye slapped her and pushed her away. She screamed and fell to the nearby bed, whimpering. Kalejaiye opened the door and moved into the next room. He stepped into the hot August night and returned home drunk at about eleven o'clock.

* * *

Scared by what Funmi had told him, Kalejaiye stayed at home the next day, a Saturday, and nothing happened, prompting him to dismiss his wife's revelation. He decided to visit his maize farm the following morning to pluck some corn. The farm was situated a kilometer from his home and was a playing field for local kwela birds. The birds were many and young boys frequented the farm, holding catapults. When they killed one, they took it home and used it to prepare rice stew.

On getting to the farm, Kalejaiye saw the kwela birds perching on the stalks of maize. He noted they were very many. As he stared at them, thinking of the damage they did to his farm, he heard the boom of a sudden rifle shot. The birds shrieked, fluttered their wings, and rose from the farm, scattering into the air.

Shaken by the shot, Kalejaiye dove to the bottom of a nearby bush, his heart pounding with fear. As he rolled on the ground, thorns caught his shirt, tearing it. They also scratched his arms and legs, and he saw blood flowing from the wounds. His head, arms, legs, and clothes were covered in sand and dirt, and he beat at his face to prevent thorns from entering his eyes. He was so frightened that the hunter might mistake him for a kwela bird that he stayed still under the bush.

When he remembered that Funmi had told him he was marked for death, he became more afraid. The hunter would kill him. It was fated. He shuddered as though already hit by the hunter's bullet and he stiffened up, splitting inside with fear and confusion. Three more shots crashed into the evening. It seemed to Kalejaiye as though a bullet whistled past his head, missing him by a few meters. However, the rifle shots soon ended. Standing up, Kalejaiye ran off of his farm like a frightened rabbit.

Recalling the incident when he got home, Kalejaiye concluded it was another sign that something was wrong. He had been certain he would live for a hundred years after the visit to Professor Fire. But with Funmi's revelation and subsequent events, this belief appeared foolish. After lunch, while everyone else was at church, he removed the string of cowries from his neck, went to the kitchen, and dipped it into a calabash of water, rendering it powerless.

Kalejaiye was quiet in the next few days, scared the charm would still work and he would soon die. He came straight home from work, expecting death. If a fly buzzed too loudly, he jumped. However, on the dawn of the eleventh day after the professor gave him the charm, Kalejaiye smiled; he had survived.

* * *

In the evening, Kalejaiye went to Mama Destiny's bar to meet his friends. Olowo congratulated him.

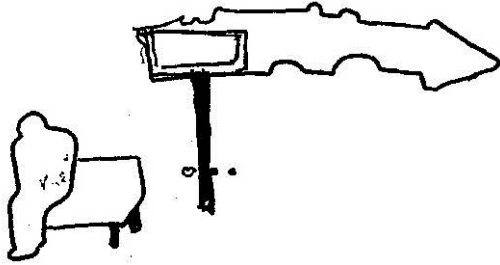
"Thank God you're alive," he said. "You should have asked for seventy years instead of one hundred. You're lucky you acted quickly."

"Thank God," Kalejaiye said.

After congratulating him for escaping death, Fayemi left his seat and sat close to him.

He told Kalejaiye about Professor Fire's latest charm. It would make someone live up to seventy years. After using it, people became richer, stronger, and more potent. Those who

used it said it was Professor Fire's greatest charm. Kalejaiye sat listening, thinking about a charm that could ensure a life of seventy years—a good, long life.



ASTERIUS
Daniel Hornsby

Asterius sits in a cow suit he made out of suitcases. He is covered in a confusion of luggage flaps and zippers. Human feet poke out; an ant navigates his toes. Most days he sulks in cattle fields, among his half-sisters and half-brothers, staring at the vaguely familiar miles of fence, remembering.

Not every immaculate conception is so immaculate, resulting in a Jesus, Krishna, or Heracles. Sometimes the children of gods are ugly. Loki's daughter Hel, for instance, was, like Asterius, a bisected vision of beauty and horror. Asterius never understood why Leda's children were so pretty. Shouldn't they, by extension of the laws that had shaped him, be half-swan? Or at least swan-headed? No. Shouldn't Perseus be half-human, half rain? Divine laws were inconsistent, especially when copulation was involved. Some kids are conceived to be heroes; others are fated to wander mazes and eat teenagers.

The other cows graze around him, blind to his presence. Aside from his bull's head, he also smells bull-like, leaving him free to pass among them unnoticed. He stumbles down to the man-made pond, drinks.

He was never killed. No, Theseus' slaying of the Minotaur and escape to Athens was a historical metaphor for the rise of mainland Greece and the economic/cultural decline of Crete. Asterius was never butchered. He just let Theseus go.

He never left the maze, either. It continued to grow. While the inventor's kid hit the sea like a pillow and Ariadne was ditched on Naxos, the maze began its expansion. First, only in its stone form. It spread, sentient (Daedalus could make lifelike robots long before the invention of the computer), consuming stones and pebbles, vomiting them out as tiles, doorways, and walls. When it had expanded as far as its supply of stone would allow, it

was forced to continue its expansion in other dimensions. In the spaces typically reserved for thought, ideas, language, aliens, and the divine, the walls snaked themselves into circular reasoning, circumlocution, and circumnavigation. The maze rematerialized as walls, fences, windows, and skulls on distant continents, making distinctions between objects, delineating what is and what is not. The genius of the maze revealed itself. It did not grow on its own. To trap a creature, you must understand where it wants to go. The maze grew from the desires and definitions imposed by humankind. In this way, it was pervasive, offering infinite galleries, trap doors, and false exits. The maze came to encircle the earth, much like the other god-bastard, the world-snake.

That left Asterius in a strange predicament. Previously, the Minotaur had been the only lost creature in the maze (he was no ruler; he was a prisoner—the labyrinth had been built to contain him). Now, the maze had bloated itself over all of civilization. The maze was crowded.

At night he wanders along the barbed wire fence on the highway. His hide coat is slung over his shoulder. Cars speed by, spitting light on him. After decades in the darker parts of the maze, his vision is sharp. He can see the tiny hairs between the eyebrows of the housewives through the windshields. He can count the moles on the truckers, the pimples on the teenagers. In these passengers he sees only labyrinths, Athenians and Minotaurs. Everyone, through his bovine eyes, is lost in a maze made by others.

Far off, headlights are two golden balls of thread, raveling towards him. As the vehicle nears, he sees it is a sports car, a Mercedes. The Minotaur steps out onto the road. The car speeds on, unaware of him. When it comes close enough, Asterius slaps the car as a father would punish a child, knocking it into the ditch between the highway and the fence. He looks down into the broken window on the passenger side. The man quivers, and, seeing the strange head of a cow staring down at him, cries out.

The Minotaur drives away in a Mercedes with cracked windows and a badly dented side. He will drive until the car runs out of gas. Asterius wonders if he should have eaten the man. He was fleshy enough, with no hair on the top of his head; it would have been an easy meal. But hours later the man would wake up and, for a moment at least, feel the maze, the absolute lostness of the walls. Until he remembered to check his cell phone or flag down a passing car, the man would be a Minotaur, too. Pressing the gas pedal with his bare foot, Asterius accelerates with an empty stomach, assuring himself that he did the right thing.

The man will be asked in the morning what happened. "I think I hit a cow or something. When I came to, I had no idea where I was. My car was gone." The authorities will find the car 150 miles west, somewhere in Colorado, with horn-shaped holes poking through the roof and bits of animal hair stuck to the leather seats.

THE GRASSHOPPER
Leanna Petronella

Who is green like me, the color of in sickness and in health?
Should I not be bridal white? Would I not make more sense
bleached, the skeleton of birds, an avian calcite maze,
with tiny skull and joints and angles? No! I'm green.

You won't know how to feel about me, as I decorate the dirt,
a vegetable or plant next entering your cells,
and here I am also, shading skin behind your skin,
a nuclear addendum so you land your pulp inside white bowls.
No, you won't know how to feel about me.

I jump and jump, life and death inside.
Tell me, are you anything like me?
Have you ever been a finger, elbows sprouting from the knuckles?
No? Perhaps you're a well-rubbed charm of dragons?

No, your life is still unbroken, which I forgive, or understand,
but I'm the glass jar with its heart gone.
Who knows where I have crawled?

If you're looking for a rainbow, I suggest you swap out nets.
If you're looking for me, I'll join you, and rot my ripe arcs
while I'm waiting.

I guess you'll find me in an instrument, blurring certain music.
I rub my hairy legs against my body until I start to thrum,
a small scraping of your somber horns, I gasp,
and then I'm done. Relaxed at last, and tendrils limp,
sprawled out from the seed, what, all humans, buzzed away?
I play myself in loneliness. I don't know how to grieve.

Or I guess you'll find me in a garbage heap,
strolling slimy runways, dressed up in peapods and shrimpheads
as I try to tear out my peppercorn eyes.

Or I guess I sit somewhere, penniless, jittery,
balefully collecting tickets before I climb into my tiny green horse
to begin working and working the stilts.

Can you feel my sad little body?
The antennae I stick into my horn-buds, flower stems
 waving in the wind?
Broken, broken me. The Frankenstein of insects.

Tiptoe past as I add leaves for wings and a grass blade for a tail.
This is my green costume, this star knotting up its limbs,
a tiny life exploded until stopped in a halted dance of prickling.
So to me it happened.

Earth,
you leave me with too many loose threads.
So much grass by the grave.
I spend my life leaping ridiculously beneath bootsoles,
clicking long green needles, a small grass-covered body
flying above a larger grass-covered body
because there's nowhere else to go.



MARIA AND THE MICE

Charles Antin

On the first day of a new temp job, the boss usually says, “Just answer the phones,” or, “Don’t wear sweatpants again tomorrow,” but on my first day at The Cooper Laboratory for Murine Research, Maria looks at me and says, “Let me show you to the mice.”

Maria leads me through a small office and into a dimly lit warehouse. Hundreds of mouse cages line the walls. It smells of cedar and urine. Each cage contains a water bottle, some wood shavings, and a single white mouse with red eyes. The cages are stacked six high, so that the top mouse cage is right at eye level.

“This will be your area,” she says. “We need to have all of these mice done by Friday. Can you handle that?”

“I can handle it,” I say.

“Have you ever handled mice?”

“The truth is, I’m not really a mouse person. I was an English major. Won The Award for Excellence in English.”

“How is that relevant to mouse work?”

“It’s not, directly, but it was a liberal arts thing so I’m very good at picking up stuff. I learned how to learn.”

“Can you learn how to handle mice?”

“I think so.”

“Because the last temp was afraid of mice.”

“I won The Award for Excellence in English,” I say. “I think I can handle some mice.”

Maria stares at me silently with her hands on her hips. I have clearly impressed her. To someone who is capable of understanding women and reading their looks, Maria’s glance paints a vivid, American picture, an Edward Hopper. This is the picture:

A 50s-style diner in Kennebunkport, Maine. Maria and I are in a corner booth. The chef smokes a menthol and flips a

pancake while, with his other hand, he pinches the waitress's ass as she picks up an order. An old man sits at the end of the countertop with a flask, pouring Bailey's into his coffee. Maria and I are oblivious to all that. We're having breakfast after a long night of lovemaking at her parents' cabin on the beach. Maria's eating Belgian waffles with blueberries; I'm drinking coffee.

"Pay attention," she says. "I'll show you how it's done."

Maria picks up the first cage in the row and places it on a steel table by the wall. She snaps on a pair of latex gloves and opens the cage. The mouse avoids her at first, but she is persistent and soon she pinches the skin of his neck between her thumb and first two fingers. He wriggles uncomfortably.

When the mouse is subdued she turns him onto his back. With her left hand she fills a syringe with a clear liquid. She watches me as she injects it into the mouse's abdomen.

"We have to wait for it to take effect," she says.

We stand in silence as the mouse, formerly inquisitive and mouse-like, begins to stumble. His nose stops twitching and he falls over.

"Now, once he's down for the count," says Maria, "just snip off about this much of his tail."

She indicates about half an inch with her thumb and forefinger.

"Cut off his tail?" I ask.

"No, just snip off about this much. Put the tail piece in a test tube, mark the test tube with the same number that's on the cage, and then put the mouse back in the cage and put the cage back on the rack. Repeat. *Capisce?*"

"*Ho capito*," I say.

"What does that mean?" she asks.

"That means 'I understand' in Italian."

"Why are you speaking Italian?" she asks.

"You said '*capisce*.'"

"So? That's just something people say. Are you Italian?"

"No, I'm French/Russian," I say.

"Do you understand what to do with the mice or not?"

“*Si*,” I say, though I don’t because how could I listen with Maria’s slender white arms grazing against my side now and then? It is clear these brief grazes are not unintentional. Maria is impressed with my worldliness. She is probably thinking something like: Here is a man of exotic French/Russian heritage with a working knowledge of Italian and who am I? I chop the tails off mice. He won The Award for Excellence in English and has a bright future as a famous novelist and/or literary critic. He’d never go for a girl like me; I feel like a Philistine in his presence.

Maria snips the end of the mouse’s tail off with a pair of scissors and scoops the fragment into a test tube. A drop of blood oozes from what’s left of the mouse’s tail. She places the mouse back in the cage to sleep off his hangover and returns the cage to the stack.

“We have a lot of mice to do, so let’s get started,” says Maria.

“*Ho capito*,” I say again.

Maria is a hard worker. She wants to get straight to work. No screwing around. That is an admirable trait. Not one I can say I possess myself, but one that will be useful for one of us to have when we move to Alaska. I envision us driving up there in a hybrid pickup truck, someday after our kids have moved out because why not? We both love salmon and Maria ties flies while I smoke a pipe and read *The New Yorker*, which I get a month late due to the iffy mail plane service to our island. Maria also built our house out of logs that she felled herself, with very little complaining.

“I said let’s get started,” repeats Maria, with a touch of the intensity that makes her such a great house builder.

I open the cage and look at the small white mouse.

“Mick,” I whisper. “Mick, let’s not make this difficult. You’ve got a tail, and I need to put about a quarter of that tail into this test tube.”

Mick doesn’t notice me. He gnaws on a food pellet in the corner. Just a tiny bit of his tail. An inch, that’s all. About twenty-five percent.

I reach into the cage and suddenly Mick sinks his teeth into my finger. I give him a little shake and then the pain hits. Suddenly, I'm hopping around the room doing a sort of erratic cowboy dance, waving Mick like a lariat above my head.

"Mick, you son-of-a-gun!" I say, and then realize that "son-of-a-gun" is not the kind of swear that will likely impress Maria. Women like Maria want a bad boy. I have to impress a woman like Maria with my rebellious, bad-boy attitude, as well as my intellect.

So I smash Mick across the edge of the table. He doesn't let go. I whip him against the table again, harder, and he still doesn't let go, but this time he rips in two, so at least he's not thrashing around. His back half flies across the room trailing his guts like a bloody mouse comet, but his front half remains attached to my finger.

"What the hell are you doing!" shouts Maria.

"Whaddya got?" I say and do my best Brando snarl.

Maria and I have now connected at an almost supernatural level. It's like I can read her mind. How did he go from this intelligent, multilingual guy, to this animal-killing, Brando-quoting brute, she thinks. When will he take me in his *Wild One*-era-Brando-arms and make love to me right here on this mouse operating table, she also thinks. But for now she remains silent.

I am also wounded, and that helps my case. Men like to fight and women like to take care of men when they injure one another. I am a temp, yes, but I am also attuned to things. I won The Award for Excellence in English. I am sensitive. When people look out at a lake and just see a lake, what I see is a giant poem or a song. In Maria I see the preliminary stages of what is commonly known as "The Florence Nightingale Syndrome."

Maria takes my hand in hers, gingerly, I think, though I'm a bit too light-headed from the blood loss to be sure. She wipes a drop of mouse blood from my cheek with her thumb. She pries Mick's mouth open and then removes his front half from my finger. His back half she finds, eventually, behind a mini fridge. She takes her time searching for him, almost as if she doesn't care

that my finger is still bleeding, and that my white blood cells are gearing up for an attack against the tetanus that courses through my veins.

“Let me see your finger.”

I present the appendage.

“Tell me,” I say. “Is it bad?”

“I’ll clean it out and put some Neosporin on it,” she says with the restrained piety of a field nurse in Italy circa World War II. She cleans my wound and dresses it. I can picture us on the roof of the hospital in Padua watching chimney swifts. Maria is the night nurse. I’m an American ambulance driver who caught some shrapnel in the back. We talk about all the things we’ll do when the war is over and we return to New York City. But then an Italian soldier woos Maria with his knowledge of animal husbandry at the Palio di Siena, and I return to Brooklyn heartbroken. Eventually I get gonorrhea from a Macy’s sales girl while riding in a taxi cab down Broadway.

“Hello?” says Maria.

“What?” I say.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Of course. The pain is pretty bad. It feels like there’s a little heart beating in my finger.”

“The pain is not bad. These mice bite me a few times a day.”

Maria holds up her hands. They are covered with small white scars, some in the exact shape of two little mouse teeth. Maria is a gorgeous girl, but her most redeeming feature is not her hands.

“Well, it feels like I took some shrapnel in Padua or something.”

“What the hell is a Padua?”

“It’s a town in Italy,” I say.

Maria knows very little about Italian language and geography.

“Do you know who Boticelli was?” I ask, as a test.

“The boss is not going to be happy. Let’s get back to work.”

“I’ll take that as a no,” I say.

Maria, it is clear, feels that her work is important. She enjoys cutting the tails off of mice and putting them into test tubes. Whereas someone like me would rather sit around drinking Port and discussing where trout go in the winter, Maria would rather be “getting her hands dirty.” I see my injury as an opportunity to take the day off, but not Maria. She just wants to get back to “the grind” as she probably refers to it over beers at “The Watering Hole,” or wherever she goes with her girlfriends. I must admit, I find her blue-collar tendencies very charming, very *Germinal*. If I must relate to Maria on the level of the so-called nine-to-five then so be it.

I walk to the stack of mouse cages and take the second one off the stack. I notice, with some regret, that the mouse inside looks very much like Mick did pre-bisection. He sits in the corner, twitching his nose. His red mouse eyes watch me. Nonetheless, I am resolved to remove his tail and present it, a trophy, to Maria.

“Have you ever been to a bull fight?” I ask Maria.

“Please work on the mice,” she says.

I picture myself as a matador in Sevilla, circa early twentieth-century. It’s a *mano a mano* bill, me versus Joselito, the hometown favorite. Mick is a 534-kilo bull, a Miura, with long horns. It’s the end of the fight but he’s still got some life in him. I pass him a few times and the crowd cheers. The band strikes up the *pasodoble* and then it’s time to line up for the kill. I stand in front of the bull. His neck is low, his tongue droopy and dusty. Blood streams from his back. I sight my sword at the silver-dollar-sized soft spot between his shoulderblades. I twitch my cape and he charges.

“*Olé!*” I say.

“What are you doing? You’re supposed to stick the needle in, inject the anesthesia, and then take it out, not leave it in there. Why did you drop him? Why are your hands in the air?”

Very few women can resist a matador. Maria can't, that's for sure. Her face is red. Her teeth are grinding and the knuckles on her fists are white. She stares at me unrelentingly. Where I come from, that's called passion.

Mick #2 is dead. That much is clear. There are little beads of blood on his abdomen where I poked him with the needle. I pick up the scissors and snip off his tail, but not just twenty-five percent. I snip off the whole thing for good measure. Why not, he's dead anyway.

"For you," I say and extend the tail towards Maria.

"Put the tail down. You're done with the mice," she says.

"I cut off his tail," I say.

Maria, for all of her talent and grace, still speaks in the incomprehensible *lingua franca* of the fairer sex. They ask for one thing, but want another. She asked me to cut off the tails of mice, and then she got angry when I did. Maria got her tail. As I see it, the ends justify the means. Obviously her ignorance of Italian culture extends to Machiavelli.

"Perhaps I'd be more suited for something a little more cerebral," I suggest. "I don't feel like this mouse thing really takes advantage of my skills in the humanities."

"You know," she says, "I think you're right. Why don't you go into the office and use the computer."

"What should I do?" I ask.

"I don't care," says Maria. "Surf the Internet. Check your email."

This, I think, sounds like a management position. A position a The Award for Excellence in English winner is cut out for. Of course, I'll be Maria's boss, which may be awkward for her, especially since I'm a temp and climbing the corporate ladder so quickly. I can see it now: my salary shoots up with much fanfare, like the fountains at the Bellagio. My co-workers throw me a party at a fashionable downtown hotel like the Soho Grand. Weeks later, Maria gets angry when I come home with a Porsche 911 GT3 and refers to the "glass ceiling." I point out that

women who work with glass ceilings shouldn't throw stones and I don't hear you complaining when we're eating Maine lobster and drinking Grand Cru Chablis on the widow's walk of our house in Nantucket. The fight ends in passionate lovemaking, during which I let her stay on top in the "dominant" position.

I'm busy arranging a list of possible retirement communities into an Excel spreadsheet (the things a The Award for Excellence in English winner will do for love!) when Maria enters.

"Ready to go?" she asks.

"Is it five already?"

Maria takes her coat from the wall closet. It's a big poofy thing, a Triple Fat Goose from the late 90s. She hands me my sport coat. We walk together into the parking lot. I hold the door for her.

"See you tomorrow?" says Maria.

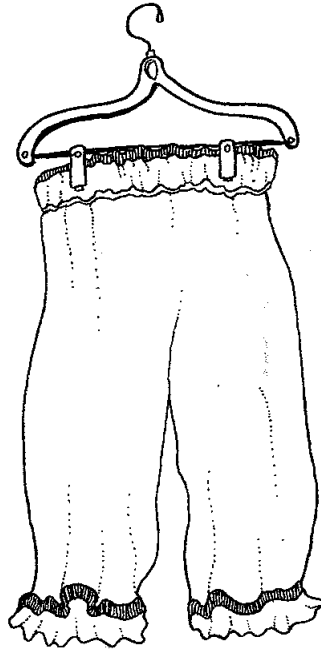
"I guess so," I say.

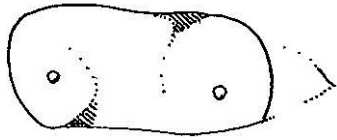
"You'll pick it up eventually, don't worry."

"I don't know if I'll be here long enough to pick it up. It's just a temp job until I write a novel or collection of poems or something."

"Yeah, I said the same thing when I started. That was eleven years ago November."

And just like that, I see this: Maria walking down the aisle in a Vera Wang (her one indulgence). It's an elegant number: a full A-line gown with swirling, graduated French tulle and pleating, a black taffeta sash, and a sprinkling of English net overlay. We're at the beach in Kennebunkport. The sea is dark blue in the background and the wind blows steadily. On the altar stands Ernest Hemingway in a tuxedo. He's been drinking, that's clear, and he's got on a big grin, like he can't believe how lucky he is to be marrying a lab tech at The Cooper Laboratory for Murine Research. I'm behind the tool shed with my Uncle Mike, smoking a joint and getting drunk on wine coolers.





[POETS CAUGHT BY A LASSO]

Tomaž Šalamun

Translated from the Slovenian

by Michael Thomas Taren and the author

Poets caught by a lasso and a corporation's
CEO know: lightning and mercy.
Nuns know tigers, lions.
Ex-nuns with their relatively good education,
are like juice, spilled from the deck into the sea.
In May we'll have the Congress.
There drinking and singing will happen.
The man who comes close, looking through a
magnifying glass, can be misled. Spruces remind me
of chimneys. But as a seamstress who knows
in advance how the hem will look, we of
today know in advance what will be the clear
and defining platform and decisions.
The fat woman will be fashion.

BRANDS OF GIRL
Cathy Vandewater

“What is she wearing?” whispered Ter to Jo. “A sweater,” I said. The sleeves were short, I realized—I yanked the cuffs. “Um, we know,” said Lei.

She stared at the sweater. It was suddenly scratching me, making my skin crawl. “It’s Calvin,” I said. Lei snickered. “Labels are so tacky.”

We called our friend Leijla “Lei,” like the jeans, and Shan and Jo were short for Shannon and Joanna. “Ter” was our Cambodian friend Tharath.

They tried to give me a nickname—Cat—but it didn’t stick. Lei, Ter, Shan, Jo, and Cathy. Cathryn. Kit-Kat. We tried. I wasn’t as catchy.

They all had a look. Shan was preppy, in GAP and clear Stila lipgloss; Jo, freesia-smelling with CG Simply Powder and Purell in her purse.

Lei the rebel, poor in a hip way, with perfect skin, dotted borrowed eyeliner on in study hall, no brand, flipping her dark hair.

Ter the sexpot, poor like Lei, but glamorous, got her nylon black panties from Walmart and Poly-Lycra blend tops from Deb.

And me? JC Penney. My mom and I, we'd driven 4 hours to the outlet mall that weekend for a single treasure: a ½ price Calvin Klein sweater.

I wore it (the CK label proudly embroidered across the chest in red) on the first day of school with my dark jeans and blown-out hair.

Jolly Ranchers are the candy all the hot, popular girls suck and twirl with their tongues—the red ones, to flush your lips like kissing.

My friends had them, passed them out before homeroom, from empty New York & Co. purses. That's how I knew they were cool. I saw them, unwrapping.

I smiled and waved at my friends. Lei smirked. Jo sucked a Jolly Rancher and clicked it on her teeth. They shot glances at each other.



THE BEGINNER IN A YOGA CLASS

Julieta García González

Translated from the Spanish by Toshiya Kamei

The students were in the downward dog posture when the beginner arrived, bringing a gust of cold air with her. Late again. That was why she wasn't making friends with those who were disciplined and quiet: her style was less serene, more expansive. She came in trying, as always, to get noticed, but no one paid her much attention. A few swung their hips, the position coming undone, but most continued steadily, with their foreheads touching the floor and their buttocks pointing toward the ceiling.

It was perhaps the beginner's third or fourth class, and it showed: her carefully coiffed hair, her visibly new pants, the soft-looking soles of her feet, and, above all, the anguished expression that crossed her face every time she had to do a more or less complicated asana.

In the room there were all kinds of people: an old man who bent himself with surprising agility, bringing his feet to his head at the drop of a hat; a girl who groaned like she was having an orgasm every few seconds; a couple of very athletic young men who lacked flexibility, but were full of force and energy and fumed as if the class were an Olympic training regimen. And so on. But no one smelled of perfume like the beginner, nor did any other girl slip thin gold bracelets over her wrists, and there was never another student with makeup as perfectly applied as the beginner's.

The instructor was nice and good-looking, and floated through the room with an absent or smug air that made him desirable. He hardly modulated his tone because there was no need to raise his voice here: it would disturb the peace the students sought, the tranquility of the Buddha who rested quiet, illuminated by a few candles, in the darkest corner of the room.

Thus he walked up and down, giving instructions almost in silence; he preferred to apply the force of his hands or arms to those students who didn't bend themselves adequately when they had to do it.

To almost everyone it was clear that the beginner wouldn't last long here, but no one knew why. She had a beautiful, well-formed body and seemed worried about keeping her long, pearlized nails intact. She obviously enjoyed the instructor's hands over her body, touching her to correct her posture, because she smiled, shook a little, and even blushed. It was perfectly acceptable for him to touch all the bodies in the room—he was allowed to put his hands under the students' chests, spread their legs apart, and grab their thin or sweaty hands. Perhaps he felt no special attraction to her, but found her a bit boring, because he watched her condescendingly and paid no heed to her prompt complaints.

But that day when the beginner arrived late, hurriedly took off her sweatshirt and socks, shook her wrists to take comfort in her shiny bracelets, spread her mat on the floor, raised her hips, lowered her chest, and lifted her buttocks, the room was filled with dark premonitions. One of the most advanced students—who could bend herself completely in the warrior pose, for example—talked about dense dreams that had filled her night, in the middle of the class when demanding postures required silence. One of the most seasoned students hit his head on the floor, as if he had been lifted off his feet, when he leaned to do a very simple asana; another student began to bleed from his nose, obviously distracted from the exercise he was doing, when he looked at the beginner's well-cared-for feet. But they were barely into the first half hour and nothing serious was happening; those incidents seemed nothing more than unfortunate coincidences.

The first sign that there would be no going back, that this yoga class would come to no good end, appeared when they were doing the mountain pose: *tadasana*. Upright, with necks extensively stretched, shoulders down, abdomens contracted,

feet firmly on the floor, the students tried to reach the sky with the crowns of their heads. They were supposed to be snowed mountains: their fontanels were peaks reaching up through the clouds; the rest was rock solid, an enormous, immobile mass. The effort to stay in this posture made the students sweat and complain, except for the beginner, who noticed—with a vaguely worried look on her face—something coming out of her crotch and falling to the floor. As they got out of the posture, the beginner discreetly brushed her feet. A handful of loose dirt tickled between her toes; also on her thighs there were traces of fine dust, cream-colored. She shook disconcertedly and looked up to the ceiling to search for an answer, but she found nothing.

The class continued without the others noticing the pile of dirt that the beginner, with her foot, brushed off her mat. In this class the postures were formed one after another, without giving rest to the bodies subjected to so much bending. The beginner was determined to keep up with the rest of the class. When she had to raise her rear end again—her hips bent backward, her arms stretched, her shoulder blades spread, and her breastbone open—she barely managed to stay in the downward dog posture for a few seconds before collapsing with a groan: a few sparse stiff hairs had sprouted from her bare feet, her nails had turned black and pointy. Instinctively she brought her hand over her rear end and found a bump starting to form right on her coccyx.

The instructor came near her, worried, but the beginner drew in her legs, embarrassed, hid her feet, and apologized, saying she couldn't continue holding that posture because her back was hurting. Shaking his head and telling her to do her best without hurting herself, the instructor walked toward the center of the room and showed another asana for the class to follow. Again the mountain posture. The beginner ran to put her socks back on and returned to her place. She breathed in, once, twice, before feeling something drop from her left shoulder. Fearfully she looked down and confirmed that there were a couple of pebbles and a bit of crushed dirt. When everyone sat down, she

breathed a sigh of relief, but was no longer sure that she wanted to continue with the class.

The instructor then demonstrated the fish pose: lying down, putting the soles of his feet together, arching his spine, and bearing weight on the crown of his head. He showed it twice stressing two points—watching out for the lumbar vertebrae and keeping the ankles together on the floor. The beginner, filled with doubts and fears, stayed lying on her mat, unwilling to do anything. As he walked through the room, the instructor stared at her and asked if she was feeling all right. Yes, perfectly fine, she answered, increasingly uncomfortable with the bump growing on her rear end and being a bit sore from the ankles down. Well, then, what's the problem? asked the instructor. And she, not daring to talk back, put her soles together, arched her spine, raised her chest, and leaned on the crown of her head. Everything looked upside down and felt different, somewhat blurred. An unusual itching sensation on her skin forced her to straighten up and she suppressed a cry when her suspicions were confirmed. Her cuticle was full of small, iridescent scales that shone under the artificial light and glittered beautifully when the candle flame flickered in a corner.

She looked uneasily at her arms and cried a little. Now things were very complicated. She didn't want to leave because going out into the street like this seemed crazy. On the other hand, she was afraid of staying here because she would feel obliged to keep doing asanas, and didn't know how it all would end.

The instructor returned to the center and in a soft, harmonious voice offered instructions for the crow. It was a complicated posture, and the beginner had unsuccessfully tried it on previous occasions. As she felt she didn't dominate the pose, she lost a bit of fear. Surely nothing would happen to her if she failed to do it expertly. But the instructor insisted that they work in pairs so that they would help one another and learn what their strengths and weaknesses were. A beautiful, elastic girl stood next to the beginner and smiled. They would work together. The

girl went first and the beginner tried to stay in the shade to avoid questions about her shiny new scales. When her turn came, she plunged into the task, a bundle of nerves. She kept her open palms on the floor, wrists just below the shoulder line, bent her knees, and placed them over her arms. Then she leaned forward, with her chin lifted, a bit more. To her surprise, she managed to keep her balance. Her throat let out a caw instead of the cry of joy she had uttered. Her companion winced, stood up, and pointed with shouts to the black, silky feathers growing out of the beginner's shoulder blades.

The whole group stopped suddenly. There was a silence arising from incredulity and fear, a surge of surprise, and the general astonishment that left them there, surrounding her, admiring her wings, her scales, her budding tail, and the heaps of stones on her collarbones. All the eyes were fixed on that body that seemed suspended in the air, but no one said a word. None of them would dare touch the fragile figure of the beginner, who watched them with a worried look, not daring to speak for fear that her hardened lips would let out another bloodcurdling caw.

The situation called for quick action and calm deliberation; they had to act at once to resolve the problem and force the reality fleeing the room to return and settle for good. But how? No one dared to propose anything. One student, instead, pointed to the clock: time was ticking away, and soon the next class would come in, so what would they do? They spoke of their fear of being implicated in something troublesome. The girl remained in the same posture, but didn't seem to be suffering. Some suggested calling an ambulance. Even though it was a sensible suggestion, they had no idea what they'd say to the doctors and were uneasy about the prospect of the situation slipping out of their control. One of them suggested calling the beginner's family so that her relatives would take charge of the case. But the girl refused to speak, shook her head, and frowned. Nor did she give any indication as to whether they would find, in her wallet or her clothes, information that would help them.

After such sensible considerations, the instructor stepped back and shook his head, as if searching for a ray of hope and wisdom. I know, he said, smiling. Let's change her position. We have to find a form that turns her back into a human. The girl had more feathers on her body than when her companion had pointed to her. Apparently she became more feathered the longer she remained in the crow pose. And to think, the instructor said with relief, that we were going to do the scorpion a few minutes after the crow! They surrounded the beginner and helped the instructor untangle her knees from her arms and reset her body.

If we leave her on the floor, anything can happen to her, said one student. Before letting go of her, we should think what position she'll assume.

The instructor didn't let their collective fear cloud his thoughts. Warrior 2, he said in a firm voice, and nodded as if he had spoken before a large audience. The students gave him serious looks and dedicated themselves to the task of placing one foot at ninety degrees, another foot at forty-five, hips balanced, arms spread at shoulder level, one knee bent, the body in that direction. The girl was as hard as a piece of old leather. She stretched herself to a certain point and then seemed to give in to pressure. The students took great pains to arrange her without hurting her. She seemed to breathe at last when she was in that position.

Very well, said the instructor. Everyone, that asana. Let's see if we can help her. Here and there hurried footsteps and agitated breathing were heard. They began to assume the warrior pose, with their arms firm and faces sideways. They glanced out of the corners of their eyes at the beginner, who was placed at the front of the room. Breathe slowly and deeply, said the instructor. The whole class rose with chests full of air and then there was a collective exhalation that filled the room with a vague hope. The girl, too, managed to breathe and smiled. She didn't feel like talking yet because her lips still felt hard and stuck together; neither did she want to move a lot, to shake with

an anticipated victory—the scales on her arms still shone and her feet were sore—but she felt more or less certain that she would be free.

They held the posture for what seemed like an eternity. The instructor was about to dismiss the class early so that the girl would hurry home and never come back, when he noticed the armor that had grown around her body. It was made of cloth rather than metal, but it was doubtless armor. It looked bulky and rather uncomfortable. He walked toward her and looked at her ferocious expression, her sullen gesture, and her wild eyes; the girl hadn't lost her other features—hardened lips; scales; feathers; budding tail; strange-shaped, socked feet; and dirt—but she had more of this. It was a scary sight.

No, no, no, said the instructor. It can't be. What should we do? The students knew they couldn't leave the girl like this, but they had no idea what they could do to turn her back into what she'd been at the beginning, or at least to stop her from transforming in such a brutal manner. All the students pondered in silence, desperate, touching their heads or scratching their arms, but no matter how hard they thought, nothing came to their confused minds, until one of them said, Why don't we do deep relaxation? So the girl will forget animals and warriors and all those things. She will be herself again, get back her body. The instructor decided that this was a brilliant idea, and told the whole room to relax, because they could surely use it. He had some reservations, because after all it was the position of the cadaver, but he supposed, if he did it fast and woke her before relaxation was done, the girl would go back to her normal state; perhaps she would be weak and half unconscious, but it was worth trying. He turned off the main lights, lit an incense stick and another candle, a purple one, and breathed in deeply.

Now, he said, let's relax. There's nothing on your mind—except yourself. Feel your body and feel it relax. Let your hands, fingers, and toes relax. Before lying down, three students had laid down the girl, who by then had turned into some kind of

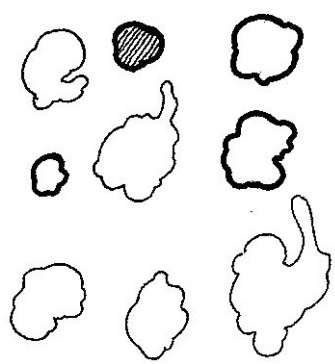
mannequin, stiff and colorful; her bracelets jingled on her wrist. It wasn't easy to focus on relaxation. Everyone was thinking about the beginner and giving her sideways looks now and again, so the instructor decided to put on some music with mantras so that they would forget about her and focus on what he was saying.

Forget everything, he said in a monotonous, hoarse voice. And think of nothing but your body. Feel it relaxed, loose, free from all the positions you've done today. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, slowly and consciously. Let your mind go blank; inhale, exhale, inhale. Now exhale everything through your mouth.

As if he didn't see her well, the instructor riveted his gaze on the girl again and noticed with relief that the armor was lying aside, as if abandoned, and that her body looked a lot less tense. As he watched her bulging chest heave up and down softly, he felt better. Now loosen every part of your body and forget everything else. Loosen your feet, toes, and ankles. Continue with your legs: calves, kneecaps, and thighs. Let everything go limp, like it's not yours, it no longer belongs to you. Go up softly to your hips, pubis, and genitals. Go gradually to your ribs. Relax your internal organs: intestines, pancreas, kidneys, and stomach. Go up, slowly, to your breastbone. Inhale, exhale. Relax your heart, lungs, throat, and tongue. Feel your teeth, jaws, ears, and brain relax. Feel inside your eyes and relax them. Inhale, exhale. Now relax your ears, scalp, lips, and cheeks. Let everything go and relax. Inhale, exhale. Gradually come out of relaxation, move slowly. Turn right and draw in your legs and arms.

The instructor's voice was soft, monotonous, and rhythmic. The mantras droned on in the background and the smell of jasmine incense filled the room. Everyone seemed to have forgotten the girl, her scales, and her feathers. Smiles of ecstatic joy flashed across a few faces. The instructor lit a lamp, then another. Sit on the right side, gently, he said, and then leaned to see if the girl was following his instructions. The group moved more or less in unison, so he had trouble making out the figure

on the other side of the room. Some started chatting, others noisily yawned. No one seemed to remember the beginner—no one but the instructor. The moment he took slow steps toward her, a chilling silence fell on the room again. On the floor, among the scales, tail, feathers, and armor of coarse cloth, there were the girl's dispersed limbs: the legs torn from the torso, the intestine by the ribs, the eyes thrown out, the fingers left beside the collarbone, covered with dust; the tongue in the hair, a fistful of teeth next to an ear, the pulsing genitals near a foot, and the fragile arms, with bent elbows, on some gold bracelets that shone for the last time.



THE BUTTERFLY
Leanna Petronella

A worm
with fruit peel wings
crashes to the ground.
Flabbily

he gasps
and rests beneath
his stinking orange peel
staring up at the sky.

A fly
crawls in margarine
and dots the yellow swirls
with curling black hairs.

He screams in the mirror
and shakes his damp fur:
For I am the butterfly
also

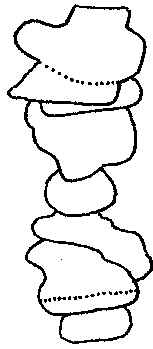
As for me
I never said
I had rainbows
for elbows

Never said
I'd slice thinly
for anyone
to see

I'm veins and wind
shivering. I float.

My mind is elsewhere,
always elsewhere,

a little hand
waving from the sky.



DIFFICULT AT PARTIES
Carmen Maria Machado

Afterward, there is no kind of quiet like the one that is in my head.

Sam brings me home from the hospital in his ancient Volvo. The heater is busted and it's January, so there's a fleece blanket wedged at the foot of the passenger seat. My body radiates pain, is dense with it. He buckles my seat belt, and his hands are shaking. He lifts the blanket and sets it down on my legs. He's done this before, tucking it around my thighs while I make jokes about being a kid getting ready for bed. Now he is cautious, fearful.

Stop, I say, and do it myself.

It is a Tuesday. I think it is a Tuesday. Condensation on the inside of the car has frozen into ice. The snow that I can see is dirty, a dark yellow line carved into a space near the curb.

The wind rattles the broken door handle. Across the way, a teenage girl shouts to her friend three unintelligible syllables. Tuesday is speaking to me, in Tuesday's voice. Open up, it says. Open up.

Sam reaches for the ignition. Around the hole there are long scratches in the plastic where, in his rush to get me, the key had missed its destination over and over again.

The engine struggles a little, like it doesn't want to wake up.

* * *

The first night back in my house, he stands in the doorway of the bedroom with his wide shoulders hunched inward and asks me where I want him to sleep.

With me, I say, as if it's a ridiculous question. It is a ridiculous question. Lock the door, I tell him, and get into bed.

The door is locked.

Lock it again.

He leaves, and I can hear the stifled jerks of a doorknob being tested. He comes back into the bedroom, flips back the covers, buries himself next to me.

I dream of Tuesday. I dream of it from start to finish.

When the thin light of morning stretches across the bed, Sam is sleeping in the recliner in the corner of the room. What are you doing? I ask, pushing the quilt off my body. Why are you there?

He tilts his head up. Around his eye, a smoky-dark bruise is forming.

You were screaming, he says. You were screaming, and I tried to hold you, and you elbowed me in the face.

This is the first time I actually cry.

* * *

I am ready, I tell my black-and-blue reflection. Friday.

I draw a bath. The water gushes too-hot from the spotted faucet. I peel my pajamas away from my body and they fall like sloughed skin to the tiled floor. A halo of flesh gathers around my ankles; I half expect to look down and see the cage of my ribs, the wet balloons of my lungs.

Steam rises from the bath. Somewhere in this room I am remembering a small version of myself, sitting in a hotel hot tub and holding my arms rigid against my torso, rolling around the churning water. I'm a carrot! I'm a carrot! I shriek at a woman, who might be my mother. I'm a carrot! Add some salt! Add some peas! And from her lounge chair she reaches toward me with her hand contorted as if around a handle, the caricature of a chef with a slotted spoon.

I add a fat dollop of bubble bath.

I slip my foot into the water. There is a second of brilliant heat that slides straight through me, like steel wire through a

block of wet clay. I gasp but do not pause. A second foot, less pain. Hands on the sides, I lower myself down. The water hurts, and it is good. The chemicals in the bubble bath burn, and they are better.

I run my toes along the faucet, whispering things to myself in a low voice, lifting up my breasts with both hands to see how high they can sit; I catch my reflection in the sweaty curve of the stainless steel, tilt my head. On the far side of the tub, I can see the tiny slivers of red polish that have receded from the edges of my toenails, crescent moons ebbing into nothing. I feel buoyant, weightless. The water goes too high and begins to threaten the lip of the tub. I turn the faucet off. In the absence of the roar of rushing water, the bathroom echoes unpleasantly.

I hear the front door open. I tense, until I hear the rattle of keys on the hallway table. Sam comes into the bathroom.

Hey, he says.

Hey, I say. You had a meeting.

What?

You had a meeting. You're wearing a dress shirt.

He looks down at himself. Yes, he says, slowly, as if he did not, before this moment, believe his shirt existed. Actually, he says, I went and looked at some houses on the other side of town.

I don't want to move, I tell him.

You should find another place. He says this with force, as if he has spent his entire day building up to this sentence.

I shouldn't do anything, I say, I don't want to move.

I think it's a bad idea to stay. I can help you find a new apartment.

I wind a hand into my hair and pull it away from my skull in a wet sheet. A bad idea for who?

We stare at each other. My other arm is crossed over my chest; I release it.

Unplug the tub for me? I ask.

He kneels in the cold puddle on the tile next to the tub. He unbuttons the sleeve at his wrist and begins to roll it up in a

neat, tight coil. He reaches past my legs, into the water still thick with bubbles, down to the bottom. Suds catch on the roll of fabric around his upper arm. I can feel the syncopated drumming of his fingers as he fumbles for the beaded chain, weaves it around them, pulls.

There is a low pop. A lazy bubble of air breaks the water's surface. He withdraws, and his hand brushes my skin for a moment. I jump, and then he jumps.

My face is level with his shins when he stands; there are wet circles on the knees of his dress pants.

You're spending a lot of time away from your place, I say. I don't want you to feel like you have to spend every night here.

He frowns. It doesn't bother me, he says. I want to help. He vanishes into the hallway.

I sit there until all of the water drains, until the last milky swirl disappears down the silver mouth and I feel a strange shiver that starts deep within me, worryingly. A spine should not be so afraid. The receding bubbles leave strange, white striations on my skin, like the tide-scarred sand at the beach's edge. I feel heavy.

* * *

Weeks pass. The officer who'd taken my statement in the hospital calls to say they might have me come in to identify someone. Her voice is generous, too loud. Later, she leaves a clipped message on the answering machine, telling me it's not necessary. The wrong person, not the right one.

Maybe he left the state, Sam says.

I stay away from myself. Sam stays away, too. I don't know who is more afraid, me or him.

We should try something, I say one morning. About this. I gesture to the space in front of me.

He looks up from an egg. Yes, he says.

We lay out suggestions on a hot pink Post-it note that is too small for many solutions.

I place an order for a DVD from a company that advertises adult films for loving couples. It arrives in a plain brown box, neatly placed on the corner of the cement stoop in front of my apartment. When I pick it up, the box is lighter than I expect. I tuck it under my arm and grope the doorknob for a minute. The new deadbolt sticks.

I put the box on the kitchen table. Sam calls. I'm coming over soon, he says. His voice always sounds immediate, present, even when he's speaking over the phone. Did you get the— Yeah, I say. It's here.

It will take him at least fifteen minutes to get to this side of town. I go to the box, which is sitting quietly where I've left it. I pull a perforated tab marked *pull*, and the cardboard opens like a book. I remove the plastic case: shiny, wrapped in cellophane. I tear open the corner of the wrapping with my teeth, wincing at its high squeak.

The number of limbs tangled on the front cover doesn't appear to match the number of faces. I count, twice, and confirm that there is one extra elbow and one extra leg. I open the case. The disc smells brand new and doesn't snap easily from its plastic knob. The shiny side gleams like an oil slick, and reflects my face strangely, as if someone has reached out and smeared it. I set it down in the DVD player's open tray.

There's no menu; the movie plays automatically. I kneel down on the carpet in front of the television, lean my chin into my hand, and watch. The camera is steady. The woman on the video looks a little like me—the same mouth, anyway. She is talking shyly to a man on her left, a built man who has probably not always been so—he seems to be straining out of his shirt, which is too small for his new muscles. They are having a conversation—a conversation about—I cannot make out any of the individual pieces of the conversation. He touches her leg. She takes the tab of her zipper and slides it down. She is naked underneath.

Past the obligatory blowjobs, past the mouth-that-looks-like-mine straining, past perfunctory cunnilingus, they are talking again.

*the last time, I told him, I told, fuck, they can see my—
I can't hold this down, I can't hold this down, I can't—*

I sit up. Their mouths are not moving. Or: their mouths are moving, but the words shaped by those mouths are different from the ones I hear. The mouths make the expected words: Baby. Fuck. Yeah. God. Underneath, something else is moving. A stream running beneath the ice. A voiceover. Or voiceunder.

*if he tells me again, if he says to me that it's not okay, I should
just—*

*two more years, maybe, only two, maybe just one if I keep
going—*

The voices—no, not voices, the *sounds*, soft and muted and rising and falling in volume—blend together; weave around each other, disparate syllables ringing out. I don't know where they are coming from—a commentary track? Without taking my eyes off the screen, I reach for the remote control and press the pause button.

They freeze. She is staring at him. He is looking somewhere out of the frame. Her hand is pressed down on her abdomen, hard. The swelling knoll of her stomach is vanishing beneath her palm.

I un-pause it.

*okay, so I had a baby, this isn't the first time that's—
and if it's only a year, then maybe I can follow—*

I pause it again. The woman is now frozen on her back. Her partner stands between her legs, casually, like he's about to ask her a question, his cock curved to the left against his abdomen. Her hand is still pushed into her stomach.

I stare at the screen for a long time.

When Sam knocks, I jump.

I let him in and hug him. He is panting and his shirt is damp with sweat. I can taste the salt in my mouth as I press

my face against his chest. He kisses me, and I can sense his eyes flicking over to the screen. You okay? I ask.

I was running, he says. I had to park a few blocks away. How are you? How was class?

I didn't go. I don't feel well, I say, turning off the television.

He looks concerned.

I feel sick, I tell him.

He asks me if I am soup-sick or Sprite-sick. I tell him soup-sick. He goes into the kitchen and I lie down on the couch. In the sharply focused dark I can hear the thunk of the cupboard door striking the cabinet next to it, the dry sliding of cans being sorted through, the sloshing of liquid, the tap of a pot on a burner, the metallic clink of him using the wrong spoon to stir. When he brings it out to me, chicken broth hovering precariously at the top of the bowl, napkin resting beneath it, I thank him. He warns me that it's hot. I sip it too quickly, and bite down on the spoon in shock. Vibrations resonate through my skull, and I burn my mouth.

* * *

His friends invite us to a housewarming party for their new home out in the country. I don't want to go, I tell him, the pale blue light from the television making shadows on my face as three men intertwine with each other, each mouth full.

I'm worried that you're spending too much time in the house, he says. It'll be mostly women.

What?

At the party. It'll be mostly women. All people that I know. Good people.

I wear my turquoise dress with black stockings underneath and take a small aloe plant as a gift. In my car, we speed out of the dim lights of our small town and onto a country road. Sam uses one hand to steer, and rests the other on my leg.

The moon is full and illuminates the miles of glittering snow that stretch in every direction, the sloped barn roofs and narrow silos with icicles as thick as my arm hanging from their outcroppings, the herd of rectangular and unmoving cows huddled near the entrance to a hayloft. We drive in straight lines, and turn at right angles. I hold the plant protectively against my body, and when the car makes a sudden left some of the sandy soil spills out onto my dress. I pinch it from the fabric and drop it back into the pot, brushing a few crumbs of dirt off the thick, fleshy leaves. When I look up again, I see that we are moving toward a large, illuminated building.

So this is a new house? I ask, my head pressed against the passenger window.

Yeah, he said. They just bought it, oh I don't know, about a month ago. I haven't been there yet, but I hear it's really nice.

We pull up next to a row of parked cars, in front of a renovated, turn-of-the-century farmhouse that glows with the lights inside.

It looks so homey, says Sam, stepping out and rubbing his gloveless hands together.

The windows are draped with gauzy curtains, and a creamy honey color throbs from within. The house looks like it is on fire.

* * *

The hosts open the door; they are beautiful and have gleaming teeth. I have seen this before. I have not seen them before.

Jane, says the dark-haired one. Jill, says the redheaded one. And that's not a joke! They laugh. Sam laughs. It's so nice to meet you, Jane says to me. I hold the small aloe plant toward her. She smiles again, so deeply that her dimples look carved into her face, and takes it. Sam looks pleased, and then leans over and scratches the ears of a large white cat with a smooshed face that is rubbing against his legs.

We've made a coatroom out of the bedroom, Jill says. Sam reaches for my coat. I slip it off and hand it to him, and he vanishes up the stairs.

A man in the hallway with buzzed hair and pale skin is holding an ancient camcorder on his shoulder. It is gigantic and the color of tar. He swings it toward me, an eye.

Tell me your name, he says.

I try to pull away, out of its view, but I cannot shrink tightly enough against the wall.

Why is that here? I ask, trying to keep panic out of my voice.

Your name, he repeats, tipping the camera towards me.

Oh Jesus, Gabe, leave her alone, says Jill, pushing him away. She takes my arm and pulls me along. Sorry about that. There's always some retro-loving jackass at parties. And he's ours.

Jane comes up on the other side of me and laughs down a scale. Sam, she says, where'd you go?

He reappears. Onward, he says, sounding giddy.

They ask us if we want the tour. We wander from the living room to a wide-open kitchen, shiny with brass and steel. They tap each shiny appliance in turn: Dishwasher. Refrigerator. Gas stove. Separate oven. Second oven. There is a door toward the back with an ornate, bronze-colored knob. I reach for it, but Jane grabs my shoulder. Stop, she says, careful.

That room is being renovated, says Jill. There's no floor. You could go in there, but you'd go straight down to the cellar. She clasps the knob with her manicured hand, and turns it.

The door opens, and yes, the no-floor yawns at me.

That would be terrible, says Jane.

The camera follows me around. I stand near Sam for a while, awkwardly smoothing my dress. He seems anxious, so I move, a satellite released from orbit. Away from him, I feel strange, purposeless. I do not know these people, and they do not know me. I stand near the hors d'oeuvres table, and eat one

shrimp—meaty, swimming in cocktail sauce—tucking the stiff tail into my palm. Another one, then a third, the tails filling up my hand. I swallow a glass of red wine without tasting it. I refill, and drain another. I swirl a cracker in something dark green. I look up. In the corner of the room, the single eye of the camera is fixed on me. I turn toward the table.

The cat saunters over and paws playfully at a hunk of pita bread in my hands. When I pull it away, she swipes at me and takes a chunk out of my finger. I swear and suck at the wound.

In my mouth, I can taste hummus and copper. I'm so sorry, says Jill, who swans up as if she has been waiting offstage for the cue of my blood. He does that to strangers sometimes. He really needs anxiety medication or something. Bad pussycat! Jane touches Jill's arm lightly and asks her to come and help clean up a spill, and they both vanish.

Friendly people I have never met ask me about my job, about my life. They reach across me for wine glasses, touch my arm. Each time, I move away, not directly back but a half-step to the right, and they match my movements, and in this way we move in a small circle as we speak.

The last book I read, I repeat slowly, was—

But I can't remember. I remember the satiny cover beneath the pads of my fingertips, but not the title, or the author, or any of the words inside. I think I am talking funny, with my burned mouth, my numb tongue fat and useless inside my mouth. I want to say, don't bother asking me anything. I want to say, there is nothing underneath.

And what do you do?

The questions come at me like doors thrown open. I begin to explain, but as soon as the words leave my mouth I find myself searching for Sam. He is in the far corner of the room, talking to a woman with short hair and a strand of pearls that wraps around her neck like the coils of a noose. She touches his arm familiarly; he bats her away with his hand. His muscles look taut enough to snap. I look back at the woman who asked me what I

did. She is curvy and taller than most and has the brightest shade of red lipstick on that I have ever seen. Her eyes flicker over to Sam. She takes another long swig of her martini, the olives rolling around in the glass like eyes. How are things with the two of you? she asks. A pimento iris lolls in my direction. The woman with the pearls touches Sam's arm again. He shakes his head, almost imperceptibly. Who is she? Why is she—

I excuse myself and walk into the dim hallway. I press my palm into the iron sphere at the base of the railing, and swing myself up onto the staircase.

The coatroom, I think. The coatroom. The bedroom full of coats. The repurposed—

The stairs move away from me, and I rush to catch them. I search for the door, a darker patch among darkness. The coatroom is cool. I press my hand on the wooden panel. The coats will not question me.

In the shadows, two figures are struggling on the bed. My heart surges with fear, a fish with a steel hook through the ridge of its lip. As my eyes adjust to the darkness, I realize that it's just the hosts, writhing on the heaps of shiny down jackets. The dark-haired one—Jane? Or is it Jill?—is on her back, her dress gathered around her hips, and her wife is over her, grinding her knee between her legs. Jane—maybe Jill—is biting her own wrist to keep from crying out. The coats rustle, slide. Jane kisses Jill or Jill kisses Jane and then one leans down and rolls down the top of the other's stockings, a rolled line of underwear, her face disappearing into her.

A pleasurable twinge curls inside of me. Jill or Jane writhes, pulls up fistfuls of down coat with her hands, makes a soft noise, a single syllable stretched in two directions. A long red scarf slides to the floor.

I don't wonder whether they can see me. I could stand here for a thousand years and between coats and syllables and mouths they would never see me.

I close the door.

I get drunk. I have four flutes of champagne and a strong gin and tonic. I even suck the gin out of the lime wedge, the citrus stinging the scratch on my finger. Gabe finally puts the camera down on a chair in deference to its extraordinary weight. It sits there, quietly, but it holds me inside, somewhere, for precious seconds that I cannot take back. A face that I have yet to really look at, resting deep in the coils of its mechanical innards.

I walk past the camera and take it, my fingers tightening around the handle. I am sure that when I lift it from its perch the handle will give way. It will crash to the floor, tremendously, and the heads will all turn. But it comes up easily. I control it now. As I begin to walk nonchalantly toward the front door, taking care to point the lens away from my body, I see the white cat with the smooshed face, watching me from the landing. His pink comma tongue slides out and makes a leisurely trip over his upper lip, and his blue eyes narrow accusingly. I stumble.

I do not bother to get my coat before I walk through the front door.

Outside, my boots crunch loudly through the glittering ice and mean snow. Near the end of the path that leads to the driveway, someone has emptied a half-full coffee cup, and dark brown is splattered grotesquely across the white lawn. Narrow tracks in the snow suggest a deer has seen this sight, too. My skin is stippled with goosebumps. I realize I don't have the keys, but I reach for the trunk handle anyway.

It's unlocked. The trunk opens to me, and I thump the camera down into its shadows.

I go back inside and have a glass of wine. Then a shot of something green. The world begins to slide.

Instead of passing out like a dignified person, I stagger out to the car again, sit in the cold passenger seat, recline it, and stare out the sunroof at a sky crowded with delicate points of light.

Sam gets into the driver's seat.

Are you all right? he asks.

I nod, and then throw open the door and vomit cocktail shrimp and spinach dip onto the gravel driveway. Pink chunks and long dark strands like hair settle among the stones and snow; the puddle gleams and reflects the moon.

We drive. I recline and watch the sky.

Did you have fun? he asks.

I giggle, laugh. No, I guffaw. I snort. Fuck no. Fuck—

I feel something cold on my face and I pick it off. Spinach. I roll down the window. Icy air hits my face. I throw it out of the car.

If that were a cigarette, I say, it would spark. It should be a cigarette. I could use one of those.

The cold stings.

Can you roll the window up? Sam asks loudly over the rushing wind. I roll it back up and lean my heavy head against the glass.

I thought it would be good for us to get out the house, he says. Jane and Jill really like you.

Like me for what? I pull my head away, and there is a circle of grease obscuring the sky. I see a black stain flash briefly under the headlights, then a huddled mass on the side of the road—a deer, blasted apart by the tires of an SUV.

I can almost hear the line between Sam's eyebrows deepening. What do you mean, like you for what? What does that even mean?

I don't know.

They just like you, that's all.

I laugh again, and reach for the window crank. Who is that woman with that pearl necklace? I ask in the sudden silence.

No one, he says, in a voice that doesn't fool either of us.

At my house, he carries me to bed. When he lies down next to me, I reach over and touch his stomach. He doesn't ask me what I am doing.

You're drunk, he says. You don't want this.

How do you know what I want? I ask. I inch closer. He takes my hand and lifts it away. He holds it aloft for a minute,

not wanting to drop it, not wanting to put it back. He settles for resting it on my own stomach, and then rolls away from me.

I reach for myself. I don't even recognize my own topography.

* * *

Most mornings, Sam asks me what I dreamt about.

I don't remember, I say. Why?

You moved around. A lot. He says this carefully, with restraint that betrays itself.

I want to see. I set up the camera to record my sleep, tucked on the highest shelf of the bookcase next to my bed. The DVD from the other day is obviously broken, so I put it in the garbage can, shoving it deep in the bag past potato peelings curling like question marks. Then, I order another DVD. It shows up on my cement stoop.

This one is in many parts, smaller parts, like film shorts. The first one is called *Fucking My Wife*. I start it. A man is holding the camera—I can't see his face. The woman is blonde and older than the last woman and she has meticulously applied mascara.

How do I say, how do I say, how do I say—

I cannot hear him. I look at the video case again. *Fucking My Wife*. I don't understand the title. I can't hear him. All I can hear is her voice, tinged with desperation.

How do I say, how do I say, how do I—

I don't want to hear her anymore. I hit mute.

How do I say, how do I say, how do I—

I turn off the DVD player. The television blinks to the news network. A blonde woman is staring gravely at her audience. Over her left shoulder, like an advising devil, there is a square graphic of a bomb, blasting apart the pixels that make it. I unmute the sound.

—a bombing in Turkey, she is saying. Viewers should be advised that the following images are—

I turn off the TV. I yank the plug out by the cord.

* * *

Sam comes over. How are you feeling? he asks.

A little better, I say. Tired. I lean into him. He smells like detergent. I lean into him and I want him. He is solid. He reminds me of a tree—roots that run deep.

The DVD player is broken, I say, heading off the question before it can be asked.

Do you want me to look at it? he asks.

Yes, I say. I plug in the TV again. As the DVD begins to play, and the bodies begin to unfold, I can hear it again. That voice, that sad, desperate sound, the questions repeated over and over again like a mantra, even as she smiles. Even as she moans and her mind flits between her question and the pattern of the carpet. Sam watches with a determined courtesy, absently stroking my hand as it plays. Nothing on his face indicates that he can hear what I hear. As the scene draws to a close, he looks over at me and asks me what's broken about it.

Can't you hear it? I feel the nails of my free hand digging into my jeans.

He cocks his head to the side and listens again. He shakes his head regretfully.

I turn the TV off. I stand in front of him, my hands dangling heavily at my sides. He stands up and puts his arms around me; rests his chin in my hair. We rock back and forth slowly, dancing to the sound of the heating vent struggling to keep us warm.

I think I found you an apartment, he says into my hair. It's on the third floor of a building on the other side of the river.

I don't want to leave, I say into his chest.

His muscles tense, and he pulls me away from his body by the length of his impossible arms.

You can't keep doing this, he says, his voice loud, upset, pitched into the ceiling. You have to find a new place.

Please don't yell, I say. Please just listen.

It's like you're not even in there. He grabs the sides of his arms. You're responding to all of the wrong things.

Please stop, I say. He reaches for me, but I knock his hand away. I need you to be simple and good, I say without looking into his face. Can't you just be simple and good?

He looks straight through me, as if I already know the answer.

* * *

Each morning, I slide the monstrous cassette out of the camera, rewind it, and watch it in the VCR. I fast forward through the stillness, though there is not much of it. Camera-me flails. She grabs for the air as if she is trying to pull party streamers down from the ceiling. She knocks her limbs against the wall, the oak headboard, the nightstand, and does not recoil in pain but goes back to them, over and over. The slender lamp crashes to the floor. Sam gets up, tries to help, holds her arms (holds my arms), trying to pin them to her sides, then looks guilty and releases them. She comes down. She struggles against the blankets. She slides down onto the floor, rolling half-under the edge of the bed, partially hidden by the pulled sheets. Sam tries to get her back up onto the bed and she takes a wild swing at his head, and I can hear her steady no, no, no, no, no, no, no even as he tugs her back up onto the mattress, getting close enough to talk into her ear, something too low for the camera to catch, and then getting her down, down onto the mattress, down into his arms in a grip that looks both threatening and comforting. This lasts for a moment before she, before I, am up again, and Sam pulls me into him, even as I hit his chest, even as I slide again to the floor. A whole night of this.

When I am done, I rewind it to the beginning and replace it in the camera.

I stop ordering DVDs by mail. I begin free trials at four different websites. There are no voice tricks in Internet porn, no weird commentary tracks.

I can still hear them. A man with slender wrists wonders endlessly about someone named Chris. Two women are surprised about each other's bodies, the infinite softness. *No one said, no one said*, a tanned woman thinks in a whisper. It echoes around her mind, around mine. I lean in so close to the screen that I cannot even see the picture anymore. Just blotches of color, moving. Beiges, browns, the black of the tanned woman's hair, a shock of red of which, when I pull back, I can't see the origins.

A woman mentally corrects a man who keeps referring to her pussy. *Cunt*, she thinks, and the word is dense and sits in the air like a wedge of underripe fruit. I love your pussy, he says. *Cunt*, she repeats, over and over again, a meditation.

Some are silent. Some have no words, just colors.

A woman with a black harness around her fleshy hips prays as she fucks a thin man who idolizes her. Each thrust punctuates. At the end, she kisses his back. Benediction.

A man with two women on his cock wants to be home.

Do they know what they are thinking, I wonder, clicking through videos, letting them load like a slingshot being pulled back. Do they hear it? Do they know? Did I know?

I cannot remember.

* * *

At two in the morning, I am watching a man deliver a pizza. A woman with breasts that float wrongly against gravity opens the door. Not the right house, of course. I think that I have watched this before, maybe. He sets the empty cardboard box on the table. She takes off her shirt. I listen.

Her mind is all darkness. It is full, afraid. Fear rushes through it, white-hot and terrified. Fear weighs on her chest, crushing her. She is thinking about a door opening. She is thinking

about a stranger coming in. I am thinking about a door opening. I can hear him clutching the doorknob. I cannot hear him clutching the doorknob, but I can hear it turning. I cannot hear it turning, but I hear the footfalls. I cannot hear the footfalls, I cannot hear them. There is only a shadow. There is only darkness blotting out light.

He, the delivery man, the no-delivery man, thinks about her breasts. He worries about his body. He wants to please her, really.

She smiles. There is a smear of lipstick on her teeth. She likes him. Below this, there is a screaming, rushing tunnel. No radio signal. It fills my head, it presses into the bone of my skull. Pounding, pushing it apart. I am an infant, my head is not solid, these tectonic plates, they cannot be expected to hold.

I grab my laptop and hurl it across the room at the wall. I expect it to shatter, but it doesn't—it strikes the drywall and hits the ground with a terrific crash.

I scream. I scream so loudly the note splits in two.

Sam comes running out of the basement. He cannot get close to me.

Don't touch me, I howl. Don't touch me, don't touch me.

He stays near the door. I slump down onto the floor. My tears run hot and then cool on my face. Please go back downstairs, I say. I cannot see Sam, but I hear him open the basement door. I flinch. I do not get up until my heart slows.

When I finally stand and walk over to the wall, I tip the computer right side up. There is a massive crack down the center of the screen, a ruptured fault line.

* * *

In the bedroom, Sam sits across from me, his fingers tapping idly on the denim of his pants.

Do you remember, he says, what it was like before?

I look down at my legs, then up at the blank wall, then back to him. I do not even struggle to speak; the spark of words dies so deep in my chest there is not even space to mount them on an exhale.

You wanted, he says. You wanted and wanted. You were like this endless thing. A well that never emptied.

I wish I could say that I remember, but I do not remember. I can imagine pumping limbs and mouths on mouths but I cannot remember them. I cannot remember ever being thirsty.

I sleep, long and hot, the windows open despite the winter. Sam sleeps against the wall and does not stir.

The voices aren't happening, not now, but I still perceive them. They drift over my head like milkweed. I am Samuel, I think. That's it. I'm Samuel. God called to him in the night. They call to me. Samuel answered, Yes, Lord? I have no way of answering my voices. I have no way of telling them that I can hear.

* * *

I hear the door open and then close but I don't turn my head. I am staring at the screen. An orgy, now. The fifth. Dozens of voices, too many to count, overlapping, tangling, making the air tight, crowding it. They worry, they lust, they laugh. Sweat glitters. Badly placed tungsten lights cast shadows, slicing up a few bodies for a few moments into slick skin and canyons of darkness. Whole again. Pieces.

He sits down next to me, his weight sinking the cushion so far that I fall into him. I do not take my eyes off the screen.

Hey, he says. You okay?

Yes. I curl my fingers tightly against one another, my knuckles locking in a line. This is the church. This is the steeple.

He sits back and watches. He looks at me. He settles his fingers lightly on my shoulder blade, catching the strap of my bra and running his finger on the curve of my skin beneath the elastic. Gently, over and over.

A woman at the center of a male orbit reaches up, up over her head, so far up. She is thinking about one of them in particular, the one filling her, making her whole. She thinks about the lighting for a bit, then her thoughts drift back to him. Her leg is falling asleep.

Sam talks very close to my skin. What are you doing?
he asks.

Watching, I say.

What?

Watching. Isn't this what I should be doing? Watching this?

The way he is still, I can tell that he is thinking. Then he reaches and puts his hand over mine—covering the church.

Hey, he says. Hey, hey.

One of the men is sick. He thinks he is going to die. He wants to die.

Bodies linking, unlinking, muscles twitching, hands.

Through the woman's mind, a ribbon of light tightens and slackens and tightens again. She laughs. She is actually coming. The first time we kissed, Sam and I, on my bed, in the dark, he was almost frantic, humming with energy, a screen door banging in the wind. Later he told me that it had just been so long, so long, that he felt like he was coming out of his skin. Skin. I can still hear them thinking, echoing around my head, slipping into the crevices of my memory. I cannot keep them away. This dam will not hold.

I do not realize that I am crying until he stands and brings me with him, pulling me from the couch. On the screen, Pearly arcs of come crisscross the laughing woman's torso. I lift easily.

He holds me and touches my face and his fingers are wet for the effort.

Shhh, he says. Shhh. I'm so sorry, he says. We don't have to watch it, we don't have to.

He weaves his fingers through my hair and supports the small of my back. Shhh, he says.

I don't want any of them. I only want you.

I stiffen.

Only you, he says again. He holds me tightly. A good man. He repeats, Only you.

You don't want to be here, I say.

The floor rumbles; a large truck darkens the front window. He doesn't respond.

He sits there quietly, radiating guilt. The house is dark. I kiss him on the mouth.

I'm sorry, he says. I'm so—

Now it is my time to shhhh. He stammers to silence. I kiss him, harder. I take his hand from my side and rest it on my thigh. He is hurting, and I want it to stop. I kiss him again. I trace two fingers along his erection.

Let's go, I say.

* * *

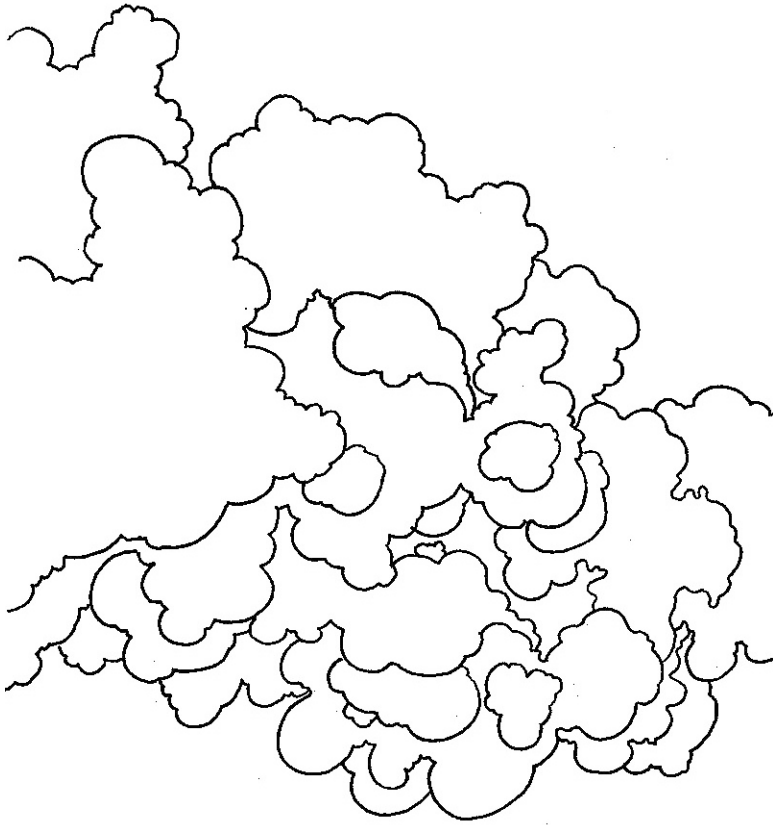
I always wake before him. Sam sleeps on his stomach. I sit up and stretch. I trace the rips in the comforter. Sunlight streams through my curtains. I can hardly sleep through such daylight. I get up. He does not stir.

I cross the room and pull the camera from its spot. I carry it into the living room. I rewind the tape, and it whines as it whirs back over itself.

I insert the cassette into the VHS player. I run my finger down the buttons on the machine like a pianist choosing her first key. As I press it down, the screen goes snowy, and then black. Then, the static diorama of my room. The wrinkled sheets with the spray of blue-china pattern, unmade. I fast-forward. I fast-forward, spinning through minutes of nothing, unsurprised by how easy it is for them to slip away.

Two people stumble in, my finger lifts, the rush-to-now slows. Two strangers fumble with each other's clothes, each other's bodies. His body, slender and tall and pale, leans; his pants hit the floor with a thunk, the pockets full of keys and change. Her body—my body—mine, is still striped with the yellowish stains of fading bruises. It is a body overflowing out of itself; it unwinds from too many layers. The shirt looks bulky in my hand, and I release it onto the floor. It sinks like a shot bird. We are pressing into the side of the mattress.

I look down at my hands. They are dry and not shaking. I look back up at the screen, and I begin to listen.



AOKIGAHARA¹
Jeffrey Pethybridge

Midway through life I
came to Aokigahara
lost without money
without knowing how I'd come
to the sea of trees to die

midwinter snowflakes
colored threads and crimescene tape
fluttered the wind's toys

handbills fluttered too
the tree's pages *think calmly*
once again your life is a gift
think of your siblings
think of your children the brames

thorned into my cuffs
below the cover of snow
I dreamed a leopard

ate my heart numbed I
dreamed the me that is my heart wet
with snow and blood roughed
by the cat's tongue and under
the spring green the me that is

my heart in the dirt
roots from feathery moss new veins
from which mushrooms fruit

¹ Aokigahara is a forest at the base of Mt. Fuji; it is a literal "dark wood" and has become a destination for people to commit suicide by hanging or some other form of self-violence or exposure in the winter. Each year search parties of local police, firemen, journalists, and volunteers enter the forest to find the bodies of the suicides. Aokigahara is also called the Sea of Trees.

Halfway through life I
found myself lost exiled
with no road to lead
back out of the dark woods I
wandered death terrors

the me that is heart
no more than to confess I
thought of suicide

and yet the good I
found there at the end of me
that is heart without
passage craves testimony
I don't know how strange brother

reader Mt. Fuji
stood a winter-moon throwing
light over the track

I walked a lion
waiting in that moonlight licked
snowflakes from the air
others stuck frosting its mane
it roared my name and I woke

from my wandering
chrysanthemum petals filled
my pockets my shoes

All middle living
is wandering exiled
I reached the border
trees of Aokigahara
like a whaler wrecked at night

who should by all rights
have drowned yet now stands panting
on shore looking back

on the man-killing
sea so did the me that is
heart study the sea
of trees with horror driven
through leaves and hanging pages

the rough and knotted
pelt of a desperate she-wolf
waved with horror too

I mistook the wind
as cause of this shivering
but when the wolf howled
her ribs straining against skin
stark hunger a torture-rack

our maker sculpted
of her a hunger-prison
and caged want-engine

Lost in media
res exiled I wandered
Aokigahara
so full of something like sleep
dreaming and waking were one

the Styrofoam cup
of tea warmed my hands I gave
my testimony

to the detective
who found me lost wandering
among suicides
I saw a ghost of a man
who wrote verses on the dead

I moved from body
to body reading the poem
he made their corpses

this study took years
there are so many dead the poem
sublime like seeing
the earth from outside the earth
then I knew the next verses

the ghost stalled his flight
the ink-brush was in my hand
he turned I followed

MY MOTHER IS A SINGING FISH

V. V. Ganeshanathan

you said: Vinothan your mother is dead, has died, is not with you, so go and do the work your father has given you, the laying of nets into water to catch the sea. No appa I cant. In Batti, after the tsunami ate the shore and gasped it back, my amma is not dead and you are a liar, she does not drown because she sings from the lagoon, which makes her mouth new, because in the room where the ocean came in the window with the light the wave rose higher than her voice and drowned it out. I was on top of the water and she was inside it. I cant lay the nets. My mother is a fish my mother is a singing fish and you are a liar. In the lagoon the voices of the singing fish rising under the Kallady bridge as always, my mother not dead, as she has never been dead. I was with her and I saw her not die because there was a moment when I could not look because my eyes were full of water. And then I was above the water and she was inside it.

my mother is a fish my mother is a singing fish

I was over the water and she swam inside it.

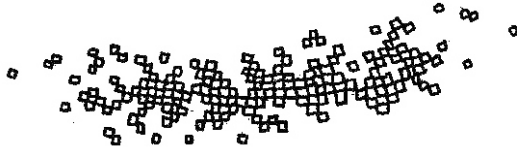
I cant lay the nets.

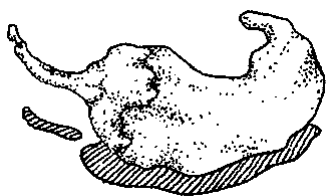
My mother is from Batticaloa. My brothers say: here is the where it has always been, the water in which the fish sing, the shore on which the sand is kind. When the tsunami came people thought the fish ate the dead and so they would not eat the fish.

My mother is not dead, she is a fish.

They lay the nets in the sea for nothing because we cannot eat the fish now. Our stomachs empty with their songs. The fishermen lay the nets in the sea and when I say my mother is a fish I will not lay the nets they say Vinothan shhh. If they lay the nets in the sea and cut the caught fish up to lie in the kind sand so that there is a piece for each of us, me and my brothers.

If you give me even a cut piece of her I will take it and put her back into the water to swim. She knows how. The water and her voice rising from the Kallady lagoon, unknown, uneaten, unsung, unswum.





A MODEL MADE OUT OF CARD
OR, THE ELEPHANT MAN AND OTHER REMINISCENCES
Gabriel Blackwell

That Obscure Object of Desire

Over the course of ten films and one-third of a century, filmmaker David Lynch has fashioned an oeuvre as hermetic and idiosyncratic as any painter's or poet's, a rare—even freakish—achievement in his chosen milieu, Hollywood. And yet, Lynch's artistic escutcheon is not wholly free of blots—two early stains, in particular, reveal the influence money (and strong-willed producers) can wield: a 1984 adaptation of Frank Herbert's science fiction epic *Dune*, that, due to unfortunate last-minute tinkering by Dino De Laurentiis, Lynch has persistently adduced a failure and has attempted to disown, and 1980's Brooksfilm production, *The Elephant Man*, a much more successful and “Lynchian” film, if still not immediately identifiable as the product of David Lynch.

On taking up Mel Brooks's offer to adapt and direct the story of Joseph Merrick for the big screen, Lynch has said, “[*The Elephant Man*] seemed right down my alley, though I'm not sure just what that alley is.” Joseph Merrick's was, in that summer of stage adaptation (Richmond Crinkley and Nelle Nugent's Broadway production of Bernard Pomerance's play) and book publication (Michael Howell and Peter Ford's *The True History of the Elephant Man*), an alley as resounding with echoes and as busy with mystery as the bisecting courtyard of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. Conspicuously missing from that alley, the Anna Thorwald of this riptide in the zeitgeist, were the shadows that Merrick's disfigured face cast, or would have, if anyone were brave enough—or perhaps only cynical enough—to light it for the audience. Deformity, the very thing that had made the man

notable in the first instance, was notably absent from the stage production (a conscious decision on the part of Pomerance), and the book contained not a single illustration in its first printing (though this was eventually remedied with a ten-page appendix of black-and-white photographs).

Lynch's unique contribution to the study of the Elephant Man then, was his enthusiastic, some said tasteless, willingness to exhibit Merrick's neurofibromatosis-ravaged visage, until then, veiled and occulted to all but those contemporary few blessed with the proper introduction or the price of admission. That these few had subsequently turned away from that face, possibly even sought to erase it from the history books, was perhaps testimony to its power to affect. The books Lynch and his screenwriting partners, Christopher DeVore and Eric Bergren, consulted were emblematic. Frederick Treves's unillustrated memoir, *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*, accounted for their script's mistaken appellation of Merrick, called there "John" Merrick, a signal, if unintended, obfuscation heaped upon a more significant transgression against history: Treves, Merrick's doctor at the London Hospital, spuriously claimed that Merrick's remains had been cremated following the Elephant Man's death, when in fact Merrick's skeleton and samples of his skin, as well as numerous casts of the areas of greatest deformity, were all preserved and on display in the Royal London Hospital Museum, courtesy of Frederick Treves. Ashley Montagu's volume, *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity*, based in large part on Treves's memoir, repeated many of Treves's errors, and, like Howell and Ford's more thoroughly researched study to come, contained not a single photograph or illustration of Merrick, though several were extant.

Nor were Lynch and his co-writers entirely innocent of the occluding gesture. Christopher Tucker's Elephant Man makeup goes unseen through fourteen minutes of film as Treves makes his way through a rowdy Whitechapel night and not one but two doors labeled "No Entry," threading a labyrinth of

blanket-partitioned freak show exhibits before finally arriving at Merrick's, where there is, in fact, no Merrick in evidence. It is only on a second visit that Treves and the audience are finally able to glimpse Merrick, and then only for a moment. The Elephant Man we are given is dressed in cloak and hat, a canvas sack with a single slit cut in it covering his face. When Merrick is examined by Treves and the Royal College of Surgeons, he is seen only through a screen, and from the back—the restive viewer could be forgiven for wondering whether, through nearly half an hour of Lynch's *The Elephant Man*, this peep in the shadows is all we are to get, what we have paid our money to see.

The film was received, despite the critical acclaim of the press, with a similarly obfuscatory impulse on the part of the establishment. Tucker's makeup, praised almost to the degree of its deformity, was nonetheless denied a special award by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences at their annual Oscar awards. The following year, the Academy, embarrassed by the cicatrix of bad press attending its snubbing of the film for a total of seven Oscars, including Best Director for Lynch and Best Actor for John Hurt, felt compelled to create, too late for Lynch's production, a new award to honor *The Elephant Man*'s innovation: Best Makeup. "The whole thing's a whitewash for them, a cover-up. They [are going to give] this treacle an award to honor the very thing that hampered John's ability to play the part and probably cost him the Oscar in 1980. It's a tragedy!" one of Hurt's costars reportedly complained when the film *Mask*, the story of Roy Dennis, a boy suffering from an affliction which caused the bones in his skull to expand and his facial features to congeal to an unchanging, vaguely benign, expression, won the award in 1985.

Tucker's makeup, prepared from Treves's casts, was perhaps Oscar-worthy, but only as given life by the actor bearing it. Hurt is practically a ghost under the bulbous promontories of Tucker's prostheses—only his eyes, penumbras of such aggrieved mournfulness they draw the lens their way like an observer

passing the event horizon of a black hole, are recognizable as *his*, but it is his eyes that give Hurt's performance. The makeup itself is so extraordinary as to set Hurt apart, as though he and his costars were appearing in completely different films. Otherwise banal scenes become uncanny simply because Hurt as Merrick is onscreen. It is this more than anything else which marks the film as Lynchian.

But was Lynch's decision to make Merrick's face the centerpiece of his production an innovation or an unwitting imitation? In fact, it seems that Lynch was unknowingly taking up a project that had very nearly reached the production stage at Universal Pictures in 1946, when the star of that production, as well as its writer, director, and producer, suddenly died of a heart attack.

Vatican of Fools

Rondo Hatton, at the time of his death at age 51, veteran of over thirty films, first discovered the story of Joseph Merrick while on the set of RKO's 1939 William Dieterle-directed adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. In the opening scene of the movie—Hugo's "Pope of Fools" contest, a competition to make the most gruesome face—Hatton plays the second of Quasimodo's rivals. He was hired largely because, as producer Pan Berman later joked, "That poor guy didn't even need to make a face to win that contest."

Hatton had intended to try out for the part of Charles Laughton's double, but was dismissed before call as being hopelessly inappropriate. Laughton, possessed of an ideal height and frame even if not exactly hideous of aspect, was thought perfect for the part of Quasimodo, while Hatton, the natural grotesque, was unfortunately much too tall to play either Laughton's double or Hugo's dwarf. Spotting Hatton's massive brow above a crowd of released extras, Berman signed Hatton for

the Palace scene on the spot. But there was one snag—while the shooting schedule was being drawn up, Berman had personally excised the Palace scene from screenwriter Bruno Frank’s script in order to save money on sets and conserve precious screen time. With Hatton’s hiring, the scene had to be re-added to the slate, dressed, and rehearsed virtually on the eve of shooting. RKO’s set dressers had to rush from studio to studio, looking for a standing set that wouldn’t have to be too heavily rehabilitated to fit the huge scene Dieterle and Berman had in mind.

Hatton would go on to bigger roles, of course, but in many ways this small cameo was the token of his Hollywood career. Those in the theaters who knew the book might be excused for having taken Hatton for Quasimodo: coming at the very opening of the movie, Laughton, with his cartoonishly distorted features, has not yet appeared onscreen when Hatton steps proudly into the stocks and endures the jeers and rotting vegetables of the crowd. Already horribly disfigured by the acromegaly that would eventually cause his fatal heart attack, Hatton nevertheless took the red ribbon while the garishly made-up Laughton was awarded the blue. The camera pans over Hatton gamely vamping for the yokels as a crowd of extras raises Laughton to their shoulders, bearing him quickly out from under the kliegs, his primitive prosthetics drooping and jouncing with their steps. Hatton, a spectacle on the set, was barely a sideshow when the cameras were rolling. In all, he is onscreen for less than a minute, thirty feet of celluloid. It was all RKO could spare—Laughton’s expensive contract did not allow for Hugo’s brand of panoptic democratic attention.

Rondo Keith Hatton was born a happy and healthy baby on April 22, 1894, in Hagerstown, Maryland, but spent most of his childhood in Tampa, Florida. An athlete, lettering in football and baseball, he was graceful and charming—Hatton was voted Most Handsome by his graduating class at Hillsborough High School, and the October 31, 1917 issue of *Stars and Stripes* reports that Private First Class Hatton “never has any trouble finding a

date, never has a slow mail day, and never fails to bring a smile with his goofy grin.” But shortly after returning home from the front, he began to experience phantom pains as if limbs and digits that had never existed had been smashed with a hammer or ground underfoot. He called in sick so often at the *Tampa Tribune* that he nearly lost his job, but the paper’s editor, E. D. Lambright, took pity on his cub reporter, until then the most dependable and the most genial of anyone in his pen. Lambright hoped that Hatton’s bad luck and bad humor would soon pass.

Instead of passing, however, Hatton’s condition worsened. The diagnosis—acromegaly—might as well have been in Greek as far as he was concerned. Back at the paper, he looked it up in the morgue; the pictures there were even more horrible than their descriptions. His doctors tried to reassure him that the disease affected different people to different degrees, that there was no way of knowing exactly what it would do to him—it might be no more severe than the headaches he was presently experiencing, perhaps a slight swelling of his hands and feet. Already, though, Hatton had had to throw away several pairs of gloves and all of his shoes. In six months, his shoe size had gone from an eleven to an eleven-and-a-half. Then a twelve. Then a thirteen. He could no longer fit his fists into his pockets. His headaches, unimaginable to begin with, only got worse and his neck was constantly sore from the strain, as though his head had been chiseled out of stone and then filled with cement.

In Hatton’s case, it wasn’t just an enlargement. The bones in his head jutted out at their seams in obtuse angles, pushing his face into a smaller and smaller set of expressions. In the rare moments he could forget his acromegalic agony, his brows wouldn’t relax their apostrophized menace, his scowl wouldn’t straighten. Strangers would no longer look him in the eye, and children wouldn’t look at him at all, not without tears. He stopped going out, his friends say, even stopped answering the door when they called on him at home. His colleagues at the *Tribune* tried their best to cheer him up, holding a bachelor

auction in his honor, at which, of course, they made sure he went for the highest price. The winning bidder, a visibly horrified Tampa debutante whose father was on the *Tribune's* board, did not return his phone calls, and the date never came off.

Lambright kept sending his young reporter out, though, giving Hatton the assignment to cover the filming of Henry King's *Hell Harbor* (1930), just getting underway then in Tampa. *Hell Harbor* is the story of a young woman sold into marriage by her own father. Hatton was spotted by the enterprising King and offered a small part as a tavern owner in league with the scheming fiancé, a lowlife openly despised by his future wife. Hatton's character falls in love with the girl and attempts to save her by betraying his partner in crime. At first, Hatton demurred, telling King that he was no actor; evidently flustered, he seems to have forgotten the several amateur productions he had starred in at Hillsborough High. But eventually King wore the reporter down, and Hatton agreed to appear in the film.

In the wake of *Hell Harbor*, friends teased Hatton that Doug Fairbanks ought to start looking to his laurels, but he stayed at the *Tribune* for another five years, working stoically on in the face of growing difficulties—he could hardly hope to get a story out of sources too scared to talk to him and, no matter what it was he was supposed to be covering, he was more often news himself than an objective reporter of it. He was finally pensioned and persuaded to put his handicap to work for him in the summer of 1935, when he left Tampa behind for the bright allure of Tinseltown.

Because of his unique physical features, roles had to be created especially for Hatton. Fortunately for him, this was rarely a hindrance in finding work: when a certain type of director or producer got a look at Hatton's Easter Island profile, he could usually find a way of incorporating it into the plot of his film. This meant mostly forgettable roles that required Hatton to do little more than stand in one spot while other actors reacted to his presence. More statue than statuesque, his role as runner-

up ugliest man in *Hunchback* was repeated in all of its possible iterations, and then those iterations were repeated again.

With World War II and the departure of popular celluloid bullies to the front, Hatton's repertoire at last began to expand, encompassing a handful of toughs and heavies, but with the steady progress of his disease, he found that even these one-dimensional roles challenged his abilities. He told a reporter on the set of *The Brute Man*:

Look, it's not like I don't know how to act. I know how to act. But this thing I got makes it tough for me. It makes it so I can't always do what I want to do, not even with my own body. I mean, I hear the lines inside perfect, but I can't always say them that way. I can see how the character ought to look, but I can't always make the right face. So I end up doing takes [unintelligible]. I been thrown off three pictures now because the director couldn't get a good take out of this mug [unintelligible]. And there ain't nothing I can do about it, either.

He played a leper, a sailor, and a vigilante. He even finally got his chance to play the hunchback, in a film called *Sleepy Lagoon*. But Hatton could not be satisfied with a career even Boris Karloff scoffed at. He flew to New York between roles to study the Method at the Group Theatre and took classes in Los Angeles with Stella Adler and Robert Lewis.

With 1944, Hatton's fortunes briefly lifted: he appeared as "the Creeper" in a Sherlock Holmes picture, *The Pearl of Death*, leading to a string of roles as the Creeper—or thinly veiled imitations of that character—in *House of Horror* and *The Spider Woman Strikes Back*, leading up to 1946's *The Brute Man*, the last film he would complete before his heart attack. With this run of success, he finally felt confident pitching his idea for

a starring vehicle, a movie in which the things that had typecast him would help him to break out of type, where the drawbacks of his illness would actually aid him in his role. He would play John Merrick, the Elephant Man of Frederick Treves's 1923 memoir, *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*.

Tedious Descriptions of Architecture

On the set of that 1939 production of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Hatton could hardly have been blind to harried set designer Darrell Silvera still hurriedly assembling his Palace of Justice even after rehearsal and blocking had begun. Silvera was referring to a model of the palace made out of stiff cardboard, a detailed model that had been stolen from Dame Madge Kendal by John Barrymore and then sold to an unsuspecting David O. Selznick, who bought the model for his as-yet-unborn daughter. When Selznick, on the set of *A Bill of Divorcement* (1932), heard that his wife, Irene Mayer Selznick, had given birth to a boy, he ordered the "doll-house" destroyed. "What the hell do I care about elephants? Are we doing a circus picture here? No boy of mine is going to play with any goddamn dolls," Selznick is reported to have said to Barrymore, "and where the hell do you get off anyway, you prick? You should have told me it was stolen. I wouldn't have paid you so much for the goddamn thing." The model was rescued from the fire by the assistant set designer Selznick had ordered to burn it, Darrell Silvera.

That Selznick, and thus Silvera, knew of Merrick at all could only have been the work of Barrymore—the publication of Treves's book was only a very minor event in England and was quickly forgotten outside of the medical field even there. It had not made its way across the Atlantic to America. Apart from Treves's tale, Merrick's skeleton, and the casts at the London Hospital, a few scattered photographs were all that remained of the infamous Elephant Man. Barrymore was probably told

of the model's provenance by Dame Madge herself, though it seems unlikely, given his appendant actions, that he took in her story's significance. Dame Madge treasured a similar model of St. Phillip's Cathedral that Merrick had made for her; the Palace of Justice, she wrote after its theft, "held, for me, memories of a rather more melancholy nature," because, she claimed, it wasn't even properly hers. She was holding on to the model for another woman, a woman who had never known it was intended for her and who had died or disappeared before Dame Madge could deliver it. Dame Madge's "memories" referred equally to the circumstances under which Merrick is supposed to have completed it, and those which brought it into her possession.

Though he had been born in Leicester and traveled to London and to Dover, Merrick had been limited in his travels to and from the capital to what he could glimpse through the slit in his mask from grimy coach and coal-blackened train windows. Bewitched by the quotidian, Merrick looked upon the English countryside as scarcely less exotic than the surface of the moon. He had never once walked across a field, smelled freshly clipped grass, or seen a spring in flood. Living in cramped and squalid quarters in industrial backwaters for most of his life, he had scarcely seen a flower in bloom or even a bird in flight. Treves therefore arranged for Merrick to stay a fortnight on the country estate of a society lady of his acquaintance, Lady Knightley. It had been relatively easy to secure accommodations, as, after the Princess of Wales had visited his tiny rooms at the London Hospital, Merrick had enjoyed some degree of fame among the British upper classes. A railcar was reserved for his private use, through the generosity of the British railways, and they even arranged to shunt the car off at a siding at London and then again at his destination in Northamptonshire, so that Merrick would not have to endure the mobs of hysterical gawkers at the depots. A traveling disguise of cape, hood, and his beloved silver-tipped walking stick gave Merrick a raffish, almost gallant air. It was the closest he would come to traveling "as other people do,"

(his most mournful refrain, if Treves is to be believed) and he exulted in all of it.

Unfortunately, upon opening the gates of her estate, Fawsley Hall, to this odd figure, Lady Knightley fainted dead away, leaving Merrick without a place to lay his head. Treves, resourceful to the last, arranged for Merrick to spend his vacation at the house of the game warden on the estate, a much stouter man than his mistress as it turned out. And so Merrick merrily did, enraptured by the novelty of even this most humble of country accommodations.

Lady Knightley, ashamed that she had committed such a grave faux pas in fainting at the sight of her own honored guest, sought to save face and correct her misstep; she made Merrick the present of a light and diverting entertainment from her own library. She had been told by Treves that what Merrick liked above all else was to read, particularly romances (even more particularly, those in which the hero or heroine, brought low through circumstance, is revealed to have high-born blood), and she found no better book for the recipe than Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. That it was, in all likelihood, exactly the reverse of what Merrick usually sought in reading—that is, an escape from his terrible condition—we must charitably conclude, probably did not occur to her. But at the moment of delivery, some glimmer of Merrick's dignity impressed itself upon her, and she hesitated. She very nearly asked for it back, but thought that would have been just as cruel, and in the end, embarrassed, fainted dead away yet again. Merrick, imbued with a mischievous and contrarian spirit, read the thus intoxicatingly taboo book with relish, spending his days wandering the Midlands hillocks and his nights sounding the cobblestones of late-medieval Paris. A fortnight earlier, setting out from the hospital, he could scarcely have envisioned such a perfect holiday.

Merrick was most enchanted by Hugo's luxurious descriptions of architecture and urban planning in the City of Lights. Though Merrick had been to the Continent—on the

curtailed leg of a tour of Belgium and the Netherlands—he had not seen Paris. Sightseeing was surmounted only perhaps by flying on Merrick's list of improbabilities; the best he could manage even in London was a quick passage from one dark shadow to the next, avoiding the goggling eyes of his ever-present oglers. The city was to him a portable and inescapable stage from which he could only see as far as the footlights. To be part of the crowd, to see the boulevards and avenues like any other burgher or boulevardier, to fly to the top of the city and see the whole of Paris from the bell tower of Notre Dame—it was not precisely a dream, but it was certainly a long way from his life.

With tears seeping from the pendulous flap of his permanently heavy-lidded right eye, Merrick read without pause, fearing his arrival at the station in London too soon to close the book, read there of the curious revelation of Esmeralda's birth and her all-too-sudden death at the hands of the authorities, read of Frolo's deserved demise and Esmeralda's ravisher's shameful indolence. Closing the book and stepping off at the siding, he longed only to avenge Esmeralda, to succeed where Quasimodo had failed. Never had Treves seen poor Merrick so worked up: he could only with great difficulty understand the pitifully enraged, gibbering figure arriving at the hospital's door. Treves advised a walk around Bedstead Square and a good night's rest, but Merrick was far too worked up to contemplate repose.

Merrick had always entertained an innocent infatuation with one of his nurses, a Miss Green, whose Christian name has never been recorded. Because of the protuberance which gave him his nickname, a growth which pushed its way out through his mouth in the general shape of a nascent elephant's trunk, Merrick's speech was terribly distorted. Early on, before he had begun his residency at the London Hospital, doctors in the employment of the Leicester Union Workhouse had operated to remove the better part of it—some four inches, said to weigh nearly five pounds—in order to assure that Merrick would

be able to eat and drink. But with the progress of his disease, this protuberance began to lengthen again, and in time, even Treves, his closest confidant, could only with begged repetitions and admonitions to enunciate understand Merrick when he grew excited. How much less then those who, like Miss Green, might only spend a few hours a week with him, and those short hours engaged in a workaday routine that scarcely afforded the opportunity for earnest or amorous exchanges. Merrick could not seem to get across to Miss Green that she was the Aphrodite to his Hephaestus. His encumbered tongue could not shape the words with the supple grace such delicate pleas demanded.

Perhaps, as he wrote to Dame Madge, if he could not communicate in words the fullness of his heart, he might give its measure in some other manner. The materials at hand afforded him but one opportunity: either a cardboard model or some sort of a basket (In order to better pass the time, Merrick had asked and received materials and instruction in basket weaving from Dame Madge. And pass the time it did, as he was effectively one-handed with his right hand so deformed that he could not use it for anything but a sort of paperweight). The basket would be a plain one, however excruciatingly wrought, unlikely to arouse anything greater than appreciation, even in one so well acquainted with its fashioner's handicap. The model offered the possibility at least of expression, but how to communicate through architecture his tender feelings?

Perhaps, Merrick wrote, through an allusion to the great work he had just finished reading. After all, given its presenter, how could Miss Green fail to see the significance?

A Model Made Out of Card

His first thought was to execute the Cathedral itself, with its glorious confusion of styles so minutely described by Hugo that Merrick thought he could build it straight from the

text. But he could hardly pronounce such a model a triumph of love: after all, it was in the Cathedral that Quasimodo had held Esmeralda, where he had finally been explicitly given notice that his tenure as her virtue's guard was over, ridiculed as a lover, and irrevocably spurned. This would signify too much his present plight, not the pleasant future he wanted Miss Green to envision as the key to his tribute's lock. Instead, why not attempt the Palace of Justice, where Quasimodo, the monster, the freak, had been celebrated, had had his well-deserved day in the sun, however brief the break in the clouds? Merrick began work on it straight away, without pausing for his prescribed perambulation or even his much-needed drowse. He posted his letter to Dame Madge the following morning, detailing his projected monument and its much-hoped-for sequel.

At completion, the model could have had little enough of semblance to its original: Hugo goes into painstaking detail in his descriptions of Notre-Dame de Paris, but only gives us a snapshot, as it were, of the gallery and the forecourt of the Palace of Justice. The veracity of Merrick's cardboard billet-doux would have been confined to its edifice, no more substantive than a Hollywood soundstage about to be struck. It was thus perfect for a cinematic set designer, but probably still too slanted for a love letter.

We cannot be certain of what transpired, but it seems likely that when, several days later, Miss Green delivered Merrick's lunch, Merrick pointed out the completed Palace, its forecourt and face as faithful as he could make them, the rest a complete fancy of his imagination. Miss Green either acknowledged it politely and conveniently forgot it there, or else did not comprehend what it was her host was attempting to show her. Whatever Miss Green's understanding of the situation, she left the model on the table where it had been assembled, a trophy scorned by its winner, a tribute unremarked by its muse.

What we do know is that Merrick left his food untouched on the tray Miss Green had brought it in on. It has been

conjectured, by Treves among others, that Merrick then fell back to sleep, a queer operation for him at any hour, due to his physique. He had always to sleep in a sitting position, with his knees up and pressed against his forehead, because the shape and heft of his head made lying down treacherous. Treves, probably wishing to save Merrick from this last indignity, wishfully espoused the thought that Merrick had only been trying out a prone sleeping position, hoping to the last to be able to do at least something "like other people." It was merely an accident, a pitiful tragedy.

In light of Miss Green's snub, it seems it was most likely a willful one. Joseph Merrick, denied even in his most oblique attentions, simply gave up. He lay back and let the weight of his own head dislocate his neck, cutting off the flow of air to his lungs and smothering him. If he could not better Quasimodo in his conquests, he could at least join the dwarf in defeat and follow Esmeralda to the gallows.

Dame Madge received Merrick's letter and the news of his passing at the same moment. In five years of correspondence and innumerable shared intimacies, she had never once set eyes on him, and the guilt she felt on that score prompted her next course of action. She decided to pay her last respects in person, and to make sure that his last, most beautiful missive had indeed found its addressee. But arriving at the hospital, she found that Miss Green wasn't on the roster and Treves had already removed Merrick's body for dissection. He was making casts of Merrick even as Dame Madge gained admittance to Merrick's rooms. When Miss Green could not be located, Dame Madge did succeed in carrying off the model and arranging to have it delivered, but Miss Green's address could never be confirmed. It appears she had been more or less temporary help, her salary paid out of a subscription fund made in Merrick's name. With Merrick's passing, the monies were transferred to the hospital's general fund, and Miss Green let go.

The model was kept on the mantel in one of the Kendals' sitting rooms in their London home. It occupied this place of

honor for many years, until it went missing after a particularly rowdy John Barrymore visited on the eve of his departure for Los Angeles and the filming of his latest picture, *A Bill of Divorcement*. Dame Madge was scandalized, but by the time a sober and contrite Barrymore made a return visit to London, she was seriously ill, and within a year, she had passed away.

Based on an Original Story by Darrell Silvera

Meanwhile, the model had gained new life, as we have seen, on the set of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Silvera had heard only what Barrymore had told Selznick years earlier, trying to save the cardboard Palace from immolation. “David, it’s sacrilege. Think of the horrible life that man lived. Think of the privations, the humiliations he must have endured. Now think of the shame, the permanent mark history will leave on you if you destroy it,” Barrymore is supposed to have said. “Nothing in Hollywood is permanent, you prick. Now burn the goddamn thing,” Selznick famously replied.

But with Selznick off running Selznick International, Silvera could indulge the model openly. He had constructed a tiny platform to stand in front of the model’s Palace, complete with stocks and paper dolls representing the contestants in the Pope of Fools contest, to get a sense of how much of the Palace needed to be dressed. The set Silvera and his dressers had reclaimed was Dr. Moreau’s villa from *The Island of Lost Souls*, filmed years earlier on a neighboring soundstage and rescued from Paramount’s trashpile. Positively heroic work had to be done to give it the look of medieval Paris: its front had to be reversed, repainted, and repurposed for the Palace’s façade. And all of it had to be done on the fly, with Berman putting the scene in the call sheets just weeks before shooting was supposed to go ahead. There would be just enough time to build exactly what was going on screen and no surplus for elaboration or ornament.

During rehearsals, Hatton was likely curious: what was this thing that Silvera kept crossing to consult? Silvera must have then told Hatton what he had learned of the Elephant Man, whatever mutated version of events Barrymore had drunkenly conveyed to Selznick in whatever distorted, mangled form it had assumed in Silvera's memory in the seven years since he had overheard it. No doubt Silvera was spurred to remember the model's rumored creator because of the remarkable visage in front of him. He may have even encouraged Hatton to pursue the project, begging the all-important screen credit for his role in the film's conception.

By the time of the filming of *Hunchback*, many of the players in the Elephant Man's drama were long buried. It had been almost twelve years since Treves's short essay on the man (and Treves's subsequent death), and would be nearly thirty years before Ashley Montagu would publish his pioneering (but seriously flawed) study of Merrick. No doubt Hatton's journalistic training served him well in bridging this long historical gap. As he learned more, he became convinced that this story remained untold only through accident, perhaps even fear. The story of Joseph Merrick was his story, the story Hatton was meant to tell, even if it wasn't exactly *his* story. But it wasn't until 1944's *The Pearl of Death* that Hatton finally commanded some amount of attention from producers.

Hatton had by then been working on the idea for what he called *John Merrick: the Elephant Man* for four years, ever since he had a copy of Treves's memoirs mailed to him by a female fan (herself an acromegalic). This slender document, barely twelve pages, was all he had to go on for source material. But if any man could empathize with Joseph Merrick, Rondo Hatton was that man. He felt competent to fill in the caesurae Treves had left with his own experiences as an unwilling sideshow.

Despite, or rather because of, a great deal of opposition from William Goetz, the head of International Pictures, the studio that was in the process of merging with Universal,

Hatton was given the go-ahead to develop his *John Merrick: The Elephant Man* and his choice of an assistant to flesh out his spec script. Hatton chose an assistant he was already familiar with, though he hadn't known it at the time: Agnes Lambright, E.D. Lambright's daughter. Agnes would have been just about ten years old when Hatton left Tampa for California, and he hardly remembered her—at twenty-two, she had grown into quite a beauty. In headshots taken from about that time, Agnes (her professional name was Agnes LaVert, which helps to explain why Hatton didn't recognize her) is a dark-haired and slightly cherubic young woman, with piercingly blue eyes and delicate features, like a young Ingrid Bergman.

Goetz had executive producer Ben Pivar put Hatton's office at the very top of the writers' building, in an attic up a spiral staircase that had formerly served as a storage locker for promotional materials of movies that never got released under the Universal Pictures name. The room had been chosen because Goetz heard that it would be difficult for Hatton to reach; his arthritic joints and tender feet had already forced *The Brute Man's* director, Jean Yarbrough, to cut a couple of scenes of the Creeper escaping the police up a building's fire escape. As painful as it was for him, though, Hatton climbed up to the rooftop office every day after shooting of *The Brute Man* wrapped, to bring his labor of love to consummation.

When Agnes was done working on her current script (*A Double Life*, 1947, directed by George Cukor), she would join Hatton in the little attic office, and the two would write and run lines to see if what they had written worked. Hatton's first draft of *John Merrick* was Hollywood heresy: a movie about a physically deformed man with a hideous illness who gets progressively worse and then dies, all without setting foot outside of the hospital. The script was not merely eschewing the formula, but making a mockery of it. The project had only been approved out of pique at the studio's incoming chief, and the pair knew they would need a miracle—or a star bigger than Hatton—to get the studio's green

light for the finished picture. Hatton suggested building up one of the nurses into a love interest, a role Hollywood's starlets would salivate over, a Beauty to Merrick's Beast, or, as she would become, a Miranda to his Caliban.

Silvera hadn't told Hatton about Merrick's reason for building the model, if he even knew of it, so Hatton had no idea that such a nurse, the nescient Miss Green, had actually existed; in his memoir, Treves had barely acknowledged Merrick as a sexual being, treating his amorous inclinations as a bit of a joke, like love between chimps or children. But it wasn't much of a stretch for Hatton to write in a friendly and sympathetic nurse who Merrick might fall in love with; after the assuasive balm of time alone with Agnes, even enacting made-up scenarios, Hatton understood the power of such ministrations.

In the script, the nurse's name is "Agatha," a name that the real Joseph Merrick could only have stumbled in pronouncing. Drafts of the script show that a number of lines had to be shortened and simplified to detour around Hatton's own worsening speech impediment. But if the man he was playing would have had trouble with the name, Hatton was proud that he could still speak it, for the time at least.

Hatton and Agnes took their script to producer Pivar, who had been instructed to keep the film in pre-production for as long as he could so that Goetz could kill it when he took over the front office. The two only got through the opening three set-ups before Pivar tore their lovingly wrought composition into confetti and told them that the pitch was maybe a half-good one, maybe, but everything they had down on paper was *A Farewell to Arms* with an ugly guy in the Gary Cooper role. Where the hell in all of this was the Elephant Man, where was the goddamn monster, for crying out loud?

People like monsters. They need somebody to root against. Here, you got them rooting *for* the monster. Who wants that? Nobody wants

to see *Frankenstein Falls in Love and Dies*. Get back to work, and bring me *Frankenstein*, not Shakespeare. Know how much business we did on *Frankenstein*? A hell of a lot more than we ever did on *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Hatton did the best he could to save his doomed film. No matter what the studio wanted, Hatton would not let Merrick become just another stupid monster, another Creeper, and Pivar relented a little—Merrick could be sympathetic, sure, but the picture would need at least one “boffo” chase scene with Merrick at one end and a crowd at the other. The picture should end not with Merrick’s pitiful real-life death, but with the accidental death of Treves at the hands of Merrick, and Merrick’s escape from the hospital into Liverpool Station, a frightened and outraged mob in pursuit. Hatton reluctantly agreed.

Perhaps persuaded by his partner, Hatton then asked that Agnes be cast opposite him in the Agatha role. Pivar agreed to Agnes in the role of Agatha, but only if Hatton would change her character’s name to Chartreuse. Pivar insisted on the change because “Agatha” was too close to “Agnes”—the rubes writing the columns in the papers would only get confused. Reading the changes with Agnes in their office, Hatton could not help stumbling at the new name of his paramour. A perfectionist by nature, Hatton would stop his line reading, hung up on the name, and go back over it until he got it right. The fifth time he read the line, “I choose you, Chartreuse,” a chore on the best of Hatton’s days, his labor was interrupted by a call: at the insistence of the board, Pivar had previewed the new version at the latest development meeting, and the picture was a go. Agnes was in, as the nurse Chartreuse, but the studio execs couldn’t see Hatton in the lead role. The guy could barely say the lines. Plus, the picture needed a star. The board wanted somebody more like Lon Chaney, Jr.—what about Lon Chaney, Jr.? Hatton could still direct, of course, but he would need an assistant, say, George Waggner,

the man who had directed Chaney in 1941's *Man Made Monster*. Hatton survived the phone call and calmly relayed the news to Agnes, but her reaction evidently finished what Pivar hadn't. The paramedics who arrived on the scene couldn't negotiate the spiral staircase with their stretcher, and Hatton's body eventually had to be lowered by rope from the attic's window into the studio's backlot while the entire cast and crew of *She-Wolf of London* waited and watched.

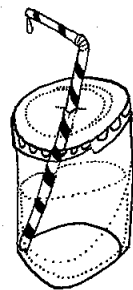
Monsters of Universal

The Brute Man was never released by Universal. Goetz sold the film to PRC (Producers Releasing Corporation) for less than Universal had spent producing it. PRC released *The Brute Man* as the bottom of a double bill with *The Mask of Dijon*, starring Erich von Stroheim; its posters promoted the movie with the tagline "The Face of Evil." PRC's press agents told newspapers that Hatton's disfigurement was the result of a German mustard gas attack, but with the Potsdam Conference over a year old, jingoism did little to boost the picture's popularity. In another bid for business, the film's English distributor successfully lobbied to have a new rating ("H" for "Horrific") assigned to the film, but not even the prurience of spectacle could attract viewers turned off by the film's evident exploitation of its star. *The Brute Man* performed worse than any of Hatton's previous "Creepers" pictures, and the film stock was eventually reclaimed by PRC. Image's 1999 DVD release of the film was made from a badly scratched print that had to be spliced with footage from a second-generation videocassette (itself apparently made from an archive-quality workprint which could not be located by the DVD's producers), resulting in a dim print somehow missing three minutes from the picture's original running time. Image's degraded print had evidently been found in the storage closet of a long-closed third-run house in Cleveland, Ohio, on a shelf

mixed in with the first three reels of another third-run classic, Robert Fuest's *The Abominable Dr. Phibes*.

William Goetz dismantled the profitable "Monsters of Universal" series and discontinued all so-called B-features in favor of what he characterized as "serious" films, movies like *The Killers* and *The Naked City*. *John Merrick* was struck from the studio's project list, and Agnes Lambright was taken off the studio's payroll. Within four years, though, Goetz was out at Universal and the studio was back to making schlock, with a run of Abbott and Costello movies, the surprise hit *Francis the Talking Mule*, and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* and its sequel, *Return of the Creature*.

In 1971, Universal joined Paramount in creating Cinema International Corporation, which distributed the studios' films. The two were soon joined by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, but the whole enterprise was broken up by MGM's 1981 purchase of United Artists, which had its own distribution arm already in place. One of the last films CIC distributed was Paramount's *The Elephant Man*, which grossed more than 50 million dollars worldwide, or ten times its budget. Based on this success, its director, David Lynch, was asked to direct an adaptation of Frank Herbert's novel *Dune* for De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, a company whose most famous production to that point was a 1976 remake of RKO's *King Kong*. Generally panned, this version of *King Kong* found a surprising defender in film critic Pauline Kael, who characterized it as "the story [of] the loneliest creature in the world—the only one of his species—finding the right playmate," and went on to write, "We might snicker at the human movie hero who felt such passion for a woman he'd rather die than risk harming her, but who can jeer a martyr ape? ... It's a joke that can make you cry."



PRODIGAL ELECTRONS RETURN TO SHINE¹

Matthew Zapruder

Prodigal Electrons
Return to Shine
is the name of the movie
she wants to see,
the first the daughter
of a famous director
whose plots to her
always seemed designed
for others
with more sophisticated
problems made
about a man who wears
gray excellent suits
and thinks too much
about science.
Always he is both
actually and otherwise
looking over his shoulder,
and a sudden death
brings him a love
he might refuse.
None of her friends
wanted to go with her
at midnight to the decayed
cinema some younger
enterprising kids
had bought and made
newly old so again
onto the famous
street of the east side
of the city its white
marquee shines
and black letters spell
the names of the great
stars this time of our age.

1 This poem is a response to Lillianna Pereira's collage *Prodigal Electrons Return to Shine*.

As she passes through
the doors she sees
the original carefully
repainted bright minarets
and above her dangle
those blue and yellow
chandeliers her mother
told her she walked
when she was a child
most weekends under
and up to the grand staircase
to sit in the huge balcony
and watch the handsome
and the beautiful
interchangeably through
the silver plots
that seemed even after
exposure to blinking
sunlight for a little
while so possible.
Tonight she walks
up to the particular
porcelain lion she had
when she was a girl for a now
forgotten reason chosen,
puts her hand
on his nose
and says tenderly
in her mind I'm sorry
I can't remember
the name I gave you.
He continues
looking away.
If he could speak
he would say that's ok
after the doors are locked
a pearlescent gloom color
no living person can know
like a dream an object
has fills the hall
and the name of that
color is my name.



THE VIRTUES

Ed Park

It has come to our attention that one of our patients, Michelle Virtue, might be someone else. Upon admittance, she was manic, yet agreeable to treatment. (“I think I know why I have to be here,” she said.) She was accompanied on that day by her cousin, Michael Virtue, who told her which papers to sign, steadying her hand as needed. For the first month he visited the Cornerstone every Saturday, bringing her sandwiches from a gourmet shop in the city and walking with her about the grounds. Michelle, sluggish and apprehensive during the week, appeared energized after these meetings, to the extent that some of her doctors wondered whether the two should be supervised. In the event, the frequency of Mike’s visits slowed, stitched together with phone calls that left Michelle distraught, and soon all contact ceased entirely. (Even while he was still in the picture, it was rumored that he was not her cousin, but her husband or boyfriend.)

Time has passed. It has been six difficult months since Michelle last heard from Mike, nearly nine since she first entered the Cornerstone for treatment. No other family member or friend has ever been in touch. Three weeks ago, Michelle’s condition took a turn for the worse. Her intermittent insistence that she had been placed in our care under false pretenses reached the status of a coherent delusion: what most of her doctors here consider a full-blown psychotic break. Michelle insisted that her name was actually Mercy Pang, that she was an actress with an experimental theater troupe in the city called Flash/Light, that her “cousin” was actually Sigh Singh, the troupe’s artistic director and, not incidentally, a former boyfriend.

In any event, Nurse Martinez, Nurse Cheryl Woolsey, and Dr. Candace Milliard later attempted to contact Ms. Virtue’s

cousin, but the phone number on the form did not connect, the email address no longer worked, and a letter to his apartment in St. Louis (some three hours east) came back unopened. Nurse Woolsey, who once lived in the city, said she had never heard of a “Library Street,” and indeed maps show that no such thoroughfare exists.

Subsequent inspection of Ms. Virtue’s admittance form indicated more deviations from fact. Michael Virtue had listed his profession as “locksmith,” but consultation of the appropriate registries does not confirm this. Nurse Martinez recalls that at the initial interview, the cousins looked nothing alike—Mike broad and vigorous, with ginger hair and pale skin, Michelle much darker, with black curly hair and close-set eyes and a dancer’s body like the shadow of flame, the shadow of smoke. A lengthy discussion of cousins followed.

Will she ever recover? Now Ms. Virtue is thin as sticks, as one of the other patients here puts it, and so fragile we fear she will break. (Her wrists, she jokes, are “like carrots.”) She spends an hour every day writing letters to the authorities, letters that she loudly announces will show us the folly of our ways. A prisoner convinced of her innocence, she dreams up names and timelines that, when confirmed, will set her free. All she needs, she insists, is to get in touch with someone on the outside. (“Who?” we ask; she does not or cannot answer.) Often she recites these letters in the day room, reading every paragraph aloud in a voice of remarkable strength and clarity, a far cry from her usual brittle tone.

Her language is gaudy and grandiose. A regular theme in these missives is how the aforementioned Flash/Light troupe had been hired by the government to place its members, under false names, at institutions like the Cornerstone. Acting as patients, well versed in the symptoms of their assigned psychiatric disorders, they would witness firsthand the shocking conditions that never get reported by state inspectors or journalists.

Alas, Michelle does not know *which* government agency, of course, and gets agitated when pressed on the point; she also notes bitterly that Flash/Light no longer exists. The troupe had been ailing financially for years, and essentially sold itself to the government, which eliminated as best it could all traces of its existence. (She laughed at this, once, realizing it made her sound “totally crazy.”) The object was to maintain a level of secrecy for what was essentially an undercover mission.

The last time Mike Virtue—that is, Sigh Singh—spoke to her on the phone, it was to inform her that the funding had run out. The government itself was bankrupt, due to bad investments and a shrinking tax base. The project was put on hold indefinitely, and the easiest way for her to get released from the Cornerstone was to sit tight, to act the way she had been acting. It should not take more than a month, he said. Michelle was instructed to follow her doctors’ orders, take the medications without fail, and never to protest her diagnosis. (“That will just make you seem crazier,” he said.) She should continue to take notes, and keep them hidden; if the government ever came into money again, the project would be restarted, and her chronicle of life inside the asylum would be needed more than ever. (She has claimed that the nurses regularly destroy her notes, and she has trouble reconstructing the events of her early days here.) Sigh Singh told her to “think of [the project] as a traffic light stuck on yellow, which might go to green instead of red.” Her constant doodling—on paper, on walls—regularly solidifies into stoplights, the three circles crosshatched in grays of varying thickness.

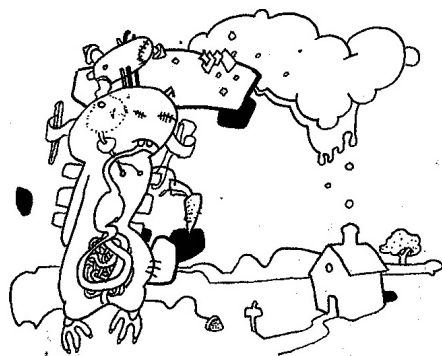
If the government recovered funding, it might allow Flash/Light to be reborn, under a different name. Michelle and her fellow members, scattered at similar institutions across the region, would return to the city, to the new theater that will surely be built, and take to the stage in triumph. Sigh Singh talked about producing an original drama based on their shared experience—a drama with humor, too—which would “shine a light on the other side of official insanity.” (“He hinted it could be big,” she says.

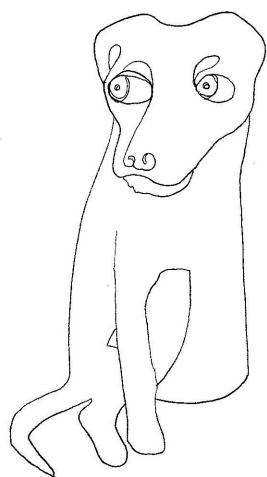
“Broadway, Hollywood, why not?”) All she needs to set herself free, Michelle insists, is a complete set of newspapers spanning the last five years, and access to the governor’s datebook. “Mark my words,” she mutters. Her letter-writing bouts always end with the paper in shreds, her head buried in her arms.

Tears mixing with ink.

“I am speaking in code!” she will declare on occasion. An elaborate, impossible claim will follow: That every word out of her mouth is an anagram or acrostic, that there was supposed to be an actor on the inside, disguised as a nurse, who could recognize her “normal” chat as signals. Her speech grinds to a halt, as if aware of the new demands placed on it. After these outbursts she exhibits calmness, for hours and even days at a stretch, but this can be ruptured by the slightest reminder that there is a world outside the Cornerstone; that people live in the city, go to work, have families; that there are places called restaurants, that meals are not always served on Styrofoam. When Michelle is calm, she can marvel and even laugh at the idea that other long-term facilities also play host to former actors like herself, all of them presumably waiting for that yellow light to turn green. Moments like these show that Ms. Virtue grasps the absurdity of her position, has a notion of consensual reality. However, a tendency toward detachment (most alarmingly a habit of speaking about herself in the third person, as “Michelle” or “Ms. Virtue”) makes us think, no, no—she is exactly where she belongs.

Sincerely—A CONCERNED PARTY.





Six and Five:

Problems arose from the beginning, or rather with the beginning. There were those of us who wanted—for dramatic effect—to jump right into the meat of the plot and open the story with the first meeting of our two lovers. Others insisted that, in order to start off on the right foot, our story needed first to be firmly situated in time and space. Here the creationists saw their opening and launched into a lengthy speech. They argued that, since before Genesis there was simply a formless void and since all subsequent stories have depended on human suffering or strife for their tension, our story, to be properly contextualized, must open with a snake and an apple in the garden of Eden. A few anthropologists piped up to debate the origins of storytelling or to raise doubts about the literal accuracy of the Bible (the apple, they said, was most likely a pomegranate), but they were soon drowned out by the physicists who contended that our story should begin not in a peaceful garden but rather with a violent bang. An impassioned debate between the physicists and creationists ensued. As if matters weren't already complicated enough, another contingent began to question the thematic ramifications of situating the story at all. Love, they said, transcends the specifics of time and place; to situate a love story at a definite point in the space-time continuum would blight love's beauty. Our story, they said, should be timeless, like a myth or fairy tale. In order to get through this quagmire of a debate, we were forced to compromise, so this story begins: Once upon a time, there was a Big Bang. Then God said "let e equal m multiplied by the square of c ," and there was light.

Ballerina Dice (Two and Two):

“Yes, I remember that Monday. School was hectic. Some of the ninth graders started a food fight while I was on lunch duty, so I had to give out a bunch of detentions, and one of the girls got a nosebleed during my lesson on passive periphrastics. Then in the afternoon, I had an appointment at the eye doctor, so by the time James brought me home my pupils were dilated, everything was too bright, and I had an awful headache. He must have noticed that I didn’t feel well because he offered to heat up the leftover meatloaf for dinner. Normally I would have taken care of it myself—ever since the mixer incident I’ve tried to keep him out of the kitchen—but I really wanted to lie down for a few minutes, so James put the meatloaf in the oven and went to walk the dog. Walking Lurky is usually my job, too. Lurky’s been kind of my baby ever since the kids moved out. Maybe that’s why he was so antsy. The dog, I mean. And, of course, he’s never liked the rain.”

Six and One:

We had thought that, with its opening finally set, the story would unfold of its own volition as our lovers entered the dramatic foreground. We were surprised, however, to find that the simple matter of their entrance, like the beginning, was in fact not so simple. The romantics among us thought we should hurtle directly from the primordial beginnings of the universe to the explosive attraction ignited as our lovers first stared into each other’s eyes. “Nothing in between matters,” they said. “And besides, it would be exciting.” “We need more from a story than excitement,” countered others. “What about everything that happened in the intervening fifteen billion years?” (“You mean six thousand years,” muttered the creationists.) Of course we couldn’t possibly tell all of it, so, in the interest of expediting this process, someone suggested that we mention only those events that were relevant to our two lovers. One might say that this is where the real trouble began. Or one might say that the

trouble began when Dr. Bertrand Sages's toupee hit the floor, or when an ancient Semite somewhere in the vicinity of the Arabian Peninsula first wrote down the story of Creation, or when the dog entered the room, or when the universe exploded itself into existence.

In any event, we could not come to a consensus on what to include. Some felt that our backstory should begin with the history of the United States of America, or at least a cultural history of Chicago, Illinois, since our lovers were both Chicago natives. The historians among us became excited and said, "Why not begin with the history of Western Civilization, or the advent of recorded history itself?" but others felt that all this information might make some of our readers somnolent. One of us suggested that we start with our lovers' families. The proposal seemed logical at first, and quickly gathered support, but the genealogists soon pointed out that families stretch backwards through generations and spread across countries and oceans. So, they asked, where exactly would we choose to enter the geometric web of our lovers' family tree? Then, of course, the biologists entered the fray, with their talk of the development of Homo sapiens, of divergent species, and even of life itself. At the mention of Darwin, the creationists among us became livid. (We were afraid violence might erupt at this point.) "True love evolve from protozoa? Who would believe it? A story must make sense." "It's perfectly rational," countered the biologists, "a logical, scientific process. In any event, we see no need to exclude the possibility that a Creator knew amoebae would eventually develop in His image." We still wonder whether such magnanimous words might have succeeded in mollifying us, had it not been for the physicists and the dog.

Five and Three:

"This makes no sense.' That was all I could think. One instant he was there. Soaked, smelly, and irritated, but there. The next he had disappeared into the bush. At first I thought Lurky was just hiding *behind* the bush. He had been kind of persnickety the entire walk—he's never happy to go out in the rain—and I

thought this was just his way of playing a prank. I figured the leash must have slipped off my hand as I bent down to bag his doo doo, and he's never been one to turn down an opportunity like that. He couldn't have been loose for more than a few seconds, but he was gone. Poof! I didn't understand what had happened until several minutes later when I found the hole."

Six and Four:

Most of us were daydreaming as the physicists began their explanation of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, so instead of foreseeing catastrophe for our story, we recalled fuzzy, black-and-white pictures of a calamity that befell a hydrogen blimp. How chaos grows from such small oversights! Dr. Bertrand Sages, the spokesman for the physicists, easily recognizable by his off-center toupee, was just finishing up his speech when we came back to our senses. "Uncertainty, you see, goes beyond mere human fallibility," he was explaining. "Of course Chaos Theory tells us that we can never measure perfectly enough to predict the future, but that is beside the point. The real issue here is that God cannot predict the future either; He must play dice."

At those words, we were immediately thrown into confusion. Some of us sobbed, a few cried "heretic" or "blasphemy," and the rest contemplated silently or discussed amongst ourselves the real question: what does this mean for the pair of lovers in our story? For us? But before any of us could grasp the full ramifications of Dr. Sages's remarks, the dog appeared, dripping wet, in the middle of our room, and our meeting fell into complete disarray. Here we must concede that no one could have predicted the dog.

Snake Eyes (One and One):

cha·os **n.** 1. complete disorder and confusion. > *Physics:* behavior so unpredictable as to appear random, owing to great

sensitivity to small changes in conditions. **2.** the formless matter supposed to have existed before the creation of the universe.

- DERIVATIVES **chaotic** adj. **chaotically** adv.

- ORIGIN C15 (denoting a gaping void): via Fr. and L. from Gk khaos: 'vast chasm, void.'

Concise Oxford Dictionary, 10th edition, page 236

Two and Three:

"We never really knew what he is or where he came from because we got him at the shelter over in Evanston. The volunteers thought he was part shepherd, part border collie, but we could never be completely sure. His name was originally supposed to be Lucky since, if a dachshund hadn't keeled over the morning of Lurky's scheduled execution, he would have been put down for lack of shelter space. The warden had bad handwriting, though, so volunteers mistook the *c* for an *r*. We adopted Lurky the next day. He's always been a bit shifty. As soon as I turn my back he finds a way to get into trouble. Like a few weeks ago, he figured how to open the cabinet under the kitchen sink. When I came home from school, I found the house covered in shredded paper towels. Lurky was relaxing on the kitchen floor, chewing on a sponge. James was furious when he saw, but I wasn't that upset. It's hard not to laugh at a dog with a dish sponge in his mouth and shredded paper stuck to his ears. Besides, Lurky keeps me on my toes. But I must say I never expected that phone call."

Six and Three:

"Order! Order! I want order!" hollered the bearded man who had pushed Dr. Bertrand Sages from his place behind the lectern, but most of us weren't listening because we were too busy clamoring to get a clear view of the dog. We were shocked when we read the identification

tags. “I want order!” bellowed the bearded man, again. Perhaps out of anger or perhaps for emphasis—we cannot be sure—the man then raised the slide projector above his head and proceeded to dash it to the ground. It broke, irreparably, on impact, but the gesture did manage to attract our attention. “Who let this dog in?” he boomed. “This dog does not yet exist.” We shifted uncomfortably because, of course, the dog had let himself in, but no one wanted to further upset the man behind the lectern with this news, as we could all plainly see an artery throbbing just above his right temple. We inferred that his frustration stemmed from the fact that the dog was Lurky, the mutt who would come to belong to our lovers long after they had met, married, and begun the happily ever after portion of our story.

Hard Six (Three and Three):

“Woof. Arf-arf. Arf-woof.” Sniffsniff. Sniff.

A Pair of Squares (Four and Four):

Lurky's appearance forced us to reorder our priorities. We realized that we had become so bogged down in theoretical questions that we had yet to introduce the main characters of the story, our lovers. Clearly, a change in narrative strategy was needed, but, given the recent development of Lurky, we concurred that we first had to list some basic biographical facts so that everyone would be brought up to speed:

James Magliani: born February 17, 1963 (ancestry is predominantly Irish Catholic, except for paternal grandfather, who was born in Capri, Italy). Raised in the neighborhood of Beverly by his biological parents, Donald Magliani (construction worker) and Mary Magliani (housewife). Attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; graduated, class of 1985, with a degree in business. Married Kerri Martin, whom he met during his stay at U of I, on

June 28, 1986. Together they bought a house in Lincoln Square, where they raised their two children, Sheila and Brian, and live to this day with their dog Lurky. (The children no longer live at home, as they are both currently attending Northwestern University in Evanston, IL, but they visit regularly.) James has held a number of actuarial positions throughout the Chicagoland area, and is currently in partial retirement. His hobbies include carpentry and jogging.

Kerri Magliani: born Karen Elizabeth Martin, December 11, 1964 (ancestry is entirely English, we believe. Maternal great-great-great-great-grandfather and family were Boston Tories. They fled to Canada during the Revolutionary War. Great-great-great-grandfather returned to the United States and was instrumental in founding the German department at Amherst University). Raised in the neighborhood of Hyde Park by her biological parents, Donald Martin (Professor of English Literature at the University of Chicago) and mother, Laura Martin (housewife turned real-estate agent). Graduated from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, class of 1986, with a degree in classics. Married James Magliani (see above). Gave birth to son, Brian, January 15, 1991, and daughter, Sheila, November 1, 1992. Kerri stayed at home until her children were in elementary school, after which she took a job, which she has held until this day, as a Latin teacher at the Sacred Heart High School in Uptown. She currently lives in Lincoln Square with her husband. Her hobbies include gardening and crossword puzzles.

Lurky: born April 1, 2008 in Skokie, IL to parents Rex (shepherd and Akita mix) and Precious (one-half border collie, one-fourth regular collie, one-fourth golden retriever). Lived with Skokie, IL family under the name "Toast" until approximately eleven months of age, when, after relieving himself on an expensive Oriental rug, Lurky was summarily cast out onto the sidewalk during a rainstorm. During his roughly nine-week period of homelessness, Lurky wandered the streets of Skokie and Evanston, often frequenting a pine tree near the corner of Dempster and McCormick Blvd., the stairs to the south

entrance of University Hall on the campus of Northwestern University, and Al's Deli, on Noyes Street in Evanston, where a man (we presume his name is Al) would occasionally leave him leftover scraps of meat. Lurky was picked up by Evanston Animal Control on May 12, 2009, held briefly at McCormick Animal Hospital, and then transferred to the main shelter on Oakton Street, where he was soon adopted by the Maglianis. Lurky's hobbies include begging and licking himself.

We worked so frantically on our biographical compilation that we did not notice Mr. Magliani's entrance. Apparently, he had followed his pet through the hole and had been standing quietly in our midst for some time, regarding us with curiosity. We later surmised that, during our lapse in attention, Mr. Magliani had called his wife ("Honey, you've got to see this. They're talking about us, and Lurky is part Akita."), but, at the time, we were quite startled when, only a moment after we looked up and discovered James Magliani, a blurry-eyed Kerri Magliani peeked through the hole and vociferously chastised Lurky, who was in the process of relieving himself on our potted ficus.

Our proceedings degenerated into pandemonium. Some of us wailed, others laughed nervously, and still others accused the physicists of calling down the wrath of God with their Uncertainty Blasphemy. Most of us, if we had been asked at the time to describe our emotions, would have said that we were horrified at the chaos we saw unfolding around us; just when we'd thought we were beginning to gain a handle on our narration, we found to our shock that our lovers had escaped their universe and slid silently into ours. A few visionaries, however, sought to exploit our newfound proximity to our characters:

"So, you must be the Maglianis?"

"Yes, yes we are. I'm James and this is my wife, Kerri."

"We're writing a love story about you."

"Us? Really?" (This was Kerri speaking. She had come fully through the hole and was now standing arm in arm with her husband, James, and scanning the crowd for Lurky, who had slunk out of sight.)

"We were hoping you could tell us about when you first met and fell in love."

“Oh I don’t know,” *said Kerri as she peered over our shoulders and between our ankles.* “This is all a bit strange. And we have meatloaf in the oven.”

“Besides [*here James interjected*], this is sort of silly, don’t you think?”

“Love? Silly?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” *said Kerri, disentangling herself from James.*

“No, no. Not love. Of course not.” *James put his hands on Kerri’s shoulders.* “It’s just— *this.*” *He gestured toward us.* “I mean— look.”

The Maglianis gazed out across us as if searching for something in our faces. We, expectant and hopeful, met their eyes. At last Kerri turned to James and murmured into his ear. James replied in an animated whisper, and their hushed conversation continued until James let out a deep sigh. “All right,” he said in a voice loud enough to be audible to us all. Kerri faced us directly.

“We can’t stay long, but we might be able to answer one or two questions.”

“Wonderful! Could you tell us about the first time you met each other?”

“Sure. We had World Civ. together on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I remember thinking he was very handsome. But I didn’t pay him much attention because he had a girlfriend at the time.” *Here Kerri leaned in a little closer.* “She cheated on him with her Stats TA, you know.”

“Kerri!”

“And he had nice teeth,” *she added.* “I always notice when a man has a good smile.”

“And you, James? What were your thoughts?”

“Geez. That was a long time ago.” *James looked to his wife, pleadingly.* “Kerri sat in front of me in class. And she always wore a ponytail.”

“That’s it?”

“Come on, James.”

“You know I’m not good at this, Kerri. And our meatloaf.”

They stood in silence—James with his hands in his pockets, Kerri with her knuckles resting on her hips—for many lugubrious moments.

“Well, would you consider: ‘I ached to penetrate her, to enter her, for to know what it felt like to be inside of her would be to know another universe?’”

“What?”

But here we must digress for a moment, because those words were not ours as a whole. Rather they belonged to our friend Bertrand, the haphazardly toupeed French physicist, and, if truth be told, the sentence had little to do with our lovers and much to do with his unrequited affections. Poor Bertrand, as we later learned, had fallen madly in love with a beautiful Indian girl named Anjali, but, due to an unfortunate series of miscommunications which arose from linguistic and cultural differences, Anjali had come to loathe Bertand, and she had repeatedly spurned his advances. Bertrand was also having some troubles with his work as a theoretical physicist. He was enamored of, but could not convincingly prove, his theory that black holes are in fact portals to other universes. Of course, being French, he heard connotations in “trou noir” that “black hole” cannot conjure so readily in the Anglo-Saxon ear. With his words to the Maglianis, he had fused his academic and romantic frustrations.

“What did you just say?”

“I said: ‘I ached to penetrate her—’”

“I heard you the first time, you sick bastard. Take it back!”

“But sir, I did not mean—”

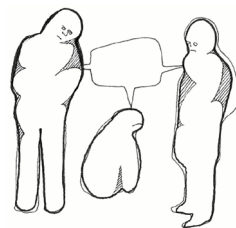
“Take it back!”

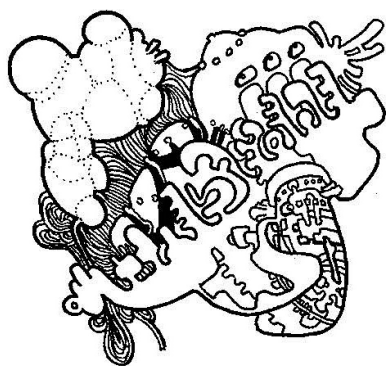
And with that Mr. Magliani grabbed Bertrand by the shoulders and began to shake him vigorously. The toupee that had been precariously perched on Dr. Sage’s scalp was finally dislodged, and it flopped onto the floor just as Anjali emerged, momentarily, from our masses. While Anjali and a stunned but unremorseful Mr. Magliani looked on, Lurky darted out of the crowd and snatched the toupee from the feet of the bald physicist; the dog scrambled away, all the while gnawing at the now-

slobbery clump of hair, and the unfortunate physicist was left without a hat or even a scarf to shield him from his mortification.

At first we thought Bertrand might burst into tears in front of us, but instead he reached for the defiled potted ficus, wielding the tree like a club. Thankfully, Dr. Sages's wild, baseball-style swing missed Mr. Magliani entirely, but the blow did connect with one of the creationists, who were still holding a grudge over the inclusion of physics formulas and unicellular life forms in our love story. The man, his face smarting with ficus-branch scratches, was only too happy to return a punch. A rumble ensued, and we all eventually found ourselves pulled into the fracas (it should go without saying that this is the point at which our narrative completely falls apart), during which the unhappy ficus tree was beaten to a fine mulch. We assume that all three of our Maglianis—James, Kerri, and Lurky—managed miraculously to slip back through the hole unharmed, though we did not see them again until almost an hour later, when all three, looking cross and somewhat damp, were in their kitchen eating slightly burnt meatloaf—the humans from plates on the table, the dog from his dish on the floor. We suspect they sensed us watching them, because, when we tried to look closer, James shut the blinds.

As we surveyed the carnage beneath our feet—ficus leaves, glass shards, crumpled slides of subatomic particles, fragments of chairs, a lifeless hairpiece—we were overcome with sorrow and shame. All we'd wanted was to tell a story—a love story, no less!—and yet we, beings who considered ourselves to be rational and levelheaded, had been brought to blows by a stray dog, some misplaced words, and a poorly attached toupee. We could do nothing but stand in a stupor, the wreckage crunching beneath our toes as we shifted from leg to leg. It was then that we felt, for the first time, the full weight of the question that has spent eternity hovering in the spaces between our neurons: why? why did any of this happen?





THE VISIT
Tomaž Šalamun
Translated from the Slovenian
by Michael Thomas Taren and the author

I.

The brown color of Teotihuacan is circling.
The sun presses grapes, crumbles the membrane.
Shadows are lying down as a taint on a young skin.
There's no fish.

Toys recede as they'd sled from walls.
A pastel senses a punch, a hollow one.
I watch illumination,
I think they are crates for hares.

Jesus (Hesús) turns the radio on.
Blurs roll into bumps and vaporize.
Lopsided jeans are visible from the moon.

Entrance, exit, the same direction.
Innumerable ladles, they pacify heads
with red eyes. Voice, the air, the teethridges.

II.

Water in a bright metal bag round the neck of the animal.
A feather on pine tree needles on steep ground.
Let my arm overgrow into roots.
I see one part of a roof, a piece of roof.

I'm waking up, the sun is sliding.
A fluff sprouts to the clouds, it dies.
Let the stone's shadow fall to the ground before the stone.
The sound thickens.

I draw a line with my knife around the mill in the turf.
The star is waiting to be crushed.
It doesn't fall. It waits to fall.
August. The dust hardens.

III.

The seed of intelligence snows on the face of the doe.
It washes it, it wounds it.
The three columns of the transmission lines in the woods.
A blueberry, it doesn't exist.

Fingers freeze.
There is fire in the huts.
The seed of intelligence scatters hush on the sand.
The picture is hard.

I'm shaking off my shoes.
Below the eaves I see water.
Smoke is undisturbed.
Gold peels from the windows of the house.

IV.

if not then if it won't then
if a crown if a blossom
a gnarl opens a gnarl opens
I have a cap I have a cap
the river brings colors
I hear I hear the dark curtain goes
to the left it retreats as if I'd watch it through
rain fingers cry I hear the servant
speaking I watch the cigarette smoke
one threshold more and I'll munch
I munch I'm lost I'm lost it stirs me
like polenta I contract I expand
contracting expanding I go round
to give them a place in myself
they're like dwarves many dwarves
they're of pastels colors my woolen pullover
is made out of smoke I didn't swallow
anything no plant no powder I don't need
any plant any powder the machine started to
shudder it doesn't want to if I'm carried away
from the riverbed it hurts me everything hurts
me from happiness me Buddha sitting in
the little caves of my ears

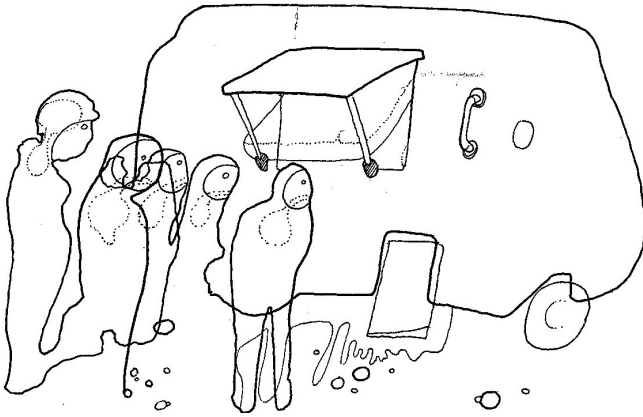
V.

the world travels in clouds and flowers
 who sees knows
 all is the same all is one
 it is soft is soft and pierces
 until now I called the gods now
 they came they are here in me with me
 we are colors we are colors colors
 powder such a strange powder as
 rain the molasses happiness is molasses
 thinning it becomes scarce I'm tired I'm lazy
 I'm tired lazy blessed I can't figure it out
 I'm awashed exploded the heart survived
 it seemed it will TTAK! stop now it is as
 a cauliflower's blossom on every
 leaf's millimeter there are huge cities
 shone upon with light now I can
 crawl in between swim and breathe
 so that all children all grown-ups
 all people can all fall asleep in beauty as in
 water everything is what it is

VI.

I put epitaphs into the machine as I
 wait for my brothers once I died on X
 I went up from downstairs to upstairs in
 die Spitze where I was annihilated then I started
 to crawl apart alive now it is different now I
 travel on the surface twelve years of staring into
 whiteness is the school but now it's no
 not needed anymore the school this is made
 rather very simply like if you'd jump from a horse
 stand up from the wheel open the door
 cross the threshold you're greeting everybody
 you can talk at the same time some
 kind stupidities it doesn't matter in sum
 you go completely and naturally through
 and in and out without dramas tragedies
 doomsday or punishment these walks
 are from color to color color to color
 eternally in all directions—
 they're infinite—
 of the cross





THREE TALES OF A VERY WINDY TOWN

Lyubomir P. Nikolov

Translated from the Bulgarian by Kalin Nenov

Up on the cliffs by a rough sea, there falteringly existed a town.

In the streets of that town, there were no children. The wind that blew all year round was so strong that people did not let their children out of their houses.

In each house, the largest room was the children's, and the children spent all their time there, never going to school. The windows of the children's rooms never overlooked the sea, because the sea was slightly frightening.

That sea attracted only madmen, who went on to become sailors. Sailors, once they had departed, never returned to the town. They sent letters home in bottles to inform their relatives that they were doing well, but they never came back.

The town struggled with the sea and the wind. Its citizens were, in a way, proud of their struggle. But often they lost track of their thoughts, because the wind blew the thoughts away.

One day, the mayor had a visitor. They sat on the wind-beaten terrace of the Town Hall, the only one looking out on the sea, and struck up a conversation while having lunch. The conversation consisted of only two sentences repeated over and over again, and the meal of a single dish served countless times. The wind blew their thoughts away, so that after the one sentence spoken by the mayor and the other spoken by his visitor, they both forgot what they had said and started over. They ordered the astonished servants to bring them one and the same dish till dusk fell.

When, on the following day, the mayor found out what had happened, he was embarrassed. He decided that such a mean wind was not to be trifled with, and he ordered that all houses in

the town be made wind-proof. The walls had to be built of stone, three feet thick, and each house had to have a labyrinth inside to catch the wind.

One night, such a gale hit the town that the stone houses quavered, and the wind labyrinths chimed like organ pipes. People lost their thoughts and memories, dogs coughed instead of barking, birds hid in holes in the ground so as not to be sucked up by the wind funnels and carried out to sea, and goats banged their heads against the walls. People, animals, and probably plants were out of their minds.

The wind let up in the morning. There was an unusual quiet, and everyone would have calmed down but for one odd occurrence. Inconspicuously, the wind had blown all letters away from the town. While the frightened people had scrambled to and fro during the night—and naturally no one read anything, be it a book or newspaper—the wind had blown away all printed letters: the inscriptions on monuments and tombstones, the scrawls on walls, the degrees in the diplomas of doctors and professors, the little text on the pills inside medicine bottles, the lovers' verses, and even those characters that looked like letters but were in fact not.

And so, as you may have guessed, because of a lack of letters, this story cannot continue, so it must stop a while.

* * *

In the very windy town, there were two antique shops. The old men from the town never failed to visit them on birthdays and wedding anniversaries, and again a week before their deaths, in order to refresh their memories. The pendula of the clocks there mesmerized them, the music boxes softly sang to them, and they forgot what they were and remembered what they could be.

They spent a few hours in one store and then, necessarily, just as many hours in the other. The two stores differed greatly from all stores you may know. The saleswomen, who were also

the store owners, had no interest in their proceeds but rather in something else they never talked about, and the old men strained their deaf ears to find out what the saleswomen wanted, and spent long hours among the curios.

One store was staffed by a young woman, who was actually a hundred and twenty years old. Oddly, in this store every object grew younger. Pray do not think that an eighteenth-century watch left in the store would become a nineteenth-century watch. Nay, the watch grew younger as its parts returned to that state when it had just been made, and it began to work in synchrony with astronomical time, without the sloppiness peculiar to old watches which would often run an hour and a half slow. The battered incrustations on the lid resumed their original relief, and the watch started looking new.

All in all, it was an antique store where old things turned new, papyri shook off their dust and mold, and old men who had spent at least an hour inside went out into the wind feeling no aches or hurts.

The other antique store was run by an austere and shriveled old wife with hair long turned yellow. Her actual age was forty-two. In her store, things grew old quickly. Time ran fast, and so did watches. One left this store crushed with fatigue, as if one had read and memorized a whole encyclopedia full of thoughts that were exceptionally ponderous but also insightful, bearing the sense that beyond one's personal life, there were higher worlds, and this mental weariness allayed the other, scarier tiredness of the daily grind. The old men went away even older but also livelier in spirit—they grew older, aye, yet the world stayed young and undeciphered, and it would not end with them. When they walked out, the wind wafted new thoughts to them.

However, neither the people exiting this store nor those others in town had any idea why the wind never stopped blowing. They thought it was due to the sea or the location of the town, but these were shallow and misguided thoughts. The wind in the town was in fact due to the different speeds of time in the two antique stores.

* * *

In the very windy town, there was a well. The citizens drew no water from it. They threw, mainly at night, unneeded things into it—fermented cabbages, hideous paintings, broken clocks, sometimes rats, sometimes cats—there are all sorts of bad folks, you know, and the windy town was no exception, especially when the bora blew. One woman went so far as to throw down the well all of her husband's tools, her son's gymnastic apparatus, and her daughter's poetry.

She did not do it out of cruelty—she merely wished to clean her house. She was the most fastidious person in town, and in her house, there were only four beds, a table with four sets of silverware, and no other redundant stuff. The others in her family asked the neighbors for everything they needed, till finally her husband had to give all of his salary to the families nearby so he could ask for things without feeling embarrassed. He started spending all of his time at the neighbors' houses, and his wife stayed alone in her clean empty house.

The abovementioned details may not seem related to the tale that follows but in fact they are, as they explain why one could find in that well all that was needed for a decent life. They also explain why, when the mayor's daughter dropped into the well, she fell onto something soft and did not break her neck.

She was quite brave, and she did not grow scared. She actually felt no wind blowing in the well and told herself, "For the first time, I'm going to live in this town without the wind blowing at me, and my ears are going to have a rest." She also realized she could put on some earrings without the wind blowing them away.

When the wind had blown away all letters from the town, handwritten and printed alike, and erased any trace of lofty poetry and prose as well as political science, statistics, and other poppycock, it had actually poured them down the well. The mayor's daughter, whose name was Valeria, blinked in the dust of tiny letters and waved her hand, trying to shoo away the thin

threads of sentences wrapping round her. The whole well had been covered by letters, yet they had not fallen chaotically; they had held together in words and sentences, and even, in some cases, complete works. Of course, nothing remained of the textbooks on pedagogy and political science—only a few quotes from other books.

Valeria began unwinding the word threads entangling her body and saw that often they were sentences beginning with “Valeria,” and even more often with “My dearest Valeria,” or else with “Angel mine,” “O!” and once, “my sweet little kid.” Valeria forgot her loneliness. Absorbed, she read the multitude of letters, cautiously unwrapping them from her body. Evidently, they were addressed to her, because they contained numerous references to her blue eyes, her red slippers, and her turquoise dress shoes with lace, embracing her “elegant little feet.”

When night fell, she turned on the fisher’s Petromax thrown away by that woman I’ve already told you of, who had also thrown away a matchbox, and she (Valeria) kept going over the threads. She had never read any of those letters addressed to her. Her woman’s heart was fluttering as it had never done in any store. The words in some letters made her face blush, her ears tingle, and her lungs plead for more air in the overstuffed well. Certain phrases in the letters suggested boys she knew, while others, the ones that made her blush the most, were obviously from a mature man. A letter said, “I know my words will go with the wind, as does my mom’s laundry, and with each word and piece of clothing blown away, I remain ever more naked before you.”

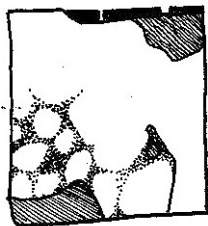
Tired from reading, Valeria prepared to go to bed. She unwound the last sentence and read it with sleep-yearning eyes: “Mister Mayor, I know you’re hiding all my letters from Valeria, but you should know that a day shall come when she shall drop into the well, and I shall be the one to save her, and that shall happen before my father’s Petromax has finished burning.”

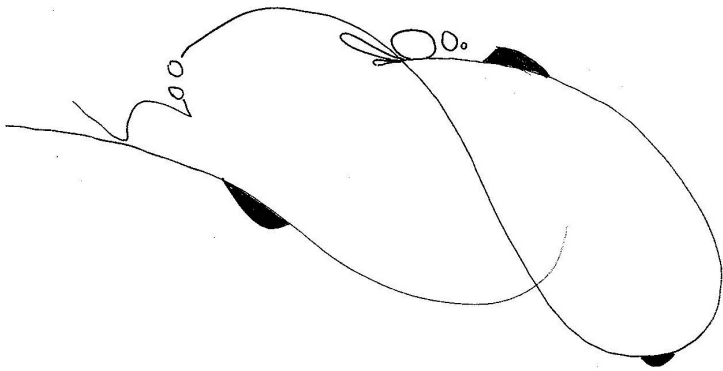
Valeria read the sentence over a few times, because it seemed to hold more sense than the others. When she had read

it for the fourth time, a rope ladder dropped into the well. A boy whom she vaguely knew, merely because he had asked her to lend him the tin opener a few times, now climbed down panting and said, "I'm sorry for interrupting, but I saw my father's Petromax burning."

"And me? Are you going to rescue me?" Valeria asked.

"Of course," the boy said, blushing, "but I was too shy to begin with that."



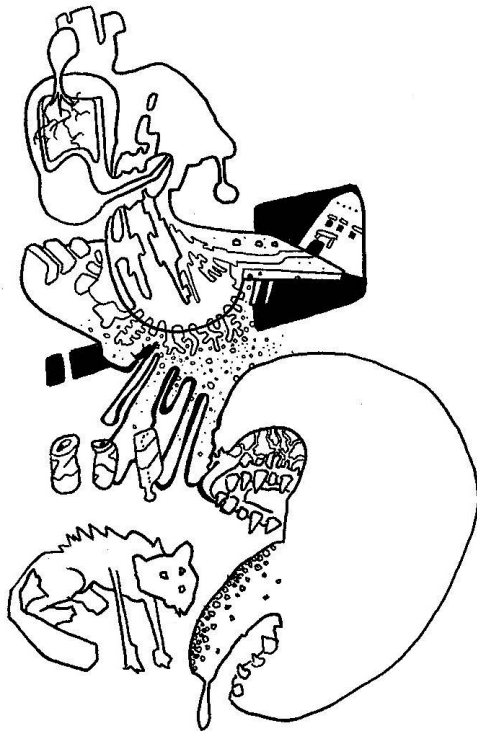


THE UNICORN
Leanna Petronella

The unicorn is a river poured into a horse.
Also the unicorn is the elephant's glass wife.

I just knew if I had a horn it would all make sense.
I wanted silver details of myself to swirl like metal ice cream
from my forehead. I too could be porcelain steam
if enough wires were found to curve around my body.
For once I just wanted to dissolve.

The earth dances in her blue-brown dress. Lower your head,
you ghost chariot, you flesh car made from wind.



MOONLET, HER AND THE OTHER ONE

Rikki Ducornet

There was once a man in her life as thimble as the moon and small enough to straddle her finger. There was so much wrong with him!

But to give him credit, his defects were all on the outside, unless you counted the abject filth jammed inside his brains—but these days who does?

The other one in her life was as tall as a steeple and as thin as a needle. The boys in the street threw their soda cans at him, and the biddies emptied the alehouse spittoons on his head. She liked neither of these men but had little choice in the matter. As her mother instructed, a lump cannot argue with Fate. So she married them both, and off they went together, Moonlet holding her left hand and the other one her right.

Soon they reached the rental cottage in the woods. The walls were made of straw, the floor was nicely spread with cow flops, and the roof was stuck in place with recycled mustard plaster. The landlady had stocked the refrigerator with a pickled trotter, and because it was their honeymoon, a bitter bottle of cider. The bride provided three meatballs stolen from her mother's frypan and warmed in her pocket. Once she had brushed the dust from everybody's boots, they sat down to their little feast and made the best of it.

After Moonlet had sucked his cider, forked the trotter and gummed his meatball, he projected a terrific blast which was, in fact, not unfamiliar. When she politely asked how he made his livelihood, he told her it was he who made the thunder.

"Other One," she asked then, looking to the ceiling where her second husband's head scraped the lamp's underside, "how do you make your livelihood?"

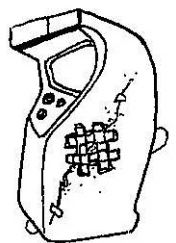
"O, that." he said. "I hold up the sky with my head. I'll be getting up early."

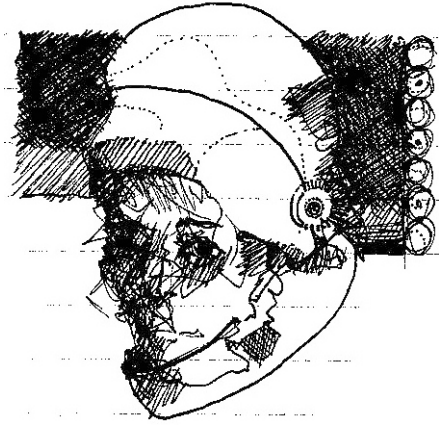
These words struck a profound chord in her heart, and she proposed they get ready for sleep. She noted that she alone washed her feet, and the undesignated place where her legs came together. Then the three of them went to bed. Hopefully she said: "How happy I am!" But no one heard her because both her husbands were fast asleep. This caused some confusion, but also relief. And they warmed her, those two odd husbands of hers. For the first time in memory, she would sleep in a warm bed.

She thought she was far from home and far from the village, yet hadn't she always been far from everything, even in her mother's house where she had been stored in the attic? Now she had two husbands, which must count for something. And weren't the three of them nicely tucked into bed together? It's not as though I've been sent packing to outer space, she thought.

When at last she fell asleep, she dreamed that a substantial meal was steaming on a shelf just out of reach. She smelled noodles, melted butter, fritters stuffed with jam. Outside the air was so cold you could have sawed it in half.

In the middle of the night, Moonlet—who was really too little for marriage—tumbled to the floor and rolled under the refrigerator where he vanished. Startled by the commotion, the other one sat up all too quickly and cracked his head open on the ceiling. All this was never known, nor could it be. Because the next morning the sky did not come up, the birds fell off their perches, the moles froze in their burrows, and in the fields the corn toppled to the ground just as if it had been cursed.





VERGISS MEIN NICHT

Catherine Dufour

Translated from the French by Michael Shreve

I do not know if it does it on purpose, or if it was born that way, but the face of Chance has a grotesque grin. I call Get as my witness, under his real name Gerard Snette, a former student at IEPT, dead in the bloom of youth and decay.

* * *

The IEPT (Institut d'Etudes Polyvalent du Trident) is a twenty-year-old temporary prefabricated building that some crazy or drunk architect designed like full-blown cancer. This monstrous concrete tumor spreads its metastases on the edge of the Old Kiss canal, spitting its students out three exits: one on the south side that tumbles down to the highway; another on the east side that leads to the mud pits pompously called a stadium; and the third due north toward the campus residences. There should have been one on the west side, but that is where the canal runs. The fact that there is no exit onto this sewer is the only evidence of a reasonable brain working on the plans of the IEPT.

Trident's industrial zone sprawls over six miles around the Institut, all the way to the city of Haussun Sassey. You can see it because of the dome of smog. When you get to Haussun, if it is a nice day, you will have a view of otherworldly grandeur: factories sparkling in the depths of the noxious haze, jet pipes glistening like eels, humps of warehouses bathed in sun.

Up close, it is not so attractive.

Everyone at IEPT dreams of getting their hands on the guy who so assiduously implemented the charming idea of bringing together the university and corporate worlds. Getting their hands on him and then giving him a bath in the canal. It

is a sadistic fantasy because Old Kiss carries all the industrial waste of Trident as well as much of the household waste from Haussun Sassey. There is alleged to be an old water treatment plant somewhere upstream, but rumors are not very reliable.

Along the canal by the IEPT they had installed a protective fence that the acid fumes had long since reduced to scrap. The “No Swimming” signs made generations of students laugh: the foam covering Old Kiss, anywhere from piss yellow to snot green and disturbed by sudden discharges of gas, makes you want to throw up, run away, or put out your cigarette, but never—*never*—go swimming.

None of this stops the IEPT from being “a good university full of good teachers with good stuff.” I used to recite this motto to myself whenever I felt discouraged and each time I drew a little line on a little notebook. When I had filled up a page with little lines, I jumped into my rolling ashtray (a broken down Renault 5) and drove to Hauss to drink a little bit of oxygen and a whole lot of beer in a “downtown” bar. Except for this, I was a model Ph.D. student, spending a third of my time in the classroom, a third sleeping in a cell wallpapered with posters and cards from Editions du Désastre, and the third third dealing with the stuff: pushing people back from cutting in line at the cafeteria, sorting out the meat from the fat, plugging up the holes in the stalls with toilet paper so I could piss in peace, and beating up the copy machine.

* * *

Get was out of place and out of time. This reed should have been wearing the costume of a medieval page, a pretty velvet doublet to hide his poking ribs and a feathered cap lowered over his ugly face. He would have played the lute, with one knee on the ground, at the feet of a damsel on a unicorn. I no longer remember when or why we first spoke to each other; it is like we had always exchanged the occasional nod or idiotic smile. Sometimes he put

his plate next to mine on one of tables in the cafeteria or his Get 27 next to my glass of beer in one of the bars in Hauss. We talked about literature every time, halfheartedly, him Saint-John Perse, me Lautréamont. I was just interested in his weird face—a knife blade plastered with boredom that suddenly froze, for no reason (as an excuse for or a concession to social life), in one of the most beautiful smiles I ever saw. I do not really know what interested him. In my opinion, nothing. According to the rumors around the Insitut, he had been worn out early on by the abuse of substances taken directly out of the canal and complicated by scandalous illnesses.

He really would have been better off born as a fourteenth century page.

* * *

One morning, while I was listlessly brushing my teeth and thinking about the class I had just missed and about the exorbitant check that I had left the night before with the manager of the *Vin des copains*, someone drummed on my door. I opened it with my right hand tilting my head to the left. It was Get, his eyes strangely lit up. He danced from one foot to the other and then decided to enter while I spat into the sink. I yawned and started to make myself look human again with broad strokes of a makeup brush. As I spread cream pretty much everywhere, I saw in the mirror that Get had sat down on the table, all twisted around, and was staring out the window. He looked so... concerned that I imagined he saw something other than the acid rain drizzling miserably on the bare lawn. Secretly watching this expression come to him like an ice floe to a duck, I waited for him to say something. I had just finished painting my yellow hue with brown powder when he made up his mind.

“I saw something fabulous last night.”

“Oh yeah? Where at?”

“In Old Kiss.”

I almost stabbed my eye with the mascara. "...Breeding nuclear mushroom clouds?"

"A ghost."

I redrew my mascara and then unscrewed the cover of my blush. "A ghost," I echoed.

"It was at midnight. I couldn't sleep. I went to take a walk along the canal and I saw a... a shape stretched along the water. It was moving... moving slowly and singing. She... it... was the size of a human being. I stood there until it disappeared this morning."

"Were you drinking? Smoking? Anything?"

"It stayed there in the same place all night long even though there was a hell of a current in the canal." He stood up and turned toward the window while I brushed my hair. "The easiest thing is for you to come with me tonight. If it's nothing, we'll say I had a hallucination. Otherwise, we'll figure out what it is. Okay?"

"Okay."

Get left my room while I dug into an old cup of yogurt so I could pay for a cup of coffee. Or two. Or three. Or only one, but really strong.

* * *

At 11:30 p.m., when Get knocked at my door, I was in a deep sleep. I woke up bit by bit. I put on my jeans, a pair of espadrilles, a sweater, and a plastic raincoat because there were still a few drops falling. Slipping in the mud, we reached the rusty fence of Old Kiss. Get crouched in front of a hole in the fence; I did the same and saw a long, bluish shape, softly glowing, floating in the middle of the canal—and around it, we saw... something move. Veils or maybe hair blowing, or coattails. A very faint murmur that was hard to locate rose from the canal, like a Gregorian chant heard through the walls of a crypt, sad and tenuous. The human-sized shape was turning around in circles.

I do not know how long we stayed there clinging to the fence, our breath cut short by the chemical stench of Old Kiss. In the end, we climbed back up the muddy hill in silence, back to the Institut, and I invited Get to drink a beer in my room. He sat on my only chair while I opened two bottles of warm beer. I handed one to him, but he did not take it. “Your feet.”

I looked: in the midst of the mud that caked my espadrilles were lilac flowers. I took off my shoes. They were, indeed, little crushed, shriveled wild flowers. Coming back from the canal, a shoe full of flowers is about as likely as coming back from the North Pole with slippers full of sand.

Once my espadrilles were cleaned off, I put them in the garbage and swept off the floor while Get, with a maternal smile, smoothed the petals out on a piece of paper. Then he folded it over and put it on a piece of wet cotton while murmuring, “I hope that this’ll hold until the library opens.”

“You worry about the botanical... me, I’ll take care of the history of the canal and the resident ghosts.”

He took a swig, looked relieved, and said, “At least I wasn’t dreaming. Tomorrow...”

“In four hours. What?”

“Nothing. I have to go shopping in Hauss.”

I downed half of my can, burped and sat there daydreaming, keeping one blank eye on the dark rectangle of window. The whisper of the canal haunted my ears. “Maybe it’s the corpse of a dog,” I murmured. “A big dog.”

“And the light?”

“Some fluorescent, chemical junk.”

“And why wasn’t it dragged off by the current?”

I finished my beer. “We’ll see tomorrow, Get.”

“Good night.”

At 8 a.m. I stumbled into the library. I was deep into the *History of the towns of Haussun and Sassey* when Get slid a botanical booklet under my nose.

“*Vergissmeinnicht*,” he shrieked.

“Quiet!”

“*Myosotis scorpioides*,” he said more softly, “also called Forget-me-nots, or, in the original, ‘Vergissmeinnicht.’”

I recognized the purple petals and the little leaves, and I read the word *Vergissmeinnicht*... “Is it an order?”

“Or a prayer?”

“We usually pray from down here to over there.”

“There’s usually no ghost in Old Kiss, either.”

I shrugged. “I didn’t find anything.”

“I’m going to Hauss. I have some shopping to do.”

I put back the *History*, picked at random a treatise on rivers, leafed through a local *History of religious orders* and then jumped in my car. I left my R5 at City Hall, forced my way into the archives and spent three hours viewing the microfiche of old newspapers from the last century. I returned to IEPT around seven in the evening.

Get was waiting for me in front of a plate of chicken and fries at the cafeteria. “Well?” he asked, shaking a steaming wing. “Any news?”

“A century ago, on the site of the cocoa factory across from the Institut on the other side of the canal, there was a convent.”

“A convent?”

“Yes. And at the end of the nineteenth century, they fished out of the canal—which was a clean little river back then—the body of a nun. Pregnant. Committed suicide. The river wasn’t deep, so her dress got caught between two rocks and she just floated there. Here, look at the obituary from the time.” I pulled a folded photocopy out of my pocket and handed it to him.

“Vergiss mein nicht...” he murmured.

“Yes. You see, they can’t bury a suicide on holy ground. That’s why they buried her near the canal. And someone covered the grave with *Myosotis*. Maybe the father.”

“But why Vergissmeinnicht and not chrysanthemums?”

“Vergissmeinnicht was being grown around Old Kiss, apparently.”

“Who told you that?”

“The archivist in Hauss. She’s almost old enough to have been there.”

Get’s gaze got lost beyond the false ceiling of the room. I took the opportunity to steal his fries. Instead of stuffing myself, I should have paid more attention to Get’s romantic ideas... and to the nineteenth century. The fourteenth is not the nineteenth. The nineteenth was “a hard time,” the rise of materialism and of smokestacks—about as fertile for fantasy as Trident.

* * *

At midnight, exasperated by insomnia, I nervously kicked off my blankets, pulled my espadrilles out of the garbage, grabbed my coat, and slid down to the canal. I crept up to the fence. The shape was still floating in its phosphorescent halo.

“Who’s there?” a voice came out of the shadows.

“Get?”

“Oh, it’s you.”

He was on the other side of the fence, leaning on something big and black. I asked, “What’s that?”

He lifted the huge thing with one hand and threw it into the canal. “An inflatable raft I bought this afternoon.”

I heard him wade out and pull himself over the edge.

“But it’s no good! It’ll never hold out against the acidity of Old Kiss!”

The sound of the oars plunging into the canal was the only answer I got. I saw the raft move off from the shore, reach the ghost and stop. I glimpsed Get’s outline leaning into the blue light—and after that, I don’t know. Did he scream *before* diving in, or after? Did the raft deflate or capsize? Anyway, it happened very fast. The ghost light vanished and night fell before me. I sat there for a minute listening, but I heard only the insidious song of the canal. Then I crawled back up to tell someone.

The police and the IEPT experts took turns giving me all kinds of reprimands. However, they were able to solve a case in the news thanks to me: an executive from the parachechemical plant located upstream from the Institut, on the shore of the canal, had been missing for fifteen days. It was his body glowing in the canal. I do not really know who killed him or why—misappropriation of funds granted to the water treatment center, or something like that; it doesn't really matter. They had sneakily pushed him into a tank full of fluorescent waste, fished him out with a long boathook, rolled his body in barbed wire tied to a big rock and then thrown him into the canal. The wire caught on something and the body just stayed there shining in front of the IEPT. The gases from decomposition escaped through the holes from the hook, making the rot-swollen limbs tremble.

That was the floating veil, the blowing hair...

I tried to talk about the Vergissmeinnicht, but nobody wanted to hear it. "Don't try to make poetry out of your irresponsibility," the inspector told me.

When Get, in tears, leaned over the ravishing nun, he found himself face-to-maggots with a hideous rotting corpse. The raft got stuck on the barbed wire and Get was thrown headfirst into the poisoned grave. It was Old Kiss who woke me up during the night with unbelievable nausea.

The whole campus was at the burial, and the grave disappeared under the flowers. I did not see who had slipped over the top of the cross a little wreath of Vergissmeinnicht.

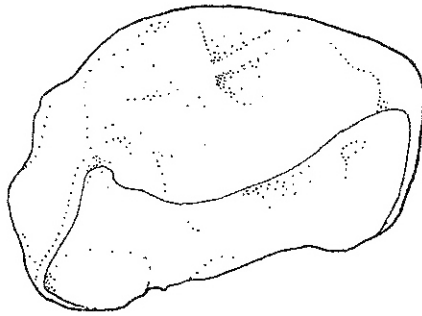
Forget me not.

There's no chance of that.

I kicked the empty Coke can that the wind was rolling along the gutter of the cemetery and went back to my thesis. The night before the annual closing of the Institut, I got up the courage to go listen to the canal again. It was still singing. It is probably the effect of foam bubbles popping by the thousands.

For Get, a.k.a. Ian Brown





THE LOVE DECAY HAS FOR THE LIVING

Berit Ellingsen

The shattered windows, blistering paint and whispering mold drew the Lover to the building in the drowned district. Inattentiveness and bad luck drew him to the nail that protruded from the wall like a curse. The vigor of his bloodstream drew the fungal spores on the sharp metal into his body. There they became progenitors and ancestors. When the Lover woke in his two-room apartment above the small restaurant on the corner the next morning, more than a dozen thin mushrooms peeked out of the wound in his thigh. The fruiting bodies were long and translucently white, like the fingers of a ghost, each topped with a tiny, ivory-colored cap. The fungi smelled of ozone and forbidden thoughts.

* * *

The Chef had been drawn to the Lover by the ease of his smile and the calm of his eyes, and the two men had lived in each other's orbit for some time. When the Chef saw the pale fungal digits in the Lover's thigh, the Chef's attraction to the Lover was reborn. And just in time.

"Never trust the food of a skinny chef," the Lover had used to joke. But lately he had only told the Chef: "You are getting thin."

"Did you know that fungi are neither plants nor animals?" the Chef asked the Lover. "They are so distantly related to animals and plants that they are almost like extraterrestrials, strangers on their own planet."

"I did not know that," the Lover said, "but I can feel it." He had already turned a shade stranger, a hue subtler. His skin smelled like sparks.

“Shall I fetch the doctor, so he can treat your wound?” the Chef asked.

“No need,” the Lover said. “I will be all right.” The gleam of fresh desire in the Chef’s eyes had not escaped the Lover, and he wanted more than anything to keep it.

* * *

Instead of calling the physician, the Chef went to the floating market to find out what type of fungus was growing in the Lover. The Chef thought that the diminutive, leather-skinned women who sold mushrooms and vegetables and flowers and fruits from the bottoms of their slim canoes would know more about what was edible in the land than any book or Internet site did. The air at the market was swollen with flower fragrances, tobacco smoke, frying oil, and human sweat. The saleswomen’s cries cut through the moist air, but the Chef found no mushrooms that matched the Lover’s, and returned to their two rooms and bed empty-handed.

The ceiling fan moved the humid air in slow circles above the Lover, who was resting on the bed. Raindrops leaked in from the roof and sang their wet song in bowls and buckets on the floor. When the Chef and the Lover wanted to sleep, they had to navigate the sea of containers with care. The monsoon season refused to leave; it kept raining, and few tourists came to their part of the country anymore.

* * *

With eyes that shone of curiosity as well as love, the Chef climbed quietly into bed. He cut two of the diaphanous stalks that stood in the Lover’s flesh with a broad, curved knife that had been made to decapitate mushrooms. The Lover shuddered and set his jaw, but did not open his eyes. Quietly, the Chef left the damp bedding and padded into the tall and narrow kitchen,

rinsed his pale harvest in the tepid water from the tap, put them in his mouth, and chewed. Something in the spectral-looking digits reminded the Chef how decay, like love, dissolves every barrier and door, but they brought no pain or regret to him.

* * *

The next morning, new fruiting bodies had replaced the ones the Chef had taken. They wafted in the air like sea anemones in slow current. The Chef took out the crescent-shaped blade again, leaned across the sticky sheets, and sheared off a handful of the fungal stalks. The remnants of the ghostly fingers twitched and jerked and filled the air with blue scent.

In his restaurant on the ground floor, the Chef fried the mushrooms in a small round skillet and mixed them with grilled squid and spring onions, toasted red chili, thick dark soy sauce and a dash of bitter tamarind. The Water Seller who peddled liquid on their street came inside and sniffed the air like a hungry dog.

“What is that?” the Water Seller asked.

“Try it,” the Chef said. He scooped the steaming food onto a fresh lotus leaf on a cracked porcelain plate with faded gold decoration on the rim, and handed the Water Seller a fork.

“Thank you so much,” the Water Seller said, while chewing loudly. “I haven’t had any breakfast. We can’t afford to, with the tourists absent and business slow.”

“Yes, the weather has been strange,” the Chef said. The years had been less moist and warm when he’d first met the Lover.

“This is delicious,” the Water Seller said. “There are white truffles in it?”

“Do you know what truffles taste like?”

“A few years ago my wife and I went to Paris,” the Water Seller said. “She’d always wanted to go to Paris, the most romantic city on Earth. We ate in a Parisian gourmet restaurant to see what it was all about: wild boar, white truffles, red wine, and

everything. It was good, but not that good. This, though,” the Water Seller said, motioning at the plate, “is different. It reminds me of something good that I have always known, but forgot a long time ago. Something that I ought to remember. What is it?”

“My new course,” the Chef said and smiled, quickly and strangely, like the ghost lights that flare up in the rice fields at night.

* * *

The dish was an instant success and everyone wanted to know what the ingredients were, but the Chef only said: “It’s made with love,” and thought about the Lover. The word spread like running lichen and soon the restaurant was always full, despite the lack of tourists in the city. The locals spent their hard-earned currency on the mushroom dish before they bought water or rice.

“You’ll never have to work again; you can spend all day taking pictures of dying buildings, as you adore doing,” the Chef told the Lover. The Lover lifted his head from the pillow and smiled, his teeth ultraviolet bright and his eyes the color of the mushrooms’ ivory buttons.

* * *

Every night the Chef harvested a few of the wafting lengths. Even a quarter of a stalk was enough to remind the eater of the love decay has for the living. The mushrooms said nothing when the Chef cut them from the colony; they only stiffened a little as if in momentary pain. The Lover did not complain that small bits of him vanished during the night, because he knew what it meant to the Chef. Doesn’t love demand a sacrifice for the dreams of the beloved?

The Chef sharpened his gently curved mushroom knife at night, under the serpentine shadows of the rain that trickled

down the windows. The year before, he had painted the walls sky blue to give them some sunshine, but the paint couldn't take the moisture, and had flaked and peeled like tourist skin. The rivulets of precipitation twisted and turned like the plant fibers that were wound in the ropewalk at the edge of the city.

Every day the crop of diaphanous fingers on the Lover's leg became a little smaller and a little thinner, while the Chef's smile broadened. The Lover returned to the abandoned building in the drowned district to find the nail with the fungal spores again, but the structure had collapsed from the water's calm consumption and the nails had been pulled out of the rubble by scavengers from the steel plant nearby.

Disappointed, but not defeated, the Lover returned home. There, he took the broad-bladed mushroom knife, bit down on a thin scarf printed with blue dragonflies, and cut a gash in his other thigh and on his upper arms in the same measured and deliberate way the Chef harvested the fungal stalks. He crushed several ivory buttons, smeared them into the wounds, and prayed that they would grow.

* * *

The white digits multiplied in their new sites. The Chef saw that the fungi had spread to the Lover's other thigh and both his upper arms, but he did not ask any questions. When the Lover slept, the Chef harvested what he dared.

Journalists and magazines visited the restaurant and wrote about the Chef's delicious dish. He was invited to France to work in a golden restaurant. Paris was warm and bright, the way the Chef and the Lover remembered their country had once been.

The fungi did not flourish here, however. The Lover had hoped the new home would be warm enough, but the temperature was a little too low, the air a touch too dry. The ghostly fingers wilted and dwindled. In despair, the Lover ran the shower in the

bathroom and the tap in the kitchen to moisten the air in the tall-ceilinged, many-windowed apartment. He went to the flea market at Porte de Clignancourt and bought an old humidifier. The seller laughed and asked if he was making a sauna in the heat. The Lover kept the humidifier on high, and he and the Chef were constantly wet, but neither of them said anything, for the sake of the fungi and for the sake of love.

* * *

But the Lover knew the fruiting bodies were dying. They no longer glowed blue at night and their electrical kisses had ceased. When the Lover woke to find the Chef crying above him in bed, he didn't need to ask the reason.

"We should never have left," the Lover said.

"But you always wanted to live in the most romantic city on the planet," the Chef said. "And the people here are the best and most appreciative eaters in the world."

"This city is too dry," the Lover said. No shadows of running water adorned their walls at night, no raindrops rushed in through the open glass panes on the wind's warm breath. Compared with their home country now, Paris was cold and arid.

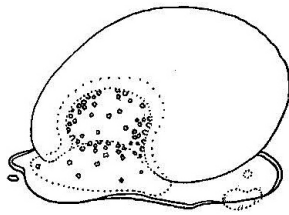
* * *

The Chef relented. They boarded a plane for home, the last of the fungal digits clinging to life in the dry air of the passenger cabin. They flew through thunder and lightning and the electrical discharges enlivened the remaining fungi, like defibrillation of a still heart. The Chef and the Lover returned to their apartment above the small restaurant and its food remained a local delicacy instead of an international sensation.

"The Parisians didn't like my other dishes anyway," the Chef said. "Just the one with the mushrooms."

The Lover only smiled at him and blue sparks rose from the ends of the pale fingers that moved like smooth tentacles on the Lover's arms and legs. The tiny lightning bolts felt like decay's never-ending, always loving thoughts.





MY USUAL
J. Robert Lennon

I was passing through town on business and decided, on a whim, to eat lunch at the restaurant where we used to go. The place was pretty much as I remembered it, quirky and rather dark, and crowded for a weekday afternoon; the bar was packed for some reason and people were talking loudly.

I recognized the hostess and I think she recognized me. She gazed at my disheveled suit and my book and said, “One?” I nodded and followed her to a table.

But it wasn’t right. There were too many people, and I realized that I knew them. There was Sandy, from church, and fat David the project manager at the old office. I was pretty sure the guy with the mustache was Roy, Eileen’s friend, and he was here with Frank, the carpenter. Other familiar people, too, sitting at tables near mine, all of them pretending not to notice me. Except for Roy, who was staring right at me. It had been years, but none of them had changed. I said to the hostess, “Do you have something more... private?” and she said of course and led me back, into the dark and windowless rear of the place.

I didn’t believe we’d ever sat back here—I didn’t remember it at all. The booths were small and curtained and dim lighting emanated from crooked wall sconces. The noise of the place receded as we walked, and the hostess placed me in a far corner. It was a good table—I could barely make out, in the distance, the window to the street, and cars passing by outside.

The hostess lingered when I ordered coffee; something more seemed to be expected of me. So I said, “I see you’ve recovered from your eating disorder.”

“Yes, for now.”

“That’s good. It’s important to eat.”

“That’s why you’re here.”

I laughed a little. “Yes, that’s right.”

“I’ll leave you alone with the menu,” she said and, with a smile, walked off.

The menu was different—they had expanded it since I’d last eaten here. In fact, it was hundreds of pages long, with unnecessarily elaborate descriptions of each item. There must have been a new chef—he, or she, was clearly obsessed with the history of the recipes and ingredients. *A favored seasoning of shamans and conquistadors alike... reputedly served to Jesus Christ on more than one occasion... a drizzling technique passed down from King Farrad himself.* Never mind. I would just get what I always got. I opened up my book—it was a management guide written by a former sports star—and was soon absorbed in it.

Barely a minute passed before the hostess returned. I remembered this about her, the way she would never leave me alone—her insatiable need. It was all right, though. I said, “You’re waitressing today, too?”

She shrugged in reply. Then she said, “Your usual, I assume?”

“Yes, please.” I hoisted the menu off the table and placed it in her arms, which sagged from the weight. She leaned against the post that separated my booth from the next.

“You’re looking well,” she said.

“Thank you. I’ve never been better.”

“Did you get my messages?”

“Messages?”

She gestured with her chin toward the pocket of my jacket, where I kept my phone. I took it out and switched it on. Indeed, there were three messages waiting for me. I opened them up. They were from the hostess and consisted only of photos. Each had clearly been taken in the women’s room of the restaurant—I recognized the wallpaper, same as in the men’s—and depicted the hostess with her dress, the one she was now wearing, unbuttoned to the waist. Her heavy breasts were spilling out and she was making kissy faces at the camera—but she was also giving it the

middle finger. “Mixed messages,” I said, looking up, but she was gone.

In a state of slight confusion, I returned to my book. This was an exciting part—the bit where the driver, in a state of tension and anger, is tailgating the minivan. I knew that, as soon as the van moved aside, he would roar past, jerk too quickly into the right lane, and spin off the road, out of control. The former sports star was trying to parlay this scene into some form of management advice, and it was quite thrilling to see him try. I was so absorbed in his efforts that it took a moment for it to dawn on me that other people had sat down at my table and were fussing, chatting, making something of a hubbub.

It was a family—a man, a woman, and two children. The woman was a short, stout redhead, and quite obnoxious: she had a horselike laugh, which she seemed to emit at regular intervals, and she kept telling the children to “stop it,” though they didn’t seem to be misbehaving. The man was also short, but he was delicate, fleshy—sensuous, really. I happened to know that, in an unusual turnabout, he had taken on the woman’s name when they married. For some reason this repulsed me. The children, on the other hand, were quite charming. They were twins, a brother and sister, and I remembered them as toddlers of one or two. Now they looked to be pushing eight. I said, “Excuse me.”

None of them seemed to hear me.

“Excuse me, this is a private table!”

They didn’t react. I was beginning to feel angry, much as I had felt when I was trapped behind the minivan, on the highway that day. That wouldn’t do. I realized that I wouldn’t be able to concentrate on my book with these people here, so I returned to my phone and took another look at those messages. A couple of new ones had arrived—in them, the hostess had hiked up her dress and was displaying her private areas. I had to confess, I was a little bit hurt by these photos. I like curvy women, and the hostess had been very thin when I knew her—sickly, in fact. Maybe if she had looked like this then, so full-bodied and healthy,

things could have been different. Maybe my emotions wouldn't have been so volatile, is what I mean.

It took me a moment to realize that the twin sitting beside me, I think it was the girl, was peering at the screen of my phone. In the photo it now displayed, the hostess was bending over, fingering herself from behind. It was quite explicit. I tilted the phone so that the girl could see better.

"Is everybody's phone like that?" she said.

"Yes," I told her, "at some point, yes, generally speaking."

"Does Chloe ever miss me?" the girl asked now, looking directly into my face.

This question caused me some embarrassment, I must admit. I could only say, "Yes, of course, she asks after you often."

The child's face brightened. "Really?"

"Well, yes, of course. You were the best of friends."

"She said that?"

"Yes, she talks about you all the time."

This seemed to satisfy the girl, and she returned with a nod to her work, which was coloring in a line drawing on the children's menu with crayons. Her brother, across the table, was working on the same thing. The drawing was of King Farrad, standing at the summit of Mount Hesperaphal, beheading a petty criminal with a scimitar. The spice fields rolled out behind him, and I must admit it annoyed me that the girl was coloring them blue. What in the hell spice was blue? You didn't have to be a goddam adult to know better.

I saw motion on my phone and realized that the photo I'd been looking at was actually a film, or, rather, a live video feed. The hostess had buttoned herself up and was loading a hand truck with menus. Soon she was gone from the ladies' room and had appeared before us and was hoisting the menus off the hand truck and onto the table in front of my unwanted visitors.

I said, "Excuse me, but would you do me the favor of getting these fucking interlopers away from my table? While you were busy sending me pictures of your tits, they just showed

up out of nowhere to ruin my fucking life. They're ruining my fucking life! So how about taking your finger out of your asshole and doing your fucking job, for once?"

My request was interrupted, however, by laughter; everyone—the hostess, the parents, the children—was looking down at my management book, which lay open before me to the page I had been reading. There was a photo there of the former sports star standing in front of a terrible auto wreck. Broken, bleeding people were visible through the windows of the ruined car. The former sports star was gesturing with his hands in a manner that suggested explanation or illustration. The caption read, *fig. 14. Managing expectations in a shifting business climate.*

I said, "There's nothing funny about any of this."

The man, that is, the man who had changed his name, gazed at me with moist pink eyes and said, "Bradley and Chloe were sweet children. And Eileen, what a wonderful wife. We always said you four were a beautiful family. Betsy and I tried to emulate you, your wonderful union. In bed, we always tried to imagine what you were doing, and do that same thing. We slapped the twins in exactly the same way you used to slap Bradley and Chloe at play group."

"I never slapped them!"

"You were so good at it, is the thing," the man who had changed his name went on. "It was always so *effective.*"

"It didn't hurt them!" I protested. "It was only to get their attention."

"Betsy would say, 'I bet she kneels, like this, and then I bet he gets behind her, this way,' and I would say, 'What do you think he says, does he call her bitch?'" and Betsy would say, "Yes, I'm sure he does," and it would go on like that for a while."

"I never called her bitch!"

"Well, sometimes you did, of course, at least in summer, that's when we could hear it, what with the windows open. When we read in the paper about the accident, and how it was your fault, we thought, oh, those poor people, what a wonderful and adventurous sex life, cut short in an instant."

“It wasn’t my fault!” I cried. “There was something on the road—an oil slick, a puddle. There had to be. I’m an excellent driver. I never let my emotions get the best of me. And how dare you suggest that I was drunk—how dare you!”

Somehow, in the midst of all this, the hostess had taken everyone’s order, and it was clear that they had all ordered what I had ordered—my usual. I have to admit I was rather flattered by this. The menus were back on the hand truck now and the hostess was already wheeling it away. A general mood of good will and forgiveness seemed to come over the group, and I felt myself tearing up a little. I said, “I... I don’t know what to say.”

The child beside me, the little girl, gave me a pat on the shoulder. “It’s okay,” she said.

“Of course it’s okay!” shouted the obnoxious woman. “Stop it,” she said to her son. “Stop it!” He was coloring his scimitar red—coloring everything red, really—and didn’t seem to hear her. “We admire you,” she told me now, “your business sense, your... rigor. You demanded the best from everyone.”

“That’s right,” said the man who had changed his name, “not just your employees, but the driver of that minivan, your children, your wife, the hostess.”

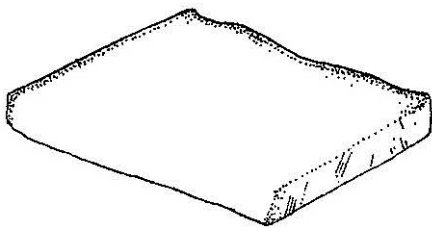
“When you wanted something,” the obnoxious woman said, “something that you felt you deserved, you took it. Whether it was a mistress or a position in traffic.”

I couldn’t help but become a little choked up. “Thank you,” I said. “That’s... thank you. You’re so kind.”

It was true—I really was different. Special. And these people understood that. How had I ever lost touch with them? I wouldn’t make that mistake again—I would try to remember their names, take down their contact information, and give them the affection and kindness that was their due. I was glad, so glad, that I had returned to this place, and that I’d invited these good people to share my table. Eileen would want it this way, I was sure.

I was going to say something to that effect—that my family, if they could be here today, would have thoroughly enjoyed this fortuitous meeting—when I noticed that all activity had stopped, and all eyes were on my phone, which was lying face-up on top of my open management guide. The live video feed had switched to the kitchen now, and something was being prepared there—something big. My usual. It must have been hot in there, very hot, because the staff were in various stages of undress, and the room was crowded with heavy bellies, hairy shoulders, haunches, and backs. Burly men and women were muscling things onto serving platters—big things, big platters. My fellow diners—the obnoxious woman, the man who had changed his name, the twins—were all salivating, smacking their lips: drooling really. So was I.

It really was coming—my usual. We were excited and moved. The hostess was on her way, panting and groaning, pushing the food before her on a rolling cart, a kind of gurney; we could hear the wheels rattling and the hum of rubber against the cold tile floor. There would be enough for everyone, I could see now—for the obnoxious woman's family and my family as well, if they had been here to eat it. I seemed to remember there was some reason they couldn't make it, but couldn't put my finger on what it was. In any event, we would eat until we were satisfied, that was for sure, the way King Farrad did in *King Farrad and the Table of Bounty*, and none of us, not even the hostess, would ever go hungry again.



THE COCKROACH
Leanna Petronella

Shellacked maggot,
rocking hard
in diorama's little chair,

let's call you Medusa's clitoris,

a jewel sliding from her body
as her suitors turn to stone.



THE WATER SPIDER

Marcel Béalu

Translated from the French by Edward Gauvin

I was walking innocently, even aimlessly, down by the river when a distant voice, as though from the water's depths, made me stop. Its thin, somewhat piercing song stood out clearly over nature's vague hum. Surprised, I parted the reeds, leaned forward. The only thing on that shifting surface crisscrossed by a golden shimmer was a water spider of the sort summer draws from its mysterious berths. To and fro it passed on the limpid green. And suddenly, as that strange series of sounds took up anew, at once fragile and resonant and near, I realized that the spider was expressing, with its almost human song, its insect joy.

Surrounded as we were by solitude, speaking to it did not seem ridiculous.

"I'm not far from falling completely in love with your song, you know," I said, half serious, half teasing. "With a voice like that, you belong in the world."

"Take me away from here," it replied, "and you'll see how I can please you."

At the risk of falling in, I scooped up the tiny creature whose damp, barbed touch gave me a faint shiver. But no sooner was it sitting in my palm than I seemed to see a tiny face peeping from between its mandibles. Deeply touched by this effort to draw closer to my species—to look like me, in a way—I made it a promise never to throw it back into the vile environs where chance had caused it to be born.

Showing such aptitude to escape its pitiful condition seemed to deserve reward indeed.

"Oh, yes! Keep me, keep me!" it said.

I felt no repulsion hearing it speak this way. Taking care not to crush it, I carried it off. From time to time, it took up its song, whose charms grew ever sweeter to me.

At the sight of the houses, it fell silent. I reknotted my tie, dusted off my jacket. The path led along some underbrush, and I was of a good mind to toss away the insect, which was beginning to tickle the hollow of my palm. But a secret tenderness (as sometimes comes over me before a pebble, a tree trunk, a leaf—a shameful feeling I take care to lock up in the most secret part of myself) made me slip the spider, mute once more, into my pocket.

A bit farther on, I ran into one of the rare villagers who still deigned to speak to me.

“Nice weather...” he said, seeming to want to expand on this interesting preamble.

I was about to give an evasive reply when he began to gibber: “There’s a spider on your shoulder!”

Blushing, I banished the bug with a flick. But when the unwelcome passerby was gone, I searched for the spider at length, bent close to the ground with despair in my heart. At last, I found it again. What joy! My brutal gesture seemed to have caused it no suffering.

* * *

I hid my fragile friend in a drawer with three blades of grass. Each time I found myself alone, I allowed myself to gaze upon her.

The tiny creature taken from the water grew in size with each passing day. Reddish-black in her river setting, she was now covered in a fine pink-tinted silver down. The eyes in her tiny head had grown bigger. There was nothing revolting about her appearance now. Had it not been for her nimbleness and the surprising song that swelled her abdomen, you could have taken her, standing firm on her eight legs, for an odd chiseled brooch on my table.

One morning, as I stood bewitched by this miracle, the door opened. I can’t be alone in my office for fifteen minutes without Catherine coming in, on the pretext of neatening something

or other, looking for a pencil, asking me about the most arcane crossword clue. The spider sped across the table straightaway, and my wife, letting out a scream, ran to grab a broom. When she returned, the insect had already reached the curtains and disappeared into their thick folds.

“You should’ve smushed it,” Catherine said reproachfully. “You know how much I loathe those things!”

And sure enough, she finished with a tear in her eye: “Spider in the morning, take warning..”

A few minutes later, on seeing my protégé reappear and climb all the way up my pants, I took her in my hand and was stunned to hear her say: “What a nasty woman!”

“Why no, no!” I wanted to reply. But all I said was “Shh!” and, in order to prevent further incident, went and left her in a corner of the attic.

I was a bit annoyed without knowing why, and had expected she would find a way to scamper off. But in the days that followed, I never stopped thinking of her, to the point where my wife’s attentive gaze each night became a veritable strain. For now there was a secret between us.

How to relate the facts in their simplicity? Most people believe that the last word of a mystery, the last word on a mystery, is that there is no mystery. And yet, one day or another, the supernatural shows itself to each of us. Some suspect nothing, believing the event not meant for them, since it fails to match exactly the one they’ve been awaiting. For many, death comes in just this way. How to tell Catherine I’d lived thirty-eight years without anything happening to me and that one day in my thirty-ninth something did? Something I was no doubt awaiting.

* * *

One evening, when Catherine had gone to see one of those poor village women on whom she lavished her care, I stood daydreaming at the garden gate, as ever vaguely obsessed by my

spider. Suddenly, overhead, as though from a dark corner of the eaves, rose a song. I recognized it right away, almost frightened by its range, the depth and sincerity of its overtones. This time there was no doubt: it came from a human organ.

“Is it you?” I asked. “Are you still there?”

A *yes* was my only answer, but pronounced with such ardent conviction that I looked around several times, astonished not to find anyone. Luckily Catherine, when she came home, didn’t notice my turmoil.

Assailed by a thousand thoughts, I had a hard time falling asleep that night. The next morning, I went up to the attic as soon as my wife had left.

No sooner had I stepped into the shadows beneath the roof beams than I saw something light-hued, two feet from the floor, sliding toward a pile of old rags. That it could be one of the stray cats Catherine and I collected never crossed my mind. Probably because it had fled at my approach, while those familiar animals always ran up to greet me.

“Don’t be afraid, it’s me,” I murmured. “Where are you?”

And I heard the same voice from the night before answer me now: “Bernard! Please, don’t come any closer, not yet!”

Aghast at the anguish in that voice welling up from the shadows, I drew closer, spurred on by curiosity. There was a panicked movement under the shapeless heap, and I made out a creature hiding there. Lifting the tatters slightly, I thought I saw two limbs shrink back, each big as a child’s arm, and ending in tiny feet. Then I realized these were actually made from four limbs, still poorly fused two by two, one to the other. This distressed assemblage seemed to be swathed, here and there, in a sort of downy skin. I covered it all back up hastily and fled.

Later, trying to analyze the fear that had kept me from lifting the veil entirely, I saw that its source was a deep well of pity. Just as that gestating flesh had appeared to me in its nudity, I’d been stricken with shame as though some hideous secret forbidden to humans had been revealed to me against my will.

Mingled with this feeling was not so much fear of a sight surpassing the known limits of horror, but rather apprehension of the punishment the act that had made me its spectator must entail. And so it was, after all, a kind of cowardice that had compelled me to obey the supplications of that ill-formed body. I resolved to wait several days before returning to the attic.

These two beings were watching me now: Catherine, and... the other. How different they were, these presences! One devoid of mystery, bristling with defenses and suspicions, infuriating me with her constant attention, the other with her novelty, with the invisible ubiquity of the watch she kept, filling me with a turmoil I dared not name.

I couldn't remain quiet without my wife immediately interrogating me, and how was I to answer her without discomfort? God knows, despite the tumultuous desires of a man in the prime of his life, it never crossed my mind to hurt her. Her affectionate solicitude sufficed my transports, and had I to renew the contract that united us, I would've signed off on every clause for an unlimited term.

Only the strangeness of these events kept me from confiding them to her. Her tendency to mistrust my ramblings would've characterized these unusual facts as absurd. Maybe she wouldn't have been completely wrong. By drawing no line between concrete things and those begotten of my imagination, I wound up losing an exact notion of the real.

Or so this idea plagued me when, on one of the evenings that followed, as night was falling and I was alone in the garden, I heard the song again—from the apple tree, where I stood in thought. Once more, I was so surprised that the urge came over me to run and find Catherine, as the misbehaving child throws himself into the arms he fears.

Surely I was going mad. But discreetly, "it" must have guessed my thoughts. The song fell silent and, shortly after, I heard a whisper.

"It's me, Bernard. Don't move."

And soon it seemed that a face, an actual face despite its tenuousness and fluidity, slipped onto my shoulder as though it had been hanging from the low branches. Frozen with the fear that a moonbeam might reveal some horror hidden in this face shielded by shadows, I caught from the corner of my eye a momentary glimpse, amidst features vague as a halo, of a pale, radiant gaze drowning in ardor.

* * *

From that night on, I couldn't take a single step outside the house without some unusual sound, a near or distant song, a word, the sudden and hesitant touch of a hand, reminding me of her invisible presence. No—this mysterious eavesdropping on my reactions, my desires, the sound of my voice—these weren't the ravings of a diseased mind. And yet often it was in vain that I returned trembling to the apple tree at twilight.

When the notion of another visit to the attic crossed my mind, I banished it as I would a repugnant memory. At the slightest sound from overhead, I pretended to dive into my work, whistling so as not to hear.

"Listen!" said Catherine, with her dread of rats.

Sweet Catherine! How I would have loved to cast off the intolerable strain of her endless suspicion. But just one word from her in a certain tone of voice was enough to make me feel I'd done something wrong. Everything, especially whatever she didn't understand, was an excuse for her to forge weapons that wounded her before they even struck me. Rather than throwing her into torment, wasn't it better to stay silent, as though I *were* guilty?

Besides, how could I open my mouth now without running the risk of destroying what I feared and hoped for with the same fervor?

One day, lost in the research which had for many years now been my lot in life, I heard a voice weakly calling my name, and lifted my gaze from my desk. Pressed against the door that

had just quietly opened halfway was a kind of tall, supple young woman whose tiny head, with its attentive features, was tilted toward me. I noticed right away that her feet weren't touching the floor—that they seemed to be clinging, almost two feet above it, to the jamb.

At that moment, the curious creature seemed to fold in two, and I saw she was actually no taller than a child of ten. She was wrapped awkwardly in rags through which hair or flesh showed through in places. From this garb emerged her face and two frail arms that dangled as if incapable of movement. Her astonishingly symmetrical features seemed painted on.

Absolutely stupefied, I must have stammered something, for the sound of my voice brought to life that mask, which flushed as it lolled oddly from one shoulder to the other. Its lips stirred to articulate words its throat no doubt refused to utter, as happens in moments of greatest turmoil. Then, suddenly, the apparition disappeared, drawn up toward the ceiling of the next room. When I rushed forward, all I could see through the doorway of that room overlooking the orchard were the low branches of the nearest tree, still quivering from some disturbance.

Faced with a reality I'd so often reveled in imagining—although already it had faded away—I was seized with an indescribable dreaminess forged from eagerness and terror. At once appalled, and yet delirious with an unknown happiness, I was overcome with an awareness of my responsibility. Had Catherine been there, I would have proclaimed it an event, an advent, believing that she couldn't have resisted the purity of my joy, its plainness. Luckily, I was alone.

Great passions begin with a charade, the dance before the sacrifice. From the moment my fragile companion's transformation was complete, I knew—not without apprehension—that I'd have to love her for real. Before this quite passable child of man that the water spider had become, I was overcome with feelings that, so far, I'd feigned from play or pity—feelings only stronger now that, after so much seeming, I did not have to dissemble.

* * *

The peculiar state of the place was conducive to complicity. Catherine and I, a camp of two entrenched a few hundred yards from the village, had fitted out but two rooms in the half-crumbling house where we lived. It would have been hard to make all four floors, the outbuildings, and the vast attic livable without costly work. When the weather kept me from exploring the underbrush, I could stretch out my legs in the many empty rooms and hallways, from the first floor to the attic. These areas full of mysterious recesses, unopened closets, and dark bedrock made the double life I was already underhandedly planning if not simple, at least possible.

How many times would I now, in secret, head for the attic, leaping from one flight of stairs to the next, running with ever-rising joy through the deserted corridors and rooms until I was under the eaves where, hidden from prying eyes, my little-creature-turned-little-girl awaited me?

How little it mattered if she were beautiful or ugly, or what ambiguous rung on the ladder of beings she belonged to! The almost excruciating impression of her first appearance soon faded away. Such will—such innocence, I mean—animated her more or less human form that even the most perceptive eyes would have passed over her imperfections without notice. Soon all I saw was the fire in her eyes, all I heard the sound of her voice, all I wanted her heartrending rustle and flutter. Admittedly, some strangeness from her roots stayed with her, a surprising kind of agility, a dozen unexpected reflexes that kept me from forgetting she wasn't of human origin. But these anomalies were perhaps the most potent ferment of a love that had nothing to do with such silly flutterings as that word often concealed.

Every day I held her in my arms, amused by how light she was. We gazed at the treetops through the gaping holes in the roof. In that dusty, drafty space she'd say, "The sun! The leaves..."

And in each word echoed a discovery so profound that on hearing it I too seemed to discover the world all over again.

And when I took my leave, she would say, “Bernard! You’re going...” in such a way that this simple phrase touched me deeply.

Right at the start, to christen her, I had her pick a name at random from the saints on the calendar. It was *Narcissus*. Redoing the experiment, her tiny finger landed on *Lydia*. In order not to betray chance, I made a third word from the first two: *Nadia*. Nadia! Already that name possessed me like the incomprehensible song that, one day, had made me lean out over the river.

* * *

I convinced myself too quickly of this fantastical existence, as though it were sister or daughter to my own. Didn’t she draw her vitality from my faith in her? Perhaps the merest doubt would have been enough to destroy her. But how to doubt a *reality* at my disposal as soon as I was alone?

Several weeks went by and, thanks to a thousand miracles, Catherine didn’t notice the change under our roof. The house hid Nadia like a secret, but that secret erected invisible walls between me and my wife. This partitioning, these places in my life she couldn’t access, heightened a confusion I felt nothing but impatience for, the same impatience I felt at these dark rooms where we lived, this furniture, these objects of withered charm, while the new aspect of my days was arrayed in a kind of deliverance; a light, troubling tenderness; a mysterious arousal. A simple boundary whose fragility I alone knew kept these worlds strangers to each other.

I no longer even waited till Catherine had left to go up to the eaves. Slipping on cat’s paws from the office she thought I’d shut myself in, I mounted toward Nadia.

Nothing but purity drew me to her. But through the boundless adoration of that fresh gaze, I brooded over a mon-

strous image of myself slowly hatching. The contagious pressure of her presence made me extraordinarily talkative. I often rambled on, forgetting that she was listening. As the center where her aspirations converged, wasn't I a living god, the creator of this phantasmagoria of forms, sounds, and colors come to life around her? She never tired of asking me questions, and I never tired of answering them. Beyond the limits of my being, her only country in all the world, began another world that didn't interest her. And so each minute stolen from Catherine's trust added a finishing touch to my initial act and its consequences.

Having continued to develop, the strange girl showed signs of adolescence; worry mingled with my desires for a denouement I yearned for without daring to imagine it.

Events would hasten of their own accord. One day, I came downstairs to find Catherine in full discussion with a villager. He was complaining about the activities of the "girl of the house." Without understanding, Catherine protested that we had no servants. But the peasant persisted in his claims.

Despite their muddled exchange, I quickly realized that Nadia was probably going to the village every night, leaping from branch to branch, to commit the petty thefts she needed to survive. How was it this important issue had never crossed my mind?

I didn't let my worry show, but the bumpkin's inquisitive gaze would've pierced the walls if it could. No doubt he believed himself to be in the devil's house. After an ever more confused debate, I managed to calm him down. But as for convincing him to leave—for that, I had to get out my wallet and, in the end, even raise my voice.

* * *

Taken aback, Catherine immediately asked, "Well—do I get an explanation?"

I was getting ready to tell her everything when, for the first time, I saw just what was inadmissible in this story of a spi-

der turned into a human being. Never in her life would Catherine believe it! My inability to convince her remained an inner torment with no way out. When you discover a truth too far beyond the accepted, you must keep lying in order not to seem a liar.

A brief silence let me recover my composure, and I quite simply concocted a fable or, more precisely, I decked my memories out in verisimilitude: while out walking in the woods a few days earlier, I'd found and brought back to the house a child dressed in rags, who seemed to have no memory.

"You were gone then—I don't know what fear kept me from introducing her when you got back. I hid her in the attic so she could sleep a few hours before leaving again. But the evening went by, the chance never came up, and the next day, when I went to get Nadia—that's her name—she didn't want to go. I was very worried, since now I didn't dare confess my little secret anymore."

At this point, despite these logical circumstances, Catherine detected the awkwardness in my story and suspected a lie. Her face grew crimson. It seemed like indignation, or some other feeling of—I don't know—pride kept her from speaking. Her jaw stirred strangely. At last, she came out with a few incomprehensible sounds before collapsing on the floor. I dragged her to the sofa. Her lips wouldn't stop moving: I found it terrifying. Her eyes, wide open, no longer saw a thing. Luckily, I had the idea to lay a moist cloth on her forehead, and she sank into a deep stillness.

For a long time I listened to her heart, took her pulse. She was sleeping, as though felled by great fatigue. I took the chance to plan for the situation more clearly. I now had to stick to my story, which was coherent, all things considered—a simple transposition of reality. That my wife now knew the most important part—Nadia was in the house—was a great source of relief. But though I found her suffering unbearable, I didn't want to admit its cause.

Suddenly her voice rose up from the depths of sleep. Her words were hewn apart by long silences, although she spoke ef-

fortlessly, slowly pursuing the same idea, like an obsessive dream: “The cats... they wanted to take me to her.”

Ravings? Not at all. Catherine and I had always liked cats. There were at least four in the house. Now she was murmuring, somewhat histrionically, “Shhhh... shhhh!”

Tears sprang to her eyes, stained her face. I called out, “Catherine! Catherine!”

Fearing she’d lose her reason, I shook her head, her shoulders, as though to hold her back from an abyss. Her unrest became my own when, utterly lucid once more, she said in a very calm voice, her normal voice, “So you did this, Bernard. You dared bring a girl home under my roof!”

This scene replayed itself several times over the next few days, as though the supernatural, smuggled in and hidden deep in a drawer, had exploded, filling the house with thick smoke where we struggled blindly.

Would it burst from the walls and reach the village? Here a circle of intimacy surrounded us—we, who’d removed ourselves from the world long ago—each facing the other in the vast silent room where we ate, slept, loved, hated: each facing the other, but not alone, no longer alone.

Was he still me, this man with gritted jaw who sometimes peeked furtively at his wife, just as he would later, from the path toward town, spy upon the houses of the village with the same craven fear in his eyes?

Was she still Catherine, this woman fixed of stare and weary of face, lifting a mouthful of food to her lip—but the fork refused even this effort—this woman who suddenly stood up, features altered, stood up so abruptly that she knocked the table over; this woman who was now crying, screaming, “No, I won’t have it! No! I won’t—” before crumpling to the floor more quickly than I could react?

I leaned forward, shoulders hunched, righted the table, picked up the silverware, and then, with difficulty, I dragged the heavy, inert body to the low bed at the other end of the room. Half-dumb, unable to convince myself of my ignominy, I could

only wonder now what all this meant, what the tears and shouts are good for, since we are neither free to love, nor to stop loving.

* * *

Nadia and her vast abode open to the skies, her annexes full of birds and foliage, were henceforth forbidden to me. But now I knew about that savior of a world, hidden like an invincible treasure in a house in flames. To keep myself from surrendering to desire and rushing toward her, in the afternoons I fled, crossing the village with great strides, roaming the woods, always brought back, as if by instinct, to the river.

Such sacrifice soon seemed pointless, as Catherine took no notice of it. She fed on her fear now, worrying it at whim like a voluptuous wound. My every step outside drew me closer to *the other*, she believed, imagining it everywhere she was not. When I came back exhausted, embittered by my privation, she assailed me with the heavy silence of her rancor, a silence quickly shattered by remarks whose violence and hatred were no longer restrained.

I soon suspected my wife of having overcome her repugnance and taken advantage of one of my absences to ferret about and venture into the attic. But the subtle senses of the creature whom my wife believed her rival would no doubt have frustrated such a hostile approach. The peculiar state of our house was conducive to escape and evasion. The edge of the woods tightly clasped the crumbling wall that gave meager protection on one side to an uncultivated orchard, and on the other to a narrow strip of grass and moss. We lived almost on a level with great ivy-covered trunks that lent our refuge yet another rampart. A few steps and we were in the woods, sheltered by sighs, cries, a thousand sylvan calls vaguely complicit with my mysterious friend, which I myself had quite often mistaken for her own.

Catherine's every reproach, her every insult drove me into Nadia's arms instead of away. My wife's hands poured the poison that turned my tenderness into violent passion.

Why should I continue to deny myself, since she for whom I did so did failed to recognize my efforts? I had, with all the unconscious scenery-chewing of a thought greedy for justification, convinced myself my wife had been the first to betray our trust by believing me capable of such lowly deceit.

Nadia wasn't worried at all, as though she'd been sure I would return to her. I also realized that, after this time apart, I now saw her with new eyes. Wasn't her silence really shrewdness? Had she felt the danger looming? The fact remains that she threw herself into this unfair fight with a haste that might have spoiled her victory.

Until now—when my hands touched hers and fervor flushed her cheeks; when, simply from speaking my name, her breast unburdened itself of a sigh—I'd believed these the signs of a purely animal attachment.

"Whatever shall I do with you?" I often asked her, anxious to appease her naïve and almost unconscious ardor.

But today, the intensity of her precise, newly-hatched aspirations became plain to me in a way I could no longer deny. No doubt that was why a new kind of modesty, or terror before what I too easily sensed was coming, prompted me to cut short this long-awaited rendezvous. We had exchanged but a few words, with no end in mind but getting reacquainted, and already I was about to go back downstairs after placing on her forehead the affectionate kiss that, each time, sealed the secret of our bond. But something infinitely more imperious than usual held me back.

For the first time, a sensual stirring flooded me at the sight of her green eyes, her freckle-spotted face, her swollen, curiously expressive lips. She was squatting oddly, and her delicate arms encircled my legs in a pose she was most fond of, her tousled hair covering my knees. Suddenly she blushed, straightened up halfway, and then, pulling aside the fabric that only her shoulders supported, showed me her barely swelling breasts, trembling with living fragility.

"Are there women as beautiful as me?" she said with forced daring.

And without waiting for my reply, in a sort of sudden confusion, she collapsed, wrapped herself around me, and melted into my arms, whispering in a voice I'd never heard from her before, "Love me..."

* * *

Child's body driven by a woman's fury! How could I resist so many ways to destroy me? For indeed my very annihilation was at stake, despite the deceptive bliss of new love. I no longer sought to give a name to this warmth, this eagerness, this blood fever, which had borrowed the shape of my dream only to better answer its call.

Sliding joyously down the banister from floor to floor, I slipped outside and came back in through the garden. Catherine was gone, and I felt a keen contentment. My face, beaming with the happiness of my crime, could not have held up in an immediate confrontation with its judge.

Shortly thereafter, I came across a few words my wife had scribbled and left for me: *Bernard, I know where you are right now. I won't let that girl destroy everything that's noble in you. Goodbye!*

I read the letter hastily, as if listening to an indifferent voice amidst pressing preoccupations, and felt no worry, but—dare I admit it?—only deep relief.

I ate and went to bed without seeking to soothe the delicious turmoil loosed in me by the mere fact of being alone with Nadia henceforth. And in the middle of the night, no longer able to contain my desire, I went back to her, a sleepwalker guided to the attic by moonbeams.

* * *

Morning found us intertwined. Birds fluttered about our wakefulness, hypocrite emissaries of a torment readying its burning arrows in the offing. In my absence, birds by the dozen kept

the dear creature company; her presence charmed them. They came in through openings in the roof, and it was the beating of their wings as they swept down on the tiles that pricked up the ears of cats in the empty, echoing rooms.

The day I unlocked the doors and Nadia agreed, her hand trembling in mine, to accompany me down to the depths of the first floor, that winged flock followed. The house would have been like a giant aviary, had an unexpected barricade of house cats not arisen on the second floor. With a single crack of their wings—the applause of invisible demons—the birds all fled.

I've said my wife and I had a particular fondness for cats. We adopted those I found abandoned, even the wildest. When I saw them now, lying in wait in every corner or coming with a purr to rub up against a fearful Nadia, my thoughts turned back to Catherine.

Her absence would soon weigh on my every act. Deep in the night—for her absence went on for nights, and days—while Nadia slept pressed to my side, tears would roll down my cheeks onto those of my child bride, tears she'd never discover, as if I wished to teach her that weeping was worthless except in dreams. And yet, at the same time, it was such sweetness as I've never known simply to touch, in its slumber, that body like something hardened in a hellish inferno, though it was cool and alive.

There are souls that devour everything around them; when they meet, nothing can stop an unremitting conflagration from crackling and roaring. Perhaps the water spider's metamorphosis had occurred only to make us aware—Catherine and I—of this earthly flame?

When I endeavored to bring the dark lyricism of my thoughts back to reason, they favored my absent wife, but when I surrendered myself, a chaos of delights, to my solitude with Nadia, the memory of my wife grew faint, flattened like the ground's contours seen from the sky above.

Both choices seemed just as sacrilegious. Rent as I was between the earthward weight Catherine represented—her love,

her suffering—and the weight of Nadia and her mystery drawing me heavenward, I still couldn't bring myself to conceive of these trajectories as contradictory.

In my desire to reconcile them, I sometimes found myself, to my surprise, caressing a sleeping Nadia while babbling not the name I'd invented for her, but another more deeply graven in me, *Katie*, sweet word surfaced from my past, heavy with unspent tenderness for the wife who'd left.

* * *

What taboo had we dared defy, that already malediction's web held us ensnared? Every night, villagers prowled around the house. Whenever a windowpane burst into shards I thought I heard hostile snickers ricocheting from the walls with a clatter of hurled pebbles. All this happened in dreams, of course. I was beside myself. My acts and deeds took place as though at the bottom of an abyss whose lip I'd given up ever reaching.

My growing exasperation came mainly from within. These reminders of a forgotten world: I would have scorned them pridefully had anathema not grown stronger and more persuasive in forbidding me my pleasure. Would I not, to experience it in its fullest measure, have consented to dwell among the worst excesses, braved the wrath of earth and sky?

But Nadia bore this proscription in her very being and I, to my great surprise, was forced to admit as much after only a few days of fruitless attempts. As condemnations from the village ringed our icy rapture, we persevered, each against the other, toward a possession that proved impossible.

With each embrace, waves of exquisite ecstasy redoubled, bearing me up toward summits I alone glimpsed. All her sensuality, her all avidity in partnering my inner tumult, in no way stopped her own from staying strictly on the surface, never reaching the centers of her being. That deep carnal harmony whose flowering transfigures the abject scuffle of men and women

would never happen between Nadia and me, would never be hers. Her very nature forbade it. The thought that she would never know it made my impotence hideous. That she was condemned to languish at a threshold I strained to pull her across step by depleting step made my own pleasure unbearable.

She retained that purity native to beasts. Since something buried deep inside me was also attuned to such a capacity for feeling, such guilelessness, I threw myself into reviving it, rather than force this marvelous creature into the pinched mold of human passion and my vices. I loved her like an ordinary woman when I should have been inventing a whole new world for her, creating objects for her every wish. I, with my sluggish imagination, was dragging her through my mud when she might be tugging me toward her heavens.

And yet, sometimes we entered that land together which is our birthright, where nothing is owed to habit or unthinking routine. Marvelous, abandoned legacy! All things, stripped of the cracked, plastery shells of their names, appeared to me in their nakedness. No longer were there trees, light, a table, Nadia's hands, her hair, the nape of her neck—but harmonies of shapes and colors, an immanence at once abstract and tangible, which no words can describe, which all speech betrays. Nothing but the truly inexpressible reality that words hid. Neither me, nor Nadia, nor things, just a single, even inexplicable existence. Then, language became song with no meaning other than the melody of its own music.

I entered this innocence as if entering a dance, but with such clumsiness that at the slightest misstep our every fall made our next attempt at new momentum more fraught. Then, on lips brought close together, our words would melt into a pitiful hiss.

* * *

These walls and rooms where I'd lived with Catherine were no match for Nadia, just as the thousands of centuries gone

by will never be a match for a single second of what is to come. Her mere presence demonstrated their inanity. But any attempt to flee was forbidden. The visible world, solid and true on its age-old foundations—the world, which preserves the flagrant illusion of its permanence at any cost—would bring to bear against my new wife an absolute, utter refusal.

One day when, scorning all caution, I ventured to cross the village, hand tensed about Nadia's arm, I saw from the merry faces, the same shameful red as on my own forehead, that Nadia was mine alone, that only for me did she hold any charm, or even have a reason for being. What lack of foresight, letting these swine compare my frail, sweet, unreal mate to their ponderous partners!

Though it seemed—as the season turned, a great imminent festival filling the air—that the elements themselves were readying to celebrate our marriage, soon it was no longer the unexpected song of happiness that I heard, panting and helpless, as I once had leaning out over the golden water, but instead the terrible cry of the solstice. Strange, rare plenitude! That tunes the elemental tumult to inner storms, the creaking of high branches and the crash of shattered trunks to the wind that blows between the hills, seizes the heart, and rouses the blood!

Clamor of the dead intoning the canticle of the delivered, leaves tossed at the feet of passing clouds, black feathers torn from the wings of celestial messengers—a world in revolt was creaking loudly at the hinges, a world at once near and infinitely far. Wasn't it preparing to take back the prey I'd stolen from the tenderness of the waters, abducted from the affection of the heavens, robbed from the thousand fancies of the sun and leaves?

Clasp her to me as I might, as night cradles a sleeping bird—sweet warmth nestled in a hollow whose curve it weds—already she was escaping this cozy prison at the call of unknown powers. In the silence and distress encircling me on all sides, the vault of night (shot through with fanfares, shuddering from a mad gallop) proclaimed the return of loneliness triumphant.

It seemed around this time that my dreams began to imitate my daytime restlessness, such that bit by bit I lost the power to tell clearly between two zones haunted by images of a single obsession.

Instead of seeing in others' incomprehension a symbol of my weakness, their contempt seemed to me a cruel iniquity. My ignorance of Catherine's fate surely also played its part in my transports of rage. I mulled at length on a vengeance which, I believed at the height of my wrath, would give me justice.

On the day I had chosen, the villagers saw me turn up hunched over beneath a great sack. From beneath it, I spied on their gazes, overheard their murmurs: "Look! He didn't bring the hunchback today. What did he do with that eyesore?"

But they watched me worriedly. (From having imagined the scene so vividly, I managed, once I was there, to experience it in that foggy no-man's-land between the borders of desire and fulfillment, a waking dreamer, a hallucinating spectator whom nothing can tear from his vision, for it is vision no more, but indubitable reality.)

In the sack, I'd crammed higgledy-piggledy the beloved toms and pussycats. Once I'd reached the middle of the town square, I slammed the sack against the ground with all my strength, whirling the surprising weapon in the air and bringing it down again and again. When there was nothing left in the sack but a raucous, yowling, mass of claws and hair, when all inside were enraged, returned to their true nature, my sweet and pretty kittycats, I gave them back their freedom in the middle of the square.

At that moment, the most unexpected, regrettable thing happened, which I must recount. Through the panicked people running in every direction suddenly came the only being I'd ever loved—oh, the certainty of that moment!—the only woman in all the world...

She drew closer, forgiveness in her gaze. And the pack rushed her, hurling their slavering faces at hers; those claws I

could no longer control tore into the tender flesh of *her* face even as my throat tightened so that only a single scream sprang out: “Katie!”

* * *

When I found myself before my wife’s face—maimed and lacerated, the face of my earthly love suddenly aged by centuries, but alive, still alive—I felt a great calm, and at the same time I was overcome by astonishment at feeling without name. It swept away everything that had till now been troubling my soul. A gust of wind slammed the doors in the great abandoned house we’d returned to once more.

When Catherine had agreed to rest, I went looking for Nadia and found her playing in the garden, hair fanned out over the grass. Her features were transparent as memory. A fluid mask, like the one that had once slipped onto my shoulder under the apple tree, but which I now gazed upon without fear or shame.

The scaffolding of my revolt had crumbled; I no longer even understood the very motives for my behavior. The reasons behind my restlessness escaped me, as though mine were a stranger’s actions. Katie was back! Wasn’t it a miracle? Now nothing kept me from considering this miracle a victory: Catherine and Nadia, twin shadows, coming and going around me without hatred, merely separated by irremediable silence.

Yesterday’s tragedy could return, would return. But now it was only a struggle between passionate ghosts to cast off their faded, genuine finery. What had survived was a caricature, the final grimaces of a dying man.

Now all I had to do was choose. Katie, Nadia, different faces of a single being. Torn, I could only belong to one or the other, since neither one nor the other could stop existing.

When my wife’s face recovered its severity, her eyes their coldness, her lips their mute reproach, I thought, “What do I need her love for, if it’s just like hatred?” But perhaps it was exactly

because I knew that hateful mask was the true face of love that I weakened before it.

And yet it so happened that, from the very depths of night, the desire to escape this stalemate overtook me once more. Freeing myself from a sleeping Catherine, I climbed the stairs, and the cold breath of darkness steadied my will.

Nadia lay on a low bed, a moonbeam her only companion. I gazed at length on her shoulders, eggs gleaming in the half-light. Sudden calm, mellow as a fruit, whose stone was the hard emotion beneath my viscera. Then the little spider who'd become a girl opened its eyes, stared at me, and soon her body, as though dislocated by love, grew tangled up in mine and we exhausted ourselves in that ancient, draining stampede of pleasure whose only end is disenchantment.

When dawn came, I found myself alone once more, spread out amidst incredible dusty debris, rags hanging from roof beams, overturned bowls, unnameable furniture. Birds chirping at the roof's edge, had I examined them more closely, would have seemed not living feathers but painted wool. I sent these clockwork toys tumbling into the yard with a sweep of my hand. The cats, too, who just yesterday had filled every corner with their caterwauling: I dismissed these stuffed animals with kicks as I went down to my wife.

* * *

One of these mornings tasting of dead leaves, I found the bed empty. But Katie's voice came to me from far away, as in a hallucination. Quickly, I ran toward her call, looked around, launched myself at that voice enveloped in infinite desolation.

I caught up with her only at the edge of the canal, where she moved forward like a sleepwalker, calling out, "Bernard! Bernard!"

"I'm here!" I shouted.

But she didn't recognize me. I walked around her, trying to impede the irresistible force that urged her on. From time to time, she bent over the grass twinkling with tiny flowers. And asked them, "Have you seen Bernard?"

She hurled the same question at the sky, peering at the branches for an answer, then at the surface of the water, which she contemplated for a long time before moving on.

Morning sun sliced through the mist, began to dress things once more in the extraordinary radiance that lasts but a waking moment. All was still, save for two beings doomed in this deserted spot to repeat an endless melodrama.

I was tormented by the anxiety that someone might pass by. Suddenly, Catherine turned down one of the narrow flights of stone steps to the canal. The water was unusually clear. Catherine sank slowly into the liquid prison. Soon her voice, which continued to call out to me, only reached me from very far away, as though a glass lid had settled over her head. Having reached the bottom, whose moss-eaten slabs I could clearly see, she lay down without a care for my presence. And I now gazed upon her as if she lay in a great glass coffin.

There was no way to get her out of there! My fear that some early-rising passerby would suddenly appear became unbearable. I shouted at the top of my voice, "Katie! Katie!"

I made up bizarre, artless reasons to try and persuade her. "It's cold underwater! Come up, Katie, quick!"

At last she heard me. Her eyes opened (I could see them clearly as if through a magnifying glass), and she finally recognized me. But almost immediately, terror flooded her features. Poor Catherine! How to reach her? I saw her panicked glances. And each of us now knew that there would always be this transparent, impassable wall between us.

* * *

Sometimes, the meanings of certain dreams seem so clear to me in the moments before waking only to fade away with daylight that I wonder if such meanings aren't, rather, an extension of images from sleep.

Another feature of the strangeness which was insidiously taking hold of my life: in the middle of situations with no way out (at first my loneliness with Catherine, and then my loneliness with Nadia, and finally my attempt to hang on to them both—but hadn't all my life consisted of such situations?) I came to tell myself: "Don't fear taking this even further still: what do you stand to lose? What are you afraid of? *Soon it will be time to wake up.*"

Was it in a dream that the final day came to pass? I saw to Nadia as she slept. No sooner had I lifted her up, than she opened her eyes—sweet child!—and smiled at me. Out we went, with her in my arms, followed by a cloud of birds very high up in the sky. So as not to be seen with my burden, I tried to go around the village. But near the first house, a hurled stone hit her, just above the nape of her neck, on her head, which dangled outside my arms. Quickening my pace, I vowed to settle my score with those louts the very next day, once and for all. As luck would have it, we were not pursued, and soon I reached the river.

Upon seeing unconscious that creature for whom I'd trembled with desire, all my feelings surged up again, struggling against the fierce will that urged me on. And I took great care to rouse her from her swoon, so that I might gaze one last time at life lighting up her face.

With her tiny feet on the earth once more, her steps became so light that by closing my eyes just a bit I could almost imagine myself alone already: wasn't that infinitesimal sound but a leaf chased away by a breeze? But the resolve in me now was unrelenting. The moment when I would sever this knot of flesh and blood drew closer with every passing second that we left the village behind.

What cowardly act would I have to make up so that Nadia wouldn't suspect my treachery? She walked so trustingly along the bank, like a faithful dog.

“Now,” I repeated to myself with every step, “now, I’ll have the courage...”

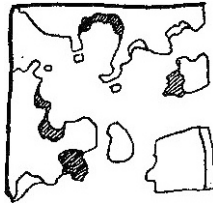
We were nearing the place where once I’d leaned over to pluck the little water sprite from the realm she never should have left. Her eyes were like copper discs dancing among the rushes, widened in infinite wonder. Never had she imagined the world was so vast, for till now it had been bounded by my image.

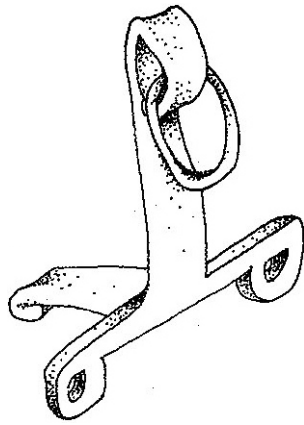
“Forgive me,” I whispered for myself alone, and these words wrung my heart. All it would take was a little push. Perhaps she’d think she’d slipped?

“Goodbye, Nadia!” I don’t know if I shouted these words. But they rang out, flung back by all the earth, and the whole sky echoed: “Bernard!”

One of her frail hands seized my hair as it flew past, one of her spindly legs clung to both of mine. I fell with her; I fell. Before my eyes, a spray of suns whirled about before coming to a sudden halt, nailed to a black wall. A humming of bells—far off at first, then growing near as swiftly as our senses return to us after a fainting spell—soon became the carillon of infernal nuptials. Then silence—a silence from beyond the world—swallowed the noise of our fall, even as I felt the body clasping mine transform, smother me between eight barbed legs.

Then the circles of darkness crisscrossed by shimmers were opening all around us, and I heard a hideous face, fastened to my lips, proclaim for all eternity the hour of horror.





CASSIE
Daniel Wallace

I thought it might be a dead body.

I don't know why, something about the thump of it: solid, heavy—and then—nothing. A silence like death, right outside my bedroom window. I woke as if shaken, the way my husband used to shake me, gently, by the shoulder. The wind blew hard that night, and my neighbors—who so often left their porch light on hours after they should have—had left it off. They turned it on for their daughter, the one who stayed out late with the boys from her school and drank, I'm sure, and who knows what else—smoking whatever it is they smoke now, groping—and, I mean, why not? I'm not against it, really. She was young, so young, I can only imagine the things she got herself into, and I think I probably would have done the same had I been her, had I been a girl now, instead of when I was. Cassandra was her name, but they called her Cassie. The light was for her. So even when everything else was dark—no moon, no stars—she would know where to go. She wouldn't trip or fall into a ditch or wander over to my house, believing my home to be hers, something comically sad like that, her wandering here and pounding at the door screaming *Mother!* until I opened up and she saw it was me, old Mrs. Murphy, her next-door neighbor.

But there was no light tonight for Cassie.

A yellow bulb, it was supposed to discourage the insects from swarming, but I don't think those bulbs really work that well. But it was *very* yellow. Even the shadows turned yellow as they fell through my window and onto the walls and ceiling of my bedroom, and if I'd yet to fully draw the curtains and shut the shades the light fell right into my eyes. *I won't complain*, I told myself again and again, by which I meant I won't be the woman who complains, who calls them on the telephone during dinner or

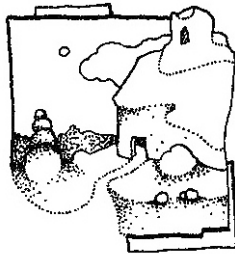
leaves the note in the mailbox. I didn't even want to be the woman who *wants* to say something, who *wishes* she could say something to them, about the light, about their daughter, about what she does at night, but won't because she doesn't want to be known as that kind of woman and, even so, becomes her all the same.

Why isn't the light on? The dark kept me up for hours that night. At some point I went to sleep, though, and that's when I heard it: the terrible sound of the body as it fell to the ground outside my bedroom window, her body, the body of this girl I'd watched become a woman before my very eyes, from whom I'd always bought my Girl Scout Cookies, and who had become beautiful, with a big laugh, lovely blonde hair, sweet blue eyes. I knew what had happened, could see it without looking: she was sprawled beneath my shrubs, her arms and legs unnaturally splayed, eyes swelled shut by the bruises, her blouse ripped and bloodied. And I could see the years ahead, living beside her parents and their childless home, watching them wonder what it was they did or didn't do, what they could have done differently to change what could no longer be changed. Should they have made her work harder in school? Make her bed? Stay away from those boys? Get a job? Knowing that anything they might or might not have done could have changed everything. You know, something as simple as sending her on an errand, a trip to the store to get some milk for her family, even this—who knows?—this may have changed her world such that she would have stayed home that evening, or gone to a movie with a different boy, or somehow thought better of what she did not end up thinking better about. That's life, though, and that's how her mother and father will spend the rest of theirs, thinking about how it might have been different, dried and hollow husks of people not even really alive anymore themselves. This is who the world will cry for.

But what about me? What about me, I thought, in my bedroom that night, in my queen-size bed, alone. *What about me?* I'm the one who heard her fall. It was under my window she bled and died. Not once did I ask the neighbors to turn out their

light—not once! And yet they did, they did, and I could have told them, this is what happens when you do.

I called the police. Two cars came, a fire truck, an ambulance. Blue lights, red lights, white lights—it was like Christmas. But the officers could not find anything suspicious—nothing—and told me the noise had likely come from the wind, which had blown so hard that night that I'd awakened as if snatched back into the world by an unseen hand.



DOGS
Pete Coco

All the world's dogs vanished at once. To freedom the jumpers jumped and the diggers dug. The biters bit, the runners ran. Only the yappers were uncharacteristic in their stealth. We lost sight of them one by one and we never regained it. Their intention should have been obvious, but we all colluded in tortuous speculation. In the stillness before the rest of the end came, we idled with our questions: Who was to blame? How had they done it?

Only after most of us stopped wondering did the truth come quietly: humanity had been abandoned.

No trace was left. No remains, no tracks, not even a single, wobbly stack of turds. The only thing left was the scaffolding we'd built around the species. Empty collars; rawhides tinted pink at the frays; staling kibble; dirty rubber frivolities hiding in the grass. Some people left these artifacts about. Shrines. Those brave enough to venture aboveground collect them now like arrowheads, bringing them back to the settlement.

Oh where, oh where had our little dogs gone? The universe was not the place we'd conceived it to be. Indeed, it is not. Those of us left mostly forget this hardest of truths. We soldier on. But I remember. Who would have thought it was the dogs who remembered everything? At least the everything that they understood of us? When my lamp flickers and runs out, when there is no one else around to ask, I ask myself this: how much more of us was there than that?

Am I the only one? I remember. I had a dog when I was a boy. On Abandonment Day she burst through the screen door. The crash made me cry and my mother, tending to me, lost sight of the Airedale. Mama carried me through the neighborhood, searching. Pickles. I don't know how truly I remember Pickles. I

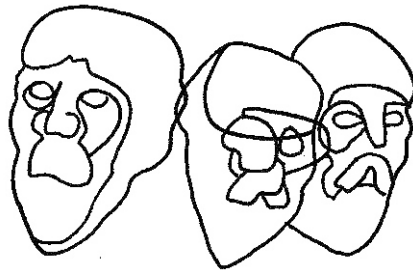
was so young. The dog I have in mind could be an invention. In one picture I ride this dog like a horse. I am a tiny savage in his landfill loincloth. Pickles is patience.

The cats have multiplied like vermin, which, with no dogs to police them, is exactly what they've become. Feral and haughty, they crowd the lake like officious sphinxes. The answer to their riddle is a loud clap, a kick. The cats part around the waterbearers only to complain more loudly, their caterwauls echoing through the caves all four thousand steps back to this last settlement. Some have begun to feed them to their children. I myself do not have children.

When I sleep, I dream of Pickles. Tonight I let her throw the Frisbee. She unfurls it with graceful obligation. When I offered the game I had been hoping for something different.

I ask: *Why did you leave?*

She throws the Frisbee once more and I fetch it. Again. Again. If she answers at all, she answers in no language that I know.





SUDDENLY I WAS AWAKE INSIDE THE ALLEGORY OF REBIRTH

Shamala Gallagher

—after *The Mahabharata*, Vol. 7, Book 11, “The Book of the Women”

I was awake
in a wood
that was
blackened and
knotted
with beasts

On every
side was
a gold lion
or blacksaffron
tiger or
elephant
brindled
black

I was scared
like wanting
to die
which feels like
emptying
the stomach
to a horrible
glitter

Imagine me
there with
the sick
glitter inside
me and
the knotted
glitter of
night

It was
a hot night
but a chill
on each of
my
hairs

I wanted
to go back
to my room
with its
crumpled
paper
and the long
wall empty
and the dishes
piled

Even though
there I'd wanted
to die

There I'd
wanted to
die but now
goldlion
blacksaffron
tiger
and the
racing
wind

Then I saw
the fiveheaded
snakes
and could not
get away

Then I saw
the net

A demon was
holding the
whole wood
in her
spiderveined
arms

Then I saw
the vinechoked
well but had
fallen in
already

And dangled
feet up
in the vine
and the
bloodpounding
head

Then above
me I saw
the sixfaced
elephant
with twelve
feet

Then a million
goldblackened
scary
bees

And below me
a snake
sizzled its
fangs

Then I saw
the thread
of honey
that dripped
and hung
so I could
drink it

It hung there
and though
I was scared
as glitter
and for years
I'd thought
I wanted
to die

I drank
it

Made me feel
sickgold
with no cure
but more

It was the
color of
my weird
halfbreed
skin

Or Texas
evening when
should be too
late for sun
but it's there

Late awful
color of
goldheat

The honey
hung like a
thread from a
nose

Or a dangle
from a low
woman's
place

Mead of
sputum
or heartworm

Feeling from
the fifth
beer

Then this was
my life

And I drank
the honey

And I wanted
it

So days
passed

And a snake
lived in the
well

And a black
rat

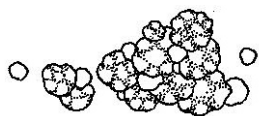
Then a white
rat

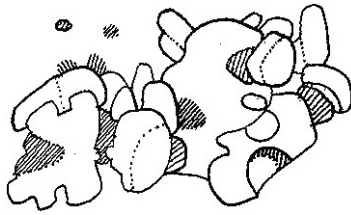
Came
interchangeably
to gnaw
on the tree
that made me
live

And I hung
there

And I drank
the honey

And I kept
drinking it
and so
I lived





EVERYBODY'S BLUFFING

Miles Klee

If we'd hit Hillcrest Savings the last time through Kansas City, neither of us could recall. But a source had it ripe that day—said the place groaned with cash. We'd outraced a storm bearing east; the air around us was all hiss while miles north, a twister poked and dragged at the earth as the finger of one supremely bored. A haze was cooking off the road.

Lionel clawed up a blizzard of yellowing newsprint in back, hoping for a hint in our headlines. Why didn't we keep these details straight? Blame the sole thing he and I felt in kind: that when wheels were in motion, the motion consumed. There appeared not only no end, but no beginning to speak of either. We'd ever just escaped that storm, riding cheap tires, our faces tight in the heat.

"Damn," he said. "Damn-hell-dammit."

"You *looking?*"

"I'm looking, Slip. Drive."

"You're not looking."

"Who cares if we do it twice?"

Lionel's mouth had vexed me ever since he'd sprung me from a cell in Decatur. I loved him, I'll say it, but trust is a different ball of wax. He'd always been spotty, in need of counsel. Thus my swerving the Ford till he lost his balance and whanged his head.

"Christ's ass," he hollered.

"Don't talk in there," I said. "Things you say stand funny."

* * *

It was afternoon and scorching when we rolled past Hillcrest, a mean brick box of no sophistication. We turned off Independence Ave. and parked next to an unhappy tree.

“We done this cracker barrel before,” I said. “No lie.”

Lionel grunted and got out and went to the trunk for the Tommy. I reached under my seat for the Colts. Loaded the machine pistol, then changed my mind. Ungentlemanlike. Pocketed the standard instead.

In the sad little bank were two tellers wearing far too much pomade; a manager, crisp like an undertaker, signing papers at his desk; a bull reading some pulp called *The Set-Up*; a dusty old cracker in overalls, leaning on the counter and speaking with one of the grease-combed tellers.

“Oh yeah,” Lionel said, remembering the place. The bull looked up from his dime-store trash—Lionel smacked it into his face and confiscated the rod all at once.

“For those who weren’t with us last time,” I said, “don’t fuss, it comes natural.”

The manager and tellers were stacking bills when I got to the counter. Lionel kept the revolver on the bull and the Tommy on the manager. I snapped open the valise and felt a mosquito land in my eyebrow and when I twitched I noticed again the old cracker in overalls beside me.

He gawked like I was a sheep he might rape. It was foul. It made me feel his lowness, dressed me in it, the way the wealthy dress you in their grace. He’d been struck dumb by our entrance, but now something about him spoke: a white government check, sapping the wetness of a spotty, tightened fist.

“You, Prince Dirt,” I said, pointing with the .38, no more than appendage this late in the dance. “You got hold of some money.”

The geezer didn’t flinch. He just real slow and careful stuffed the check in his overall pocket like nothing slicker had ever been dreamt up. Well, who wouldn’t’ve died from laughing?

“You seeing?” I said, and hacked a bit from laughing, and spat.

“Thought I wasn’t talking,” Lionel pointed out.

“Hardworking fella thinks I’m gonna take his check.”

“Oh brother.”

I stepped up to the desk, counted ten twenties from the pile and swept the rest into my bag. The tellers cast hopeful glances; I saw, suddenly, that they were twins. The manager pinched his top vest button, doubtless appalled by the slightest freedoms and ready to slander us when we'd gone. A dab of axle grease, though, and the old cracker would spend his twilight holding forth at his cracker saloon about the time Slip Church cut him in, and I'd have that many more friends when we hid out in cracker country—just pray the gallows take me first.

Lionel said my name, but strangely it was no longer mine. I stared out the window at sizzling blue, two hundred dollars in my hand. I couldn't break this gaze, now that the oddity of sense had revealed itself. A moment passed as if God weren't paying attention. A cloud was floating by and it stroked the room with shade, and the shade parted my ribs, and twists of hot shadow coiled through me.

I saw the old cracker standing there with his dinky ladies' gun. He was already dead, the Tommy ribboning his chest. The bull lunged, Lionel wheeled, I caressed an emptiness with my gun and sank. I put lips to floor thinking *now, it's now*.

* * *

My eyes fell open. Lionel's dead face stared back. Half his neck appeared to be missing, but who knew with that kind of gore.

I was laid out in richly scented blood. The unfired Colt was still in my hand. Voices weaved overhead. It was the manager and the bull (the tellers, I supposed, were meatloaf). They were arguing how they'd tell it. The bull wanted credit for killing me and Lionel both. He wanted to hide the dead cracker's gun. The manager had a better idea. He said they could split the money in the valise and claim a third robber got away. The bull didn't like that story; he started in on his angle again.

Although I've claimed, and often, that everyone's a thief and a con, it stung somehow to hear the proof. I didn't think twice about riddling the sons of bitches with lead.

But Lionel beat me to it.

* * *

Lionel and I been together a decent while. Our mothers were sisters, lived in the same steel pocket of Philly. His older brother got gassed in a trench. My kid brother hung himself. Like as not that's why I'd stuck with him so long: Jonah gone, he was the last responsibility I had. After learning how from books we set to hustling dice around town. Bootlegged a bit, had a bad scrape or three. Found robbery easier, not to mention a lot more fun, and beat it before the law beat us.

He's smart, Lionel, and quick. Not a showman, which is important, because more than one showman don't play. But if we're talking quality of mind... he's not curious. He dresses like a bum, which I've given up on fixing, and besides, I like folks to sell him short. Got the better part of all the money he ever stole buried under a cabin in Wisconsin. I've never asked what he's saving for, as I suspect he has no designs, no imagination for that fortune to excite. I suppose I don't much either, throwing it at lively women, but at least when I run dry I've got due cause to drain a safe. Lionel, he's in business for business' sake.

* * *

Hurtled south on a country road, wheel sticky with various bloods. What there was to say wouldn't come. We'd been so keen to light out of KC that we near forgot the dough, and when I remembered, out on the bank's front steps, I could see straightaway that Lionel wouldn't go back in. I told him to bring the Ford around.

"We're alive," I said after a stretch.

"We're alive," Lionel agreed. He was rasping from his clipped windpipe.

"Does that hurt?" I said.

"No. Does that?"

Two oozing holes opened into my right lung. A third plunged deep into my heart. I peeled back a flap of ragged skin and put two fingers in the heart hole: like poking a patch of swamp whose faraway bottom heaved in reply.

"Does not," I said.

I drove us to Maysville, Missouri, hardly aware of doing so. Lionel ripped a sleeve from his shirt to tie around his slippery neck. Soon after, he was asleep. Exhaustion had me too, and I eased off the road and covered my face with my hat, whose brim smelled of burnt powder.

I woke to stars clustered tight over prairie and Lionel's hand seeking pulse in my neck. He whistled in relief; blood bubbled over the edge of his scarf.

"We near Dodger's?"

"Thought we may as well."

"Let's throw cold water on him," Lionel said, cheerful about it even.

Half hour later, the Ford's beams sliced across Dodger's farmhouse, and we saw he was awake, smoking on his porch in an undershirt stretched from when he was fat. I guided the car into a hollow of the dry thicket nearby; its branches snapped like tiny bones. When we got to the house, Dodger was lighting a second cigarette with the first.

"Who you hoping for?" I asked him.

"Socrates. Gaw, the worst headache just now." He squinted drunkenly, unable to see the state of us. "Prolly scared him off."

"Keep telling you he isn't yours," I said. "Does what he pleases."

"What night is this," Dodger said.

"Wednesday," Lionel said.

"You were gonna hit Hillcrest. Wasn't it you I told last week."

“Told us yesterday,” I reminded him.

“And we did,” Lionel said.

“Again,” I added.

“Well,” he said. “You survived.”

Lionel sucked his teeth, not ready to talk. I didn’t want to, either—didn’t even see how. We followed Dodger up stairs that sighed, plodding through blackness, thick country silence. Dodger knew every gangster and crooked flatfoot the Midwest had to offer, swapped leads on jobs, and rarely if ever quit shooting the shit. But that night he led us to a chilly bedroom and didn’t cough about his share, just slammed the door. I had the thought it was a fake Dodger, made from clay, with gears in his head. Lionel and I undressed and tried to wipe the crust from our wounds before climbing into stiff yellow sheets.

We slept deeply, each facing outward. When I woke, there in the tree by the window was Socrates, Dodger’s redheaded, white-collared pheasant. Peering at me from a place of hard noon light. It bobbed and made to jump from its perch but then changed its mind and settled. Lionel stirred next to me, and I rolled onto my back, began picking apart the rafters with my eyes.

“How many folks you think we’ve done?” Lionel asked.

“Lost count. It’s like with girls.”

I understood, in an aching wave, why Jonah had punched his own ticket: if one could never see where life stood you—or in what form its answers might come—you had to take control.

“We don’t seem to be able to die,” Lionel said.

“Maybe it’s just a one-time deal.”

“One-time. Sure.”

We put on the clean shirts and trousers folded on the bedside chair, collected our dough and went downstairs. I did it mechanically, parting slow air that slid past like water. Floorboards warped, unsure against my feet. I held a brown shirt and rubbed its coarseness with a thumb, and it wasn’t as though the shirt or my thumb weren’t real, but their meeting was weird, counterfeit.

Lionel didn't concern himself with such phenomena. He had washed his face and neck and ripped one of Dodger's curtains to use as a scarf that neatly concealed his mangled throat. As he gathered his things you could hear a wet reedy wind to his breath.

Down in the kitchen, Dodger unwrapped a hunk of cornbread while his wife Victoria watched and sipped tea. Vic went all over the country, alone, but she was no outlaw really, just hustling enough for the next stretch of road. She'd meet people, join their scene for a while, then get fussy and strike out again. I don't understand it exactly, the kind of life I'm trying to explain, with those pauses.

"Slip. Lionel," said Dodger, "I am a gracious host now goodbye."

"Good morning, Victoria," Lionel said.

"Lay aside your cut then," I told Dodger.

"Good morning Lionel," Vic said. "Morning Slip."

"Don't get a cut," Dodger said.

"Morning—d'you mean you don't."

"Don't need."

"What, don't trust it? You tip someone off?"

"The hell are you. Get gone, you boys give me a headache. Like noisy little wind-up toys."

"Don't kick them out, Dodge," Victoria put in. "They're hungry."

"How... how's that?"

"Slip, let's..."

Victoria followed us out to the porch.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Don't know what's eating him. Have some for the drive." She pressed cornbread, pale and heavy, into Lionel's palm. As their fingers met she pulled hers away, as from a sharp pain. Her face was typically radiant in these small acts of kindness, betraying a purity of motive, yet now her features swirled, their careful arrangement undone.

She *knew*.

Lionel, blind to her horror, produced from his pocket a wad of cash.

“For your next trip?” he suggested.

Victoria erupted in tears. Her sobs turned to screams when Lionel gently touched her shoulder. We made our getaway, before she could put it into words.

* * *

Next few weeks were tossed with badness.

Found it took your average sober man about ten minutes to notice something queer about us, at which point he was apt to pick a fight. It didn't ever make sense, what they said, the reasons they came up with. Two pubs tossed us because of Lionel's scarf (it was “swishy”), and one hotel manager said a guest complained that a man of “guttering respiration” had lurked outside her door.

Women got wise sooner, though Vic aside they didn't make scenes. When we spoke to them they jumped as if we'd burst into being right there. In Des Moines, on a street corner, a lady shaded by parasol against that feverish corn-god sun thought to ask: Was I in town for the convention? That she'd spoken freely, figured me the illustrious, convention-going type, made me want to ply her with booze, wit, dancing. Then I understood her tone, in reality musically cruel. I was beneath her, a middling nobody, the kind of slob who went to conventions. Or perhaps... but I couldn't split her meanings, I was a reeling stack of meat, and by now the question had gone so long unanswered that she took her freckled nose and strolled off, satisfied to have stumped me.

And Lionel. Came an afternoon we were eating sandwiches on a mossy old pier, a lake on Minnesota's border. He said, spewing crumbs, that he might pay the police a call. I hadn't slept in days and screamed at him till he shoved me in the water. The Ford sped from the shore as I hauled myself out and sprawled, gasping, on slimy planks. Hours later (I hadn't

much dried) a growl shot across the lake. The approaching Ford flickered behind a rim of evergreens. It stopped where I'd parked it before, and Lionel got out chuckling, shaking his head.

"They wouldn't arrest me," he said.

"That's a damn shame," I replied. He stooped to pick up a stick that he then cast about like a magic wand.

"They said to stop wasting their time. I told them about Kansas City, they said that's KC's affair. I said we took banks in Minnesota too and they said no wonder I don't look rich. I asked if they heard of you and me, the other stuff we done, and they said why's it every guy thinks he can talk his way into being famous?"

"Damn shame," I repeated.

"I gave them the money, too."

"Of course you did not."

"I poured it out on a desk."

"Lionel."

"They said they didn't want it."

"Thank the holy Christ our savior."

"I left it there anyway."

My head rolled. Spots floated at the darkening mouth of the forest. There wasn't any part of me to wrap around what I'd heard. What I'd seen. In our previous life I'd been a name and a face and memory; I was those things, but I was becoming them, too. We'd retraced a part of this path, which made for a rotten doubling, forced us into a different past.

"The cabin," I said. Lionel tugged at his scarf and knelt and stabbed his wand into the sandy dirt. "We could hole up there."

"You mean retire." He was collecting more sticks for a teepee of kindling.

"I mean wait. And see."

"We're on a spree now. Job a day."

"No."

"They'll remember us." He worked another stick across the one that stood in the center. "Bit by bit."

He was never one for wanting fame; I didn't think adventure or desire had ever entered his calculations. He'd told me about the two days he'd spent alone in a flophouse when a job went awry and we separated—nervous rash on his backside, restless but exhausted from a rooftop escape. He'd heard a strange noise down the hall on the second morning and found a dog there, a dog eating so intensely from a can of beans that it kept choking and puking a brown mouthful that it unflinchingly bent to lick up once more. Well, Lionel had said, stupid thing had to want the want.

He seemed now to guess that my mind had wandered, because he said: "I always helped you. Wanna return the favor?" He was going at the sticks like a madman; I didn't spy any smoke.

"Even know how to do that?" I asked. He stood and kicked his kindling away in a fury, then composed himself and smiled.

* * *

So of course I went along with it. I couldn't lose Lionel, and Lionel wouldn't veer from his course. He had us arcing back down to Dubuque and zooming along the northern edge of Illinois into Chicago's sprawl, where the heat would be devilish if anyone had a mind to catch us. Which I almost wanted. I couldn't muster the confidence of the mythical me, the Slip Church known to poach kisses from pretty witnesses to his crimes, to show up at jazz clubs with four dates, tip with autographed stolen bills.

We sped downstate along the lazy Mississippi, which in its calmness resembled a terrible new road. I let Lionel drive; the fresh summer air was nauseatingly sweet. The long grass leaned forward and back again in the wind, its green changing as the light and its opposite swept through, and it was all very beautiful in the way where I wanted to blow my brains out.

Jonah was a fool for using a rope, I decided. It showed he wanted one last chance to squirm free, and that made his death a kind of joke.

“Life informs me, incessantly, of my needs,” Lionel said, unusually theatric. “It’s repulsive. Being compelled to eat and see—to spend.”

“Hardly that.”

“The energy I have to spend. Life without end means endless need. A mockery of needing.”

At last the sky sealed itself and allowed no further light to trespass. There was silence of perhaps an hour as nighttime road flowed under the Ford. It was impossible, in this hideous gap of reasoning, not to dwell on those whose need we had irreversibly severed. Had I harbored a pride in what I’d long told myself was a sorry byproduct of our work—flashes of a precise butchery? Hadn’t I come to envy such tidy, messy ends, those deaths of strict necessity, and begun to feel the bliss in their arrival?

“Alive,” Lionel said. “And needing.”

* * *

After gliding through drowsy towns for a day, Lionel stopped on the outskirts of Guttenberg, this nothing little haven for Krauts.

“We start over here,” he said.

“Let’s be quick.”

He slapped me, searing a cheek, and when I recovered, his eyes were inconstant, small black flames. He checked the machine pistol. It was a goddamn loony gun, something I’d won off a hothead kid too crazed to walk from the table. *Everybody’s bluffing*, he’d said, even after I fanned a house full of kings, and kept saying as he was shaken down, escorted into a dim back alley.

“This time you’re the one doesn’t say anything.”

It wasn’t the bank we saw first but a sliver of a general store with a scraggly vegetable garden to one side. I was hungry, and so jumped out of the Ford.

“Hey,” Lionel barked, and threw me the other Colt.

“I just want a bite,” I said.

“Just want a bite,” he mocked, stepping up to the door and kicking it in. I chased after him into the store and already we had a standoff, the swollen-bellied owner brandishing the usual shotgun, yelling in German at Lionel. There were three other dirt-streaked farmhands—caught chatting up the pretty slight thing in the painfully faded yellow dress, cloth passed through the filth of steerage. She studied Lionel with cold amazement.

“*Mon-ey*,” Lionel finally sang, and I remembered to hold my gun up, too. The instinct was dusty, my elbow creaked.

“*Fahr zur Hölle*” was the reply, only Lionel shot him in the middle of it, and his shotgun discharged into the ceiling, which sent down a flurry of wood flakes. Red bloomed in the storeowner’s white shirt; instead of buckling he staggered back into a corner and died standing against a shelf full of chews. Lionel spun to the farmhands and spoke at the one who’d pissed himself.

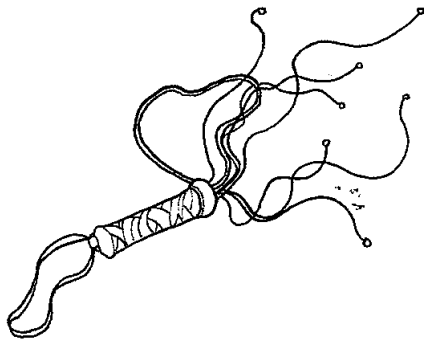
“You scared?”

He shook his head and Lionel shot him there, spraying the wall of sack grain with matter. The other farmhands and the girl ducked. I dove at Lionel; he caught my forearm and cast me aside. I’d forgotten how quick he could be. The bullet holes in my chest did something—they buzzed. Another burst of gunfire and then only the poor girl was left, huddled on knees and motionless. Lionel removed his scarf and let it fall in a lovely wave.

“You see this?” he asked her, pointing to his neck hole, the exposed and heaving apparatus of his throat.

She nodded with the calmness of a creature that’d been hunted its whole life and fully knew what came next. I stood at the edge of her being and glimpsed what had led her there: She’d woken too early that morning, innocent of her dreams. She’d looked on her brothers, who slumbered close by. She’d kissed her mother in their kitchen and said, idly, that she’d walk into town, it was so nice out. She nodded—yes, she saw.

“No you don’t,” Lionel said.



THE BLOODWORM
Leanna Petronella

bloodworm bloodworm four BLACK TEETH
bloodworm bloodworm four BLACK TEETH

HEMO-GOBLIN is a RED GHOST
is a WITCH pouring into cauldron OF HER OWN SKIN
I am full of glowing witches THE HARP HAS STOPPED
BEATING
in the corner by the singing drum and the voice
in its loose silver hearing CALL THE MUD DOCTOR
clattering down the ribcage pulls on his coat

back from death A BROWN PLANET
full of grandparents and OH MY GODS who grow like like
and as which are like and as
an or or an if A-HA THE MUD DOCTOR IS COMING
WITH THE NEEDLES
of pine of beds of bloody worms
see how green fish bones ARE A GOOD PLACE TO REST
WE ALL NEED A GOOD PLACE TO REST

tufted gilled bloodworm *G. Americana*
sewing her quilts and meatloaf
THE MUD DOCTOR BRINGS HER CHILDREN
in his black bag WHERE LIVE THE SHUDDERS
A MESS IS JUST LAZY he says she vacuums up her stories
ONE DEATH TO DIE they laugh ONE DEATH TO DIE
is best vicarious “which is why I watch!”

unbuttons her housecoat she oozily
it is their oily time JUST CUT 'EM OFF AND GROW MORE
we learn this as children to hook music for wriggling
when we pierce slimy torsos BORN THAT WAY CLOSE YOUR
EYES

in an invisible god-jar are arms legs AND SWEETS FOR
GOOD CHILDREN

so the bloodworm matures into a brainfly A-HA WHAT'S THAT
is how you like it best dripping all over the place
in tears that are tears AND NOT GLASSES WHAT THE
BOOKWORM WEARS

we have hidden his apple HEH HEH we have hidden
his spherical heart
with its brown umbilical WHICH WE TORE FROM THE
TREE

his large sad eyes, he was a good straightforward intestine
used to swallow from eyes to our hearts VIOLINS



Handwritten text in Arabic script, possibly a signature or a short message, written in black ink on a white background.

NO ONE WAS THERE¹

Kate Bernheimer

Every night after work, Mike caught the first Mount Fair bus that she could up to Bog—the second-to-last bus of the night. Mike always arrived before midnight and made the small pitcher of tomato juice come out just right with the two cans of beer while she sat at the bar counter and read.

She sometimes would make conversation with the scant regulars—on any given night, there would be zero to three of them there. Sitting at the bar counter, facing a mirror, they rarely spoke to each other.

Yet, from their posture, it seemed they knew each other quite well. Sometimes one reached out and put his hands on another one's shoulder or hand, but just for a moment. Sometimes, one of them would quietly laugh—and then another would shake his head sympathetically, though nothing had even been said.

That was Bog in a nutshell.

* * *

Most nights, Mike read from the very same book—a heavy collection of taped-in pictures and phrases from old children's stories. She looked up from the pages only once in a while. Every so often she would lift off her chair and stand at the front door, propped with her foot, just to get a break from the smoke.

Pete allowed Bog's patrons to smoke though it was against the law in the rest of the city.

"No harm in that," he said when new patrons asked if they could.

1 This is an excerpt from a novel in progress, *Happy Hour*, which will include art by by Noah Saterstrom.

* * *

Mike lived halfway down a residential street of triple-deckers a block from the bar. It was a dark stretch with vintage streetlights: dim, moonlike yellow globes. A lot of heavy pine trees—old growth, like in fairy tales. The trees were so large they made a thick canopy that covered the street. Still, the rain came through them, often in giant droplets that could soak a whole head of hair in one splatter.

Sometimes Pete would offer to walk Mike home, asking one of the regulars who sat at the bar to watch the till and serve drinks—most often, Heroin Mary. Pete didn't always offer to walk Mike home, and Mike never asked him to either.

When Pete did not walk Mike home, which happened more often, she did not feel alone, because of the trees.

And though the city had its fair share of danger, this was a safe neighborhood; those who lived there called it “Bogland” because of the soft, loamy earth beneath the many pine trees and because of the bar.

* * *

On the first night of our story, which will be very short and will end abruptly, a young couple came into Bog. The girl wore a denim blazer and bell-bottoms and sunglasses (dark lenses, white, huge), the boy a stylized suit. Custom-made, clearly—as if sewn right onto his beautiful body. He also had sunglasses—aviators—and these too fit him perfectly well. They ordered double vodka martinis.

“Not in tall glasses?” the girl said. “Not with the long stem?” She darted her eyes toward the boyfriend anxiously. In her uncertainty there was certainty too, that her needs would not be fulfilled.

Pete stared at the girl for a couple of seconds and sort of tilted his chin up. Mike barely lifted her eyes off of her book,

but yet, somehow, she exchanged glances with him. Mike then inspected the girl closely, in the mirror, with a glance expertly and imperceptibly directed so the girl would not notice.

The girl's lipstick was slightly lopsided but she was not drunk. She was tearful and not balanced upon her feet. She wore vintage brown boots with high wooden heels. There was no slurring and there were no heavy leans forward onto the bar. Still, something wavered as she stood there—either her body or a heavy fragrance around it.

Mike focused more intently upon her book's page; it featured a mid-century drawing. A child was playing. She was on all fours next to a chicken. The child wore a white frock with white ruffles that was meant to resemble the white chicken beside her. *It's my way*, read the caption.

* * *

Pete was preparing martinis, shaking his head. In the mirror, Mike watched the couple carefully select a red velvet booth beside the jukebox. Pete placed a delicately flowered pink dish of extra olives upon a metal tray, beside the extra beverage that wouldn't fit in the short glasses, in a pitcher like the one that held Mike's tomato juice side. He had poured generously, as always. As he set the drinks down on their table, he ruefully smiled at them. Mike raised her eyebrows sharply as they tipped him seventeen dollars—steep tip for a three-dollar charge.

At Bog, it always was happy hour.

* * *

The boy stood and fed the jukebox full of quarters. He began with the one about the drowning of children.

* * *

When Pete took his station again, behind the bar, he and Mike exchanged another long look.

The couple sat without speaking, the girl at the edge of despair, the boy calm and collected. He was pretty—shaggy hair, doe eyes, thin but not frail. They took occasional, tiny sips of the martinis in unison. They were conducting a staring contest of sorts.

Mike poured the last bit of the tomato juice into the glass of beer and drained it in a slow, thoughtful swallow. No one was having a conversation. She placed the feather bookmark inside, closed the book, and slid it into the crumpled paper bag.

“Well, I’m off,” she said to no one in particular as she bent down to get her umbrella and lunch sack off of the floor.

Pete’s back was turned. He was cutting up lemons slowly and methodically with a very sharp knife that had belonged to his mother. She had once run for mayor. The knife had a white bone handle into which the words MIKE FOR MAYOR were carved in black. His mother had also been named Michael. Pete raised the knife briefly in a goodbye wave to Mike in the mirror, and then he went back to his slicing.

* * *

Mike took a deep breath in the pine-scented rain. An empty bus went past, whooshing up the hill toward the park. It looked like the magical cat bus from a Japanese movie she had seen as a kid with her mother. That bus could fly; it even had fur. Mike looked at her watch. Bog closed at midnight, but it was one in the morning.

She stared down the hill toward the city. It was quiet, no motion. Up in the park, a deep fog had settled. The park had a beautiful silhouette by moon and by streetlight—fir trees against the night sky, lit by the city. The park was a hill, part of a covered volcano. Mike turned toward home—though the park, as always, beckoned to her.

On Mike's street it was even quieter still.

* * *

In the second-story apartment, at the front of the house, where Mike pulled off the day's clothes and stepped into her grey flannel pajamas, there was no sound. Not even the sound of a mouse, to whom she had surrendered the minuscule pantry.

Lighting a cigarette, she leaned out a window and let the rain soak her head. A massive pine branch brushed against her arm as she flicked ashes down. She took just a few puffs before tapping the lighted end out on the building's faded gray siding and slipping the barely smoked cigarette back into a well-worn carton.

The carton had been in her possession for a great while—since high school in fact. It was a white carton with a picture of a black camera on it. The brand was "Reporter." Mike and her friend had bought the pack downtown the day they also acquired fake driving licenses. That was under a tent in an alley. They had worn feather earrings from peacocks. The friend was Mike's dearest friend—often they went up to Mount Fair and read favorite poems to each other:

I have painted a picture of a ghost
 Upon my kite,
 And hung it on a tree.
 Later, when I loose the string
 And let it fly,
 The people will cower
 And hide their heads,
 [Etc...]

Some years later, the friend had jumped from the roof of the building where her own mother had died. "Assholes don't kill themselves," her suicide letter had read. "No one was there."

* * *

Mike tucked the cigarette pack under the mattress, which sat on the floor.

She pulled a worn, grey crochet blanket over her body. Rain hit the windows—it was only drizzling now, and would do so until morning. The sound was muted, fuzzy, electric. Mike did not fall asleep for a very long time. She stared at the window toward the pale noise. It was practically morning when she dozed off at last. The rain had stopped, and the sun shyly shone; sometimes when it rains so much in a place, the sun becomes awkward, like a person who doesn't often get out of the house. As usual, Mike would sleep until noon.





THE GREAT LONELINESS

Maria Romasco Moore

I am in the cactus room checking on the womb when I hear my third daughter Verdana calling to me from upstairs.

“The picture’s coming through. There’s water! Lots of it.”

The womb is fine. I am only here because I don’t want to be up there, watching, like everyone else in the world.

It is safe to say that these days. No danger of hyperbole. There are only a few thousand of us.

I pick up the womb from the shelf and move it over to the coffee table. I run my hand across its silver skin. How warm it must be in there, how quiet and dark.

“Come on, Mom,” Verdana shouts. “You can’t miss this.”

Inside the womb it is exactly as warm as I made it. It is precisely as dark as I programmed it to be.

* * *

Upstairs, Verdana is soaking in one of the hydroponic tubs, watching a screen on the ceiling.

“You shouldn’t spend so much time in there,” I tell her. “You’ll wilt.”

She rolls her eyes at me from under the water, but I can’t help it. I am a mother and I worry. Verdana has had fifty-seven surgeries in her life so far and I have performed every one of them. Her heart is made of metal now and half her veins are plastic tubes.

And she is growing. New leaves almost every day. Buds forming at her fingertips.

Verdana waves her hand and the screen floats down to my eye level. The picture is grainy and colorless. What it shows, if you know how to decode the pattern of light and dark, is a landscape seen from above. There is indeed water, a slick gray

smear of it near the bottom of the image. Symbols flash down the sides of the screen—a full battery of readings and diagnostics—but these are a mystery to me.

Verdana waves her hand again and the picture breaks into pieces. Now there are fifty-some tiny landscapes. Verdana sits up, drops of water falling from the forked white tendrils of her hair.

“There’s supposed to be a hundred,” she says. She’s been reading up on this for weeks now. “One hundred spider babies per target planet.”

“Maybe they rusted,” I say. The CHLT-IV is an old scout. The ones sent out within the last few centuries are much better, technically speaking, but the antiques are much farther away and it is to these we pin our dearest, most fragile hopes.

“Don’t be stupid,” says Verdana. “Nothing rusts in space.”

* * *

It was a very quiet apocalypse. No asteroids. No atomic bombs. The people died of natural causes. Fire. Water. Mountains. Lowlands.

I only know about this from stories, of course. It was long before my time. All I can say for sure is that some people did survive, holed up in bunkers and domes, reproducing through means both natural and artificial.

Those must have been exciting times. Dire, sure, and uncomfortable, but terribly exciting. There must have been a sense of urgency, of desperation, of a simple and overriding purpose: don’t die.

In the centuries between those times and these, the urgency has diminished. It has become clear that we might very well keep going forever. What has become less clear is why we should bother. What precisely is the point of surviving? And who would miss us if we stopped?

* * *

Onscreen the spider babies are falling slowly. As they fall, they record their surroundings as thoroughly and intimately as their outdated technology allows. They are designed to send those recordings out in a pulse of light before they hit the ground. Years later or right this second, depending on your perspective, the few of us left on earth will receive that pulse.

When the first of the unmanned scouts were sent out, it was by people looking for a new home. There are hundreds of scouts out there now. Some of them, like the CHLT-IV, are calibrated to seek out and investigate planets of a certain size, orbiting stars of a certain type within a certain range of distances—Goldilocks planets, they call them. Not too cold. Not too hot. Plenty of porridge.

We could go to these planets. We've got the technology. There are blueprints for long-term preservation. For canning people up like homemade jam, use-by date a hundred years hence. There are plans that utilize hopscotch clones. A self-sustaining population of one, copy after copy after copy until the ink fades to nothing.

But we do not go to these planets. What would be the point? When we got there, we'd still be alone.

There are other scouts out there now that act as receivers, scanning unceasingly for sound waves with a modicum of rhythm. A hint of soul. Still others hurtle through space shouting, as it were, mechanical travel agents broadcasting our coordinates to anyone who will listen, gushing about our formerly lush forests, our once pristine beaches.

We aren't looking for a home anymore. We're looking for a friend. Or a neighbor. A pen pal.

Even an enemy would be fine. We're not picky.

* * *

The feed from the door to the orchid room pops up in front of the spider baby screen. We have a visitor.

"It's Marjorie," says Verdana.

I go downstairs and answer the door, but it isn't Marjorie; it's her Brain. I know it immediately. Out of all of them, Marjorie's Brain does look the most like her, but I've known Marjorie all my life and I can always tell the original from the spares.

My girls can never see the differences. I have to point them out. Heart is more muscular, as are Kidneys and Blood. The Skin Graft Twins have a certain glow to them which speaks of a strict moisturizing regimen. Liver, it is generally agreed, is actually prettier than her originator. There is something about the eyes, the twist of the mouth. Eyes herself doesn't go out much.

"What's wrong?" I ask Marjorie's Brain, because something is obviously wrong. The fact that she is here instead of with Marjorie is proof enough of that.

"Can I come in?"

Although I fear the worst—Marjorie is dead, irreversibly—I step aside and invite her into the cactus room, which is also the living room.

My daughters and I live in the greenhouse. It stretches all the way around the house in a ring, though less than a third of it is still up and running. I've made a home for us in the small suite of rooms devoted to inedible plants, those which Marjorie's father cultivated primarily for amusement or decoration.

Marjorie lives in the very center of the house, in what used to be her father's private rooms. The hundred or so other rooms in the house—the laboratories and dormitories and dining halls—are empty now.

I make Marjorie's Brain some tea and sit beside her on the couch while she sips it slowly.

"Why aren't you watching?" I ask. I don't need to be more specific.

"Why aren't you?"

* * *

Marjorie's father was a rich man. By the time he was born all the truly poor men were already dead, of course, but

even by the standards of the day he was considered wealthy. He'd inherited a fortune—his great-grandfather had invented the first mechanized womb—and he was a genius in his own right. He employed many of the best and brightest scientists of his age to assist him in his research, and when they proved insufficient, he manufactured better and brighter ones.

He intended to live forever. No doubt he would have done it, too, if Marjorie hadn't killed him.

Before Marjorie killed her father, I had many sisters. Genetically speaking, Marjorie's father was our father as well, although we did not think of him this way. From his perspective, I am sure, we were no more than expensive pieces of biological equipment. We were born in batches, engineered to work for the man who had made us. Our mother cells were anonymous, pulled from the banks.

Marjorie was, in his heart, the only daughter her father had. She'd come first, of course. And she'd been born the old-fashioned way, of a woman. Marjorie was her father's heir and he protected his interest by creating backups for every little piece of her, just in case.

Some of my sisters resented Marjorie and her privilege, but I always felt that the burden she carried was far heavier than ours. We were our father's creations; she was his child.

* * *

Marjorie's Brain and I sit without speaking for some time. I am afraid to ask her why she is here. In the corner, the womb hums softly. Marjorie's Brain finishes her tea.

"We're the dinosaurs," she says, finally, setting her teacup down and turning to me.

"Ah," I say. I have heard these exact words once before. Marjorie and I sat together in the greenhouse, in one of the protein rooms, watching the gardeners buzz in and out of the meat flowers. That was three days before she killed her father. In

retrospect, her words may have been a warning, but at the time I didn't understand.

"We're not the birds," says Marjorie's Brain. "We're not the crocodiles or the coelacanths."

"More tea?" I ask, but she shakes her head. I pour myself a cup instead.

"We should have bowed out gracefully when we had a chance."

* * *

The instant I left the womb I began learning two languages—the language of my de facto forefathers' now-dissolved homeland and the language of the body. I learned to read the genome like a poem. The acids and the alkalines. The adenines and the guanines. I memorized it, rote, and then I lingered over each line, exploring it as one might explore the body of a lover. It was everyone's body, the sum of our flesh, the catalogue of our corporeal form.

A friend of mine—genetically, a sister—used to say it was a lot like a recipe. "And once you know the recipe by heart you can start to experiment in the kitchen," she would say, smiling wickedly, spooning a colony of *C. elegans* into her double-shot espresso.

She and I came from the same batch. We had the same X and the same Y, and now every time I catch my reflection by accident, in the glass of Perpetua's tanks or the walls of the greenhouse itself, I am always startled, just for a moment, to see her again.

* * *

Verdana shrieks upstairs. I drop my teacup. It smashes and disintegrates and then reforms but I am already halfway up the steps.

I run into Verdana on the landing. She is damp and naked, but unharmed. The screen comes sailing after her like a faithful dog.

“Look,” she shrieks, “look!”

She jumps up and down and at the tip of her left ring finger a small pink flower blooms.

The screen is zoomed to one spider baby’s view, the surface of the alien planet growing closer by degrees. On the surface there is a grid. It is too far yet to tell what it is made of—Rocks? Vegetation?—but it is a grid no doubt. Straight and true as a game of tic-tac-toe.

“It’s probably just a crystal formation,” I say, though hope swells unwelcome in my chest. There is an old saying: hope is a thing with feathers. If that’s true it must be a hawk, with talons to rip out your heart and a sharp beak to pierce it through.

Tiny screens begin popping up all around me, calls from our friends on the floating cities. There is also a call from Marjorie. I answer.

“Where is my mind?” she demands.

“Don’t worry, she’s here. I’ll send her over.”

* * *

My second daughter Kartika is asleep in the kitchen, curled up in the cupboard beneath the sink. With her face tucked into the crook of her arm, she is almost indistinguishable from the shadows. She is my softest daughter, covered from head to toe in fine black down. I give her a gentle prod, but she doesn’t stir. She only comes out at night, so she will have to see this later.

My first daughter Perpetua is in her room, leaning over one of her testing tanks. Her veins pulse with the light of her blood. Her skin is as translucent as that of a glass catfish, which is one of the things I love about her. I can see right through to her heart. I can make sure it is still beating. She has the spider baby feed up on a screen behind her, but she isn’t watching it.

“Check it out,” she says when I come in, “I’ve made it so these danios luminesce in the presence of liars.”

“Bullshit,” I say, and the little fish light up like Christmas.

“Oh mother,” she says, “You are supposed to be encouraging me.”

She is on her second adolescence and it is proving more difficult than the first. Genetically she is one-third hydrozoa—*Turritopsis nutricula*—and so she doesn’t age the way I do. She repeats.

“Turn around,” I tell her.

I zoom Perpetua’s screen to the grid. The baby picking it up is even closer to the surface now, still falling, and the lines of the grid show up sharper, easier to differentiate from the mottled gray of the land around them.

Verdana comes rushing in from the landing. She’s dried herself off a bit, at my urging, and put on a dress—although in her haste she put it on backwards and didn’t bother with the buttons.

“Oh Pet,” she cries, “isn’t it amazing?”

Perpetua scowls, but she doesn’t look away from her screen.

When I created my daughters, I intended for them to be independent creatures. Perpetua and Kartika are modest successes in this regard, but Verdana was something of a step back. Her fragility has made her clingy. She waves her screen bigger until it takes up the whole wall, each pixel of the strange image nearly an inch across.

I tell Verdana and Perpetua I’ll be back in a bit, but I don’t think they hear me. They are leaning together, shoulder to shoulder, watching the transmission. Verdana sways slightly in the breeze of the air conditioner.

“I love you both more than anything,” I whisper and then look quickly to the tank at my left. Perpetua’s fish remain unlit.

* * *

Marjorie says now that she spared me, out of all the people in her father's household, because I was her favorite. It might be true. I probably spent more time in Marjorie's presence than any of my batch mates did.

But I believe it was an accident.

I wasn't in the house when she sealed the doors and cut the oxygen. I should have been, but over the years I had developed an unfortunate defect of character—one that I took pains to conceal.

Marjorie's father created me and my sisters to be scientists. He intended for our every in-breath to be a hypothesis; our every out-breath a confirmation of the prevailing theories. I did my best but the truth is I was never a scientist. I'm still not one. I can ask all the right questions, but I've never much cared about the answers.

On that day, as on many unremarkable days before it, I had nicked a submarine and snuck out to visit the museum. Marjorie's father didn't have a copy of the museum, but I knew a man who did. His name was Frank and he lived at the bottom of the sea.

I visited Frank every day for months, but I only saw a fraction of the place. I would sit on his couch for hours and I would walk through the halls of the museum: past the skeletons of *Australopithecus* in front of *Guernica*, past the *Pietà* in the corner of a room from the Temple of Heaven, past the restrooms from the Louvre that someone had labeled "late eighteenth-century romanticism." Frank said that the pyramids and Central Park were somewhere in the basement. I preferred the paintings, those framed windows hung on walls that had long since burnt down or washed away. I found these pictures made by the dead as full of life as any well-tended petri dish.

I am not a scientist. I am an artist.

* * *

It takes me almost ten minutes to reach Marjorie's wing of the house. There used to be a system of shuttle cars, but in the last few decades Marjorie has allowed it to fall into a state of disrepair. I walk along the old tracks and count the closed doors.

I find Marjorie sitting in her father's old wingback chair, with her spares arranged behind her like bridesmaids in an antique photograph.

"What is it?" I ask.

Marjorie smiles at me. She is still as beautiful as she always was. The years do not show on her face.

"Plastic," she says.

"Pardon?"

"A high-density polyvinyl chloride polymer," says Marjorie's Brain. I didn't notice her when I first came in. She is sitting off to one side, her face half obscured by a flotilla of glimmering screens.

Her eyes meet mine through one of the screens. The screen is showing the spider baby feed, and the lines of the grid cut her face into sections: a dozen neat squares marked off by longitude and latitude, every single one of them an alien planet.

I understand. Someone must have managed to translate the non-visual data being sent back by the spider baby. The grid is synthetic.

"The Icarii are organizing an expedition already," says Marjorie.

This doesn't surprise me. The Icarii believe that the sun will supernova tomorrow. They always believe that, have been believing it now for decades. Eventually, they are bound to be right.

What Marjorie says next, however, does surprise me.

"We're going too."

* * *

When I returned that day from under the sea, the hatch I'd used to leave the house was locked. I thought I'd been found out, so I confessed. I rang the doorbell frequency. After what felt like an eon, the hatch slid open.

Inside, I found everyone sleeping. It was the middle of the day. They were sleeping at their desks. They were sleeping on the floors. I walked through the house for a long time but in every room it was the same.

Finally in one of the bathrooms I found Marjorie's Eyes and she was awake and she was alive and she was crying.

"I saw them die," she said when I asked her what had happened. "I watched so she wouldn't have to."

I never speak of that day, certainly, to my daughters or anyone else. There is not much to say. Marjorie's Eyes took me to Marjorie, who took me to her father. His eyes were open. His throat was cut.

His Eyes, too, and His Throat. Not a one of them was stirring.

"Why?" I asked, though I didn't really need to.

"It is a cruel gift to give," said Marjorie. "The gift of life. The gift I gave was kinder."

I left the house. I went back to Frank and told him there had been an accident. We lived together for some time, just the two of us, at the bottom of the sea. He used me to satisfy certain ingrained biological urges and I used him for Bosch's garden of delights.

I returned after Marjorie tried to finish what she started. Frank had heard about it from one of the Pope's attendants who had heard it from one of the Icarii who had heard it from a girl on the floating city of New Dubai who had heard it from Eyes. The new Eyes, that is, who was only five. I don't know for sure what happened to the old one.

Marjorie had gone outside. She was out for less than a minute but still it was bad enough that most of her had to be replaced. It took all of Lungs and Nerves and bits of several of the

others to make her whole again. It is something that confounds me to this day—that they gave of themselves so willingly.

It was what they were created to do, certainly, but the one who created them for this purpose was gone. I had long since abandoned the tasks for which I had been created.

Once Marjorie was stable, I moved into the greenhouse. The rest of the house held too many memories. Shortly after that, I began to make my art.

* * *

“Will you come with us?” asks Marjorie.

I should be happy. We found what we were looking for.

“It could still be nothing,” I say.

“It isn’t nothing.”

“It could be a mistake.”

“It isn’t a mistake.”

“It could be us.”

There have been manned expeditions sent out before. Some we have records of, but there were probably more. Some failed before they reached the edge of the galaxy. Others failed farther out. Sometimes we receive a message sent to a ground control long gone. An SOS or a suicide note, it amounts to the same.

But some of them must still be out there. The LDS fleet, perhaps, which set out in search of the three heavenly kingdoms. Or Voyager XXIII, with the naked man and the naked woman and the hundred thousand human zygotes sealed in glass.

Could it be we’re going in circles? Chasing our own tails? And all of us just like mice running scared in the big black fields of space while hope sharpens its talons and swoops toward us, yellow eyes gleaming even in the dark.

“It isn’t us,” says Marjorie. She turns and stares at the screen. “And even if it were, it would be better than nothing.”

“I’m not going,” I say. I am surprised to hear myself say this, but the moment the words leave my lips I know them to be true.

“Everyone will go,” says Marjorie. “You’ll be the only one left.”

She sounds like a child trying to coerce a playmate. I am much younger than her in years, but in this moment I feel much older. Though she is surrounded by her spares, she is nonetheless alone, because they are just her, reflected.

“I’ve been the only one left before,” I say. “I’m used to it now.”

Marjorie has no answer for that, but Marjorie’s Brain has begun to sing. It is an old song. It must be. I don’t recognize the tune.

“When the earth quakes, the engines will stall,” she sings, voice barely above a whisper, “and down will go baby, cradle and all.”

The screen showing the spider baby feed goes black. The transmission is over. Marjorie’s Brain plays back the last seconds for those of us who missed it—the ground rushing forward and then static and then nothing.

* * *

Museums were made so that future generations could enjoy the works of generations that had gone before. But these days, future generations are no longer a given. Thus my works act as both subject and object. Art and audience. The problem and the solution all in one.

Perpetua isn’t really my first daughter, although I call her that. There were hundreds before her, maybe thousands. But these daughters were just the preliminary sketches. Limbless or gutless or eyes in their stomachs and hearts in their throats. Some with skin but nothing inside of it, others with all that should be except skin. They did not live long, if they lived at all. Art can be messy.

Perpetua is a finished piece.

I consider my daughters collages. Mixed media assemblages. They are complicated and fragile and I hope that, like many great works of art, they will live on long after I am gone.

* * *

In the evening I ask Verdana if she wants to go off in search of the grid planet. She tells me her roots are here. Space frightens her. Too dark.

Later, I ask Kartika the same thing. She is curled up in my lap and I am filing her incisors. If I don't do that once a week at least they grow and grow until they are larger than she is. Kartika growls low in her throat and bites my hand, gently, between the thumb and the forefinger, which means no.

I worry, as any mother would worry, that I have made my daughters too timid, too attached, too like myself. And it is true that their human ingredients all come from me. An artist needs a signature.

But Perpetua wants to go. I tell her she can go if she wants to. I tell her it is up to her. She's not satisfied with that. She says we all have to go together. I tell her that isn't going to happen. She screams at me. Calls me selfish. She seems to think the gift I gave her was a cruel one. At the end of it all she storms off and locks her door.

But late that night she pads softly into my room and tells me she had a nightmare and can she sleep in my bed just this once even though she is too old for it and I say of course and the next morning when I wake up she is three.

I didn't even realize she could do that—age out of order. But it just goes to show you. The best art can be a mystery even to its creator.

* * *

The next afternoon I get a message from Marjorie's Eyes telling me Marjorie's Brain is dead. She stepped outside at sunrise, uncovered. She bowed out gracefully while she had the chance.

Verdana is sunning on the couch beside me when I get the news.

"Are you sad?" she asks me.

"No."

There is a flash of light from upstairs. Perpetua's fish. They're right. I haven't been this sad since Frank was killed by shifting tectonic plates a few years back. Although whether it was the actual fact of his death that pained me most or the loss of his copy of the museum—crushed right along with him—I couldn't tell you.

"If everybody leaves," asks Verdana, "Will you miss them?"

"No."

There is another flash, this one so bright that it takes me nearly five minutes to blink away its afterimage. When I go upstairs to check, I find all the danios dead, burnt out like old bulbs.

* * *

Marjorie is wrong. Not everyone will leave. Almost everyone, maybe, but not everyone. There are optimists in the ocean, keeping tabs on amoebas. Cheering them on. Waiting for life to begin all over again. They will stay. I know they will. So will the sleepers buried under the mountains. The lotus eaters. The handmaidens of Hades. The nostalgic. The homesick. The tireless keepers of the frozen Pope in his underground Vatican, waiting in silence for Jesus and the thaw.

And my three daughters and I. We'll stay.

We'll get transmissions now and then from the ones who leave, I'm sure. The lag will grow as they push farther out

but I imagine we will keep on hearing from them periodically until they fail or until they reach their destination. That will be something to look forward to, centuries from now, if I live that long. I haven't decided yet if I will.

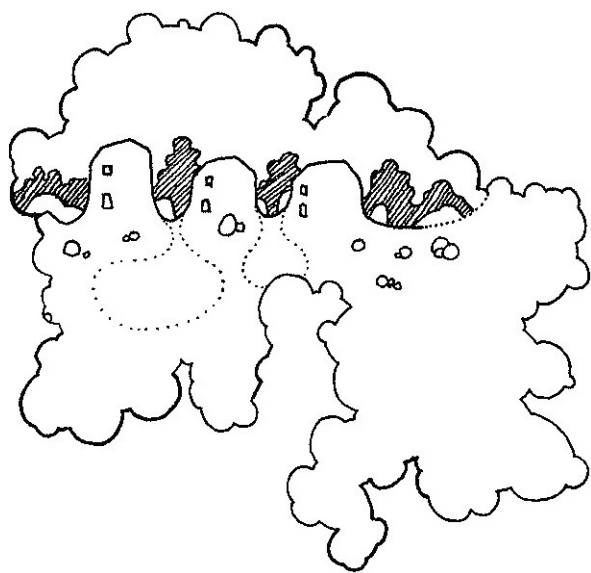
My fourth daughter will be ready soon.

She has been many years in the making and if she proves viable, which I believe she will, she will be a new thing altogether. There is very little of me in her. Her ingredients are pulled from every corner of the archives. She is a balancing act. An exercise in form and color.

She is *Ursus arctos* and *Solenodon paradoxus*. *Puma concolor* and *Panthera onca*. All the creatures that never moved in packs, never bonded in pairs, never huddled together for warmth in the night. Creatures that never sought a mate but simply split, if the mood struck, one into two. The two parts would never bother each other again, not even to ask for a cup of sugar or an iota of endoplasm.

She is every creature that left the nest and never looked back.

She will be my greatest work yet. A museum unto herself. Not just a petri dish, but an ocean full of life. She will be beautiful and she will be strange and, best of all, she will never be lonely.





SECRET IDENTITY
Jonathan Lethem & John Hilgart

When your planet exploded
A chunk was flung free
Now preserved in a bottle.

The ground turned toxic
Until scientists spread sheets of lead
To stop the deadly radiation.

Elaborate studies of identity and origin,
Always stall at one conclusion:
You're not you.

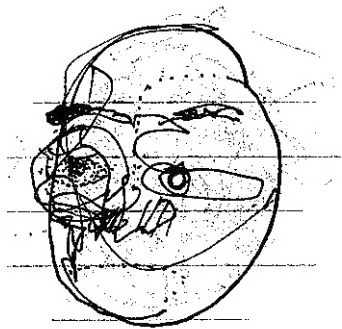
A reliance on dreams and fantasies,
Equally dire in implication.
Your real life is a wasteland.

Preening nerd Machiavelli,
Your dog is wearing your clothes.
Subatomic commitmentphobic.

Your parents are dead, yet somehow alive.
You're frank with loved ones only in statue form.
World's most powerful wallflower.

Enkrypted.
Time's arrow bent.
Cold fish.

Oh, Internet, I have uncovered your secret identity!
You are Superman in the nineteen-fifties.



THE LANGUAGE OF *NIM*

Erik Anderson

*To whom does the lamp communicate
itself? The mountain? The fox?*

Walter Benjamin

A few days into spring—and already summer—my wife and I began watching *Project Nim*, James Marsh’s documentary about a chimpanzee raised as a human. That we were doing so during a March heat wave—what one science writer called “an unprecedented event since modern US weather records began”—was as distressing as the fact that, a few minutes into the movie, my wife was enraged: not only had they taken the infant chimp from its mother, but it had been necessary to sedate her in order to pry the baby from her hands. Halfway through, my wife was so irritated by almost everyone in the film we had to turn it off. I admitted there was little about the story that wasn’t shameful, but I still went to bed sulking about the interruption. In the morning she apologized: she had taken it all rather personally, she said. For whatever reason, it had been impossible for her to suspend her judgment, and though it wouldn’t be true to say she felt Nim’s story as her own, she felt its helplessness, and its cruelty.

In 1973, Nim was taken from the primate research center in Oklahoma where he was born to New York City, where a graduate student named Stephanie LaFarge raised him among her own children. The research project, conducted by a Columbia psychologist, Herbert Terrace, was designed to answer the question of whether chimpanzees, with whom humans share 99% of our DNA, could acquire language. More specifically, could a chimp form a sentence? Nim was tutored in American Sign Language, first in his adoptive human household, then in a lab

at Columbia. But the study had baggage: namely, a long-standing debate between those who theorized language as a set of rules hardwired into the human brain, and those who argued it was a tool developed toward specific ends. It's telling that, in terms of this debate, Terrace's mentor at Harvard was B. F. Skinner, the noted behaviorist, and that Nim's given name—Nim Chimpsky—was a clear dig at Skinner's chief critic, and the theorist of universal grammar, Noam Chomsky.

Despite the researchers' evident bias, the results of the study were ambiguous. Nim learned a substantial number of signs, 125, but Terrace concluded that his use of language was an elaborate form of begging. Watching the film, however, one immediately questions the conclusion, in no small part because Terrace comes off as arrogant and indifferent. Another caveat comes in a milder form of my wife's initial reaction: the situation is patently absurd, and this is nowhere more evident than in the scenes in which one tutor, Laura-Ann Petitto, struggles to potty train a diapered Nim. This is part of Marsh's considerable craft as a filmmaker: he draws our attention to what's disturbing in his subjects without ever naming it explicitly. I have trouble imagining a viewer, for instance, who would not see the events of 9/11 hovering behind Marsh's earlier film, *Man on Wire* (2008), which recounts the story of Philippe Petit, the French aerialist who conducted a high-wire walk between the twin towers as construction on them was drawing to a close. Marsh never mentions their destruction because each image of the towers implies their absence. Likewise, he does not exaggerate the senselessness of Nim's predicament because all it takes is an image of a chimp in diapers to establish that fact.

Terrace's study ended abruptly around the time Nim turned five. That it had failed to definitively answer the questions it set out to ask was less pressing a concern at that point than the fact that Nim had already attacked several of his tutors, including one woman who had a portion of her face torn off. No doubt there were other reasons to end the study—fatigue and lack of funds

among them—but the growing strength of a young male chimp was as convenient a reason as any. From the grounds of the old mansion owned by Columbia, where he was then living, Nim was returned to the primate research center in Oklahoma where he was born. The scenes are dramatic: chimpanzees in cages, shouting loudly, and Dr. Bill Lemmon, the center's director, carrying a cattle prod at his side. It was at this point during that first night of watching the film that my wife's patience eroded completely. We turned off the TV, shut the windows—although it was still, at 9 p.m., rather warm—and went to bed.

When we started up again the following night, it was clear we had been too hasty. The years Nim spent in Oklahoma, in spite of the cages and the cattle prod, appear to have been good ones, relatively speaking. They were far better than the years that followed. When financial pressures prompted the center to sell some of its chimps, it found a willing buyer in the Laboratory for Experimental Medicine and Surgery in Primates (LEMSIP), a facility affiliated with NYU's School of Medicine. Along with hundreds of other chimps housed at LEMSIP, Nim became the subject of vaccine experiments. In 1995, NYU decided to close the facility, and many of the chimps were simply moved to comparable laboratories; others were rescued by LEMSIP's chief veterinarian, Jim Mahoney, who managed to place over a hundred in sanctuaries around the country. By then, Nim's case had already received some public attention, and, having been purchased by the Fund for Animals, he was moved to a sanctuary in eastern Texas, where he spent the rest of his short life.

The place was lonely for Nim until some other chimps were brought in. Like humans, chimps are social creatures and, if the ability to hold a grudge is any sign of intelligence, highly sophisticated ones. Near the end of his life, Nim's surrogate mother from the beginning of the film, Stephanie LaFarge, comes to visit. He remembers her, but how could he have forgotten? She had breastfed him, after all. LaFarge enters Nim's enclosure, against the advice of everyone present, and Nim lets loose on her,

grabbing her by the ankle and swinging her from side to side. He nearly kills her and, in so doing, himself. Just as his warders are deciding whether or not to shoot him, Nim restrains himself and walks away. These reenactments are painful to watch, but they oddly reflect the opening of the film, in which Nim is removed from his biological mother. The forced separation from the latter is not the abandonment by the former, but that Nim's is in part a maternal tragedy may speak to my wife's frustration with the film, if nothing else. Broken bonds, and imposed ones, are the unfortunate frames of Nim's life.

It's tempting to read Nim as a warning. Animals ought to be left in the wild, for example, or it's better to learn from them in their own environments, à la Jane Goodall, than in human ones.¹ These are entirely sensible, if somewhat conventional, conclusions to draw. Nim's story can also be seen as a human tragedy. Watching the film I thought, almost immediately, of Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man* and its controversial subject, Timothy Treadwell, who for more than a decade spent his summers living among Alaskan grizzly bears. Much of Herzog's film is comprised of Treadwell's own footage, and as disturbing as it is to watch Treadwell sob or rage on camera, it's more disturbing to watch him treat the bears as though they were human. He talks to them, gives them names, and interprets their interactions through a distinctly human lens. At the same time, there's a certain fetishistic quality to his approach: at one point he kneels down to feel the warm stool left by one bear on a rock. His delight is funny but troubling, and when, at the end of his final summer, Treadwell and his girlfriend are eaten by a hungry bear, it's clear that breaking some taboos can still have dramatic consequences.

1 The primate behavior expert Elizabeth Lonsdorf recently explained to me that "animals bred in captivity are very different behaviorally than their counterparts in the wild," in large part because "the main 'work' of a wild animal (foraging) is taken care of" for them. Scientifically, they may be the same species, but because they are dependent on their human keepers, they practically inhabit another world. Moreover, because the overwhelming majority of chimpanzees in accredited zoos were born in captivity, they are vital places for the study and care of these animals.

This strikes close to the heart of *Project Nim*. Treadwell's experience teaches us less about grizzlies than it does about Treadwell and the ways each of us, to varying degrees, views the world through an anthropocentric, if not anthropomorphic, lens. Treadwell's commitment to "protecting" the bears only inverts the biblical dynamic in which humans are given dominion over nature; it does nothing, despite Treadwell's good intentions, to revise that dynamic. In his twenty-six years, Nim likewise became a subject of (or to) human experience. Again and again, his life, like the lives of Treadwell's grizzlies, became a screen onto which humanness was projected. Ultimately, however, any such projection is precisely that, and so what began as an effort to bridge, or address, the gap between human and animal nature does not end in a closing of that distance but a confirmation of it. In this way, too, Nim's story reflects Treadwell's: in both cases the distance appears to collapse only to expand once more, with violence.

The problem, as Giorgio Agamben argues in his book *The Open*, is not the inevitable separation between one species and another, but rather the shifting articulations of that separation. It is this very articulation, he says, that not only establishes our difference but gives it its power and its presumptuous centrality. What exactly life would look like in a suspension of humanness isn't easy to say, but it's clear that, for Agamben, figuring it out takes precedence over other dilemmas—human rights, for instance, or the ongoing environmental holocaust. For, if we suspend the term "human," can we begin to speak of rights applied more broadly? Can we conceive of prerogatives that are not specific to given classes, so that no distinction exists between human and animal rights? Does a chimp have as much claim to life and liberty as a human? And, if so, what obligations do we have to the chimps?²

² In 2008, the Spanish parliament passed a resolution to grant human rights to all great apes living in Spain, and related (but less expansive) legislation has been passed in Germany, New Zealand, and Switzerland. The question is whether this fulfills or defers whatever ethical obligations we have to the apes.

Very little encourages us, day to day, to see non-human phenomena—the nature of chimpanzee societies, for instance—as possessing equal value to our own habits and preoccupations. The prolonged study and appreciation of the nonhuman world has largely been consigned to the academy, and apart from alarming articles about the consequences of climate change, science reporting is essentially marginalized. Even the *New York Times*, with its wonderful science section, ghettoizes the field: the section only appears on Tuesdays, part of a rotating series that puts science on a par with style. This isn't precisely news. That our species is self-centered, that we see ourselves as having a divinely ordained position among the orders of creation, is all too evident in the legions of animals we enslave for food and, paradoxically, in the naïve naturalisms that place the grand vistas of national parks on romanticized pedestals. In fact, both are made possible by the same sense of separation that has come to define humanity's place in the world. It goes without saying that bighorn sheep don't marvel at the mountains. No cow cultivates other animals for food.

And yet, it's hardly inevitable that this separation should lead to, say, experimentation on chimps, nor was the extraordinary heat of this past March an unavoidable side effect of human habitation. Instead, this winter heat wave feels like Nim in another form: Nim writ large on the planet. In neither instance have we been able to reconcile our intelligence with the creaturely world. We have imposed or sought signs of our intelligence in that world, or we have assumed that this intelligence is resourceful enough (or divine enough) to get us out of any squeezes. Hubris has always been central to tragedy. That we persist in experimenting on chimps—there are over a thousand in American laboratories—is, like the way we fuel our lives with extracted carbon, a product of our species-specific variety: ever since Eden we have named and, in naming, divided.

For Walter Benjamin, at least, this naming is a great comfort. Nature's muteness, he writes, is mournful. Even in the

rustling of leaves, Benjamin senses a lament, the sadness of which lies in the inability to name. There have been few minds as nimble as Benjamin's, but he was also writing at a time before we knew that dolphins (among other creatures) chatter with one another toward specific ends. He writes:

Man communicates himself to God through name, which he gives to nature and (in proper names) to his own kind, and to nature he gives names according to the communication that he receives from her, for the whole of nature, too, is imbued with a nameless, unspoken language, the residue of the creative word of God...

* * *

That naming constitutes communication, through nature, with God may be an encouraging proposition, but it probably runs counter to the evidence. Nim named and his life was, perhaps as a result, a sad one. And yet among other chimps, Nim would have been far from mute, even if his communication with other chimps had lacked names. I'm inclined to reverse Benjamin's formulation and say that the name is a lament, in which case human sadness may consist in the inability to access what Benjamin calls the unspoken language of nature, the muteness that persists not within species but between them.

My wife was rightfully bothered by the treatment of the chimps in *Project Nim*, but it was the way this treatment reflected on humans that I found most disturbing. What does it say about us that we are not only willing to impose our language on another species, but that we see as inevitable the imposition of human names on the totality of the planet? Terrace's experiment does not prove the superiority of human intelligence any more than it disproves Noam Chomsky. In the end, all it proves is our profound

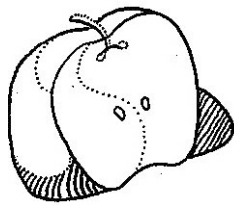
loneliness. The story represents, on a small scale, a distinctly human shortcoming: we feel parentless, orphaned into our big, sophisticated brains. Unlike Benjamin, I don't see this isolation as mystical but self-imposed, and it only heightens the fundamental disjunction between humans and the creaturely world. Again and again, either we try to articulate the differences between us and the rest of the planet, or we try to eliminate these differences. Agamben contends that we must suspend these definitions—indeed, the act of definition itself—if we are to inhabit a sane place on the planet. We must mind the gap, not eliminate it. Situate ourselves inside the either/or, at the slash that, in its muteness, divides as much as it connects.

But how does one inhabit a gap? What does life look like there? If Nim's life is any indication, this in-between state—(n)either animal (n)or human—has its challenges and dangers. As immigrants know all too well, identifying with two (or more) incommensurable cultures can be a recipe for dissociation and violence, and although Nim exhibited both throughout his life, it's telling that his favorite activity was play—as though the gap he uniquely inhabited was, at best, a game. Of course, play can turn bloody, and the gap can be an invitation to violence, but I cannot think of a better image for the position between the either/or—indicated by a diagonal line on the page—than that of the aerialist on the high wire.

For his part, Petit says life must be lived at its edge, as though it were a high wire. One must practice danger and disobedience, foregoing safety and conformity. But the wire is a state of contradiction: a path between two points that is never precisely used as such, and though it certainly is a route, you wouldn't think of it as a way to get somewhere. The wire is its own destination. Death surrounds it—and gives the walk its tension and beauty. Allow yourself fear and you've already fallen; instead, you must be entirely present, vigilant in your attention to the here and now. Human life presents its own bundle of contradictions, prominent among them the fact that, for a human

subject, wilderness exists primarily in the abstract, as does, conversely, the wisdom suggested by our taxonomic name, *Homo sapiens*. That our life consists of the movement between these poles, rather than a permanent residence in either, provides the ongoing tension and beauty of our existence.

If Nim's life means anything, retrospectively, it may be an exhortation to abandon the pole we superciliously cling to, and to accept that the opposite pole, to which our route that is not a route is also fixed, subjects us to certain entirely reasonable laws: those that govern, for example, the carrying capacity of a species (even—or especially—one with no natural predators). Given the warmth of the March during which we watched *Project Nim*—a warmth that promised only to increase—it seems both imperative and unlikely we will do so.



FAMILY MART
Elizabeth Browne

“What’s wrong with your arm?” the cashier asks, ringing up Martine’s instant noodles, vitamin drinks, and rice crackers and depositing them into a bag. His nametag reads Charoen Wattanapanit and he has a button with a smiley face on it pinned to his Family Mart polo shirt.

“Nothing,” she says, but she tugs her left sleeve down, just in case. With her right hand she lifts her items, one by one, out of her basket. Her left arm hangs limp at her side. Charoen Wattanapanit smiles, a bright flash of white that Martine knows is a sign of embarrassment but which charms her nonetheless. She’s been coming to Family Mart every few nights for nearly a month, and every visit she’s greeted by him. Until now he’s stuck to the usual pleasantries—“Hello, welcome to Family Mart!” “Thanks for shopping Family Mart!” “Good night!”—and Martine has responded in kind, trying to be polite, but also hoping to avoid any openings in conversation like this. She’s reminded of how much her light skin and long blonde hair stand out here, and she’s angered by her own carelessness. How could this shopkeeper not notice a tall blonde who appears to have only one working hand; who shops alone in the middle of the night; who speaks fluent Thai; who wears an oversized grey sweatshirt in Bangkok—as if it’s Bangor and the trees are changing color? She slides her wallet out of the back pocket of her jeans with her right hand and produces a stack of baht, fixing her expression into what she hopes is an unfriendly mask.

He knows, she thinks. He knows, he knows, he knows.

The cashier presses buttons, counts out change and deposits coins into Martine’s outstretched right hand. She closes her fingers around the change and thrusts it into the plastic bag of food on the counter, dropping the coins in among the items

inside. When she moves to snatch the bag and escape, he puts his hand on top of the plastic. “My name is Charoen Wattapanit,” he says, in English, then points to his nametag. “You can call me Charo.” The smile reappears.

“Nice to meet you,” she says in Thai, then turns and strides to the door, whose electronic chime accompanies her out into the night.

* * *

For weeks now, Martine has wondered how she ended up this way. One day her left hand held the bar on the Skytrain, steadied her camera, and formed the asdf to her right’s jkl;. Now, her wrist has grown a ring of blond hair, and out of that comes the hoof, gray and waxy. A miniature-pony-sized hoof at the end of her otherwise normal, human arm. She fights its weight. She tries, again and again, to wiggle her lost fingers, but she can only make the hoof bob up and down. The effort shames her.

Bangkok is a throbbing, sweating place. The humidity slows time, or at least Martine used to think that, when she first left the States for Thailand seven years ago. So many expats, and the city feels like an overheated version of home—a moister, less obvious New York.

The foreigners abbreviate; the world is all airport codes and Internet speak. Bangkok is BKK; Kuala Lumpur is KLM. They send text messages and buy sleek cell phones. They start Internet companies that make Martine think of a magician she used to see on the street corner as a child, waving his hands through the air to demonstrate how invisible the rabbit had become. At parties the foreigners tell each other that Asia is now, that America and Europe are so over.

It turns out time slips by just the same in BKK as it does in NYC. Martine wonders how it is that a summer trip turned into a seven-year stay, how seven years can yield only transient relationships that flicker and disappear, screens that go dark.

How she can live in a place whose daily temperature is higher than her own. Yet she stays. She is, despite the emptiness, despite the air of superiority of the expats she meets, in awe of the orchids that manage to grow on the cement in the alley behind her apartment building. She's in the habit of strolling the food stalls that mushroom under freeway overpasses, and she joins the Thais who gather there on plastic stools for plates of spiced pork and vegetables that make her pale skin flush and her nose sweat. Mosquitoes dance around bare bulbs. When Martine returns to her apartment, her long hair reeks of chilies and lemongrass.

The hoof is growing. It's been a month, and it lengthens and curls, aching and pressing against the opening of the worn sleeve of Martine's sweatshirt. She runs through the options again and again, then rejects them all again and again. She could meet with a doctor. A vet? She's thought of moving to a hill-country village. She could live more cheaply and in relative isolation, but her foreignness would attract even more attention there. Flying back to New York has its appeal—she feels somehow that she could hide the hoof more easily in that city's brashness. But then she pictures the security scanner at the airport, imagines the agents pointing out the oddity at the end of her human bones. Late at night, amputation begins to sound alluring.

Instead she has been searching the sprawl of Chatuchak Market every Saturday for the tools of a farrier. She has done research online and she knows what she's looking for. It's just a matter of finding someone to sell her what she needs. She can pay.

She calls in sick at the English-language magazine where she has been working as a photographer. After two weeks, when it's clear the hoof isn't going to retreat, she calls again and quits. She tells the magazine's editor she's going home to New York, that she's leaving Bangkok. It happens so often, with so many staff members, he does not sound surprised or concerned. She knows that another *farang* is waiting to take her place. She is expendable. All of the expats are: temporary, interchangeable, and expendable.

Martine fears revealing her hoof—the hoof (she cannot think of it as a part of her yet). She's terrified of what would happen if someone should catch a glimpse of it, so she stays holed up in her studio, grazing on snack food from Family Mart, and talking to the geckos that shriek on the ceiling. She shops in the middle of the night, after the last of the office workers have gone home and even the acrid odors of the temporary restaurants have dissipated. When Charo is on duty.

* * *

Two nights later she can tell Charo has been waiting for her. He waves when the door signals her entrance. She wants to turn around and slip back into the Bangkok night, but he waves again and calls out, "Hello!"

She wears the oversized sweatshirt, the sleeves tugged down—one over her right hand, and one over the place where her left hand used to be. She's conscious of the hoof always, even after several weeks of its log-like presence at the end of her arm. It looks out of place on her willowy frame, a blunt end to an otherwise graceful physique.

Martine raises her right hand in greeting, then lets it drop to her side. She leans down to pick up a basket and when she stands up, Charo is there, right in front of her. "Welcome back to Family Mart," he says. That smile again.

Martine grimaces. "Thank you." She jams her left arm into the kangaroo pouch on the front of her sweatshirt.

"Can I help you?" Charo points to the basket.

Martine wishes he would go away but doesn't know how to extricate herself without being rude. She hands him the basket and nods.

For a moment they stand in the fluorescent brightness near the doorway. Martine notices Charo is older than she first guessed. She'd assumed he was a teenager, perhaps a university student—Thai youth staffed convenience stores like this all over

Bangkok. But there's wisdom around Charo's eyes, and a few grays in his dark hair. His skin is tanned like a laborer's, odd for someone who works in the sunless night. Perhaps he works two jobs, Martine thinks.

"Please," Charo says, gesturing to Martine to go ahead of him down the first aisle.

She's embarrassed by his help, and she walks quickly, head down, past the bags of snack chips. She cannot remember what she wanted to buy.

"Excuse me, miss," Charo says in English. He bends down and produces a package of rice crackers. The same ones Martine has been buying on previous visits. She nods her consent, and he deposits them in the basket, looking pleased.

They continue in this way down the instant noodle aisle. Charo remembers all of her preferences. Martine cannot seem to speak. After they have gone through all of the packaged foods, Charo points to a refrigerated case. "Would you like some juice?" he asks. "Or iced coffee?"

He holds the sliding glass door open for her, and she selects some juices, milk, a few oranges, a Japanese yogurt brand she particularly likes.

They walk to the cash register together, and Charo leaps over the counter. He vaults like a gymnast, muscled and quick.

Charo puts Martine's food in a bag as he has on every other night. He holds out her change with two hands—Thai custom—and though it may seem rude to him, she accepts it with only her right hand, first the change, which she dumps into the bag, then the bills, which she stuffs into her back pocket. She no longer bothers with a wallet. Later she will empty the contents of the plastic bag on her bed and pick up each item, then the coins, one by one, and in this way, with this chore, some part of the night would pass more quickly.

"Well," she says, her hand on the bag. "Thank you for your help."

"It's my pleasure," Charo says. As he does so, he nods at her arm, the lump in the pouch on her front. She's almost been able

to forget about it in these few awkward minutes with a stranger in the middle of the night. Realizing that the stranger was aware of it always, she panics, snatches the bag from the counter, and spins toward the door. “Good night,” she says, not looking back.

As the door chimes in her wake, she hears Charo call out in English, “What is your name?”

* * *

Since the hoof appeared, Martine has considered each of the friends and acquaintances she’s made in Bangkok. Coworkers and former coworkers, Thais and farangs. Before the hoof she might have counted any number of them as confidantes, but now she can’t think of one she trusts enough to share her new extremity with. Her ex-boyfriend Mark? She’s remained close to the New Zealander—he teaches English at the university in Phra Nakhon—but she can’t bring herself to give him a call. She begins to see her time in Bangkok as out of time altogether. How is it possible to live somewhere for so long and yet have nothing—no one—to show for it?

Martine wonders whether the replacement of her hand was painful, whether she blacked out when her fingers turned to gelatin. She can’t remember anything that might explain the arrival of the hoof. One night she possessed a working collection of bones and joints and tissue, a life line and a love line, fingerprints, and half-moons for nails. The next morning all that identity had solidified into a horny lump.

She mourns the shape of her nails, her ragged cuticles, those whorls of prints. She cannot stop the dreams in which her left hand returns, full of motion and dexterity. She types; she grips a plate of *gai pad khing* while her right hand holds a spoon; she’s driving a car, hands on the wheel at ten and two, just like they tell you to; she’s taking photos, her left hand steadying the camera and adjusting the lens while she controls the shutter with her right. The worst dreams are the ones in which someone—she

can't make out his face—joins her in a double bed, and she slides two electric hands over his skin.

* * *

It is Saturday again, and Martine weaves through Chatuchak Market's cramped stalls, past antique Buddha statues, bootlegged DVDs, bright bolts of silk. She nudges past tourists ogling puppies sluggish from the heat. The hoof is now too long for her sleeve to conceal, so that she has to keep her left arm safely tucked into the kangaroo pocket on the front of the sweatshirt, a tube sock pulled over the end, just in case. Just when she believes she's covered all thirty-five acres of stalls, she discovers another alley that leads to more. The heat on the corrugated roofs is unbearable, but she presses through the crowds, sweating, skin flushed.

The weeks of solitude make the normalcy of life around her seem untouchable and faraway, as if behind glass. Her pale eyes dart about and her hair is unbrushed. The hoof's constant growth and heavy pulseless weight at the end of her arm are creating a kind of claustrophobia in her. She has tried working at the hoof wall with scissors but it resists, and the scissors leave odd markings, like graffiti carved into the trunk of a tree.

She has been avoiding Family Mart, and the aromas from the food stalls make her feel weak. Even the Thai snacks she dislikes—quail eggs, fried fish cakes, silkworm larvae—look appetizing. She knows she is losing weight and the force of her hunger pulls her to a satay seller's cart. Martine feels a surge of confidence that she'll be able to eat the meat from the skewer there in the bustle of the market with just one hand. She offers her money to the man and for an awkward moment the seller waits for her to take the skewer, but Martine cannot until the money is removed from her outstretched right hand. Finally, the seller, scowling, lays the skewer on a napkin, then takes her money. Satay secured, Martine sits on a plastic chair in the shade. She is

dying to take off the sweatshirt. She wears a miniskirt and flip-flops to compensate for the bulk on her upper body, but still she's overheated. Her bare feet are black with grime. The meat tastes good, and she remembers the freshness of the food stalls in her neighborhood, misses the old ladies who stir-fry more chilies into her *gai pad kaprow* because she is "colorless" and add more rice to her plate because they think she is too thin.

At first Martine thinks she is imagining him. I've been alone for too long, she thinks, look at me, now I'm dreaming of the convenience store cashier. But as she sets the half-eaten skewer of pork on her bare thigh and wipes her mouth with a napkin, she is sure of it; Charoen Wattanapanit sits at a nearby table with an older man. They lean toward each other, speaking in low tones and taking long, serious drags on cigarettes. Brows furrowed, teeth bared. The older man's hair has receded and is gray over his ears. He is sun-creased and thin, his bony feet exposed in the cheap plastic flip-flops Thais often wear. Like Charo, he is dark-skinned, like a laborer. The older man stands so abruptly the stool he was sitting on tumbles to the ground behind him. He stubs out his cigarette on the table and barks something at Charo, then turns and marches past a teenage girl selling grilled octopus from a hibachi cart. The smoke swirls in his wake for a moment and then Martine blinks and the man has vanished into the market.

Martine concentrates on the skewer again, eyes down, hoping to avoid a potential meeting with the convenience store cashier and his curiosity. When she tears at the meat, juices from the pork run down the crease in her palm to her wrist, and she licks at the heel of her hand. On the other side of the eating area she sees Charo rise, toss his butt to the dust underfoot, and follow in the direction of the older man. Almost as if there was a timing to it, Martine thinks, as she returns her gaze to the skewer, as if he meant to give the old man a head start.

* * *

Martine pauses for a moment by the food sellers' carts, then chooses an opening in the stalls to resume her search. She shimmies past tourists haggling over baseball caps and knock-off jeans, past Thai housewives buying spices whose colors make her think of dried grass and fall leaves. With each step the goods seem to rise higher, closer to the roof. Sneakers tangle around a pole, wool blankets dangle from rafters. The pathways between vendors narrow. Bolts of fabric are packed into shelves that rise to the corrugated plastic roofing in walls of color. Martine scans tables strewn with lacquerware and hammers, kitchen knives and rolls of tape. Glass jars of saffron threads look like bottled flames.

The crowds begin to thin, and the smells of curry and roast pork give way to those of fish guts and the tang of salt water. Martine steps over a bucket of writhing eels. The fishy odor is heavy and she cups her free hand over her nose and mouth. She sidles around tubs of snails and sea cucumbers and anchovies, tries to avoid puddles and hoses. In the heat, the remaining fish barely move. The fresh catch goes early, before the animals begin to suffocate in their makeshift tanks. Some of the stalls are dark—the day's catch long since sold—and the vacant space in the normally crowded market makes Martine feel uneasy. She's alone, save for a few men in waders smoking and spraying down buckets and pallets. One flashes stained teeth at her and she catches the word *farang* in his banter with the others. The word "foreigner" suddenly contains a hint of menace. She walks faster.

At the end of the aisle, an open courtyard. In contrast to the empty seafood vendors' stalls, it's loud and bright. A throng of Thai men are gathered around a cement pit, yelling and jeering. The sun is unrelenting. It's a common area of sorts, with aisles of the market radiating out from this hot center. Martine can hear the desperate squawking of birds and her arm throbs in its pouch, straining for release. She pushes her way into the crowd. Because she is foreign and the only woman, the men give her space; because they are entranced by the cockfight, they do not

hold their stares for long. Those at the edge of the pit yell the loudest, clutch their tickets. The gamecocks squeal. The birds are huge, standing up to Martine's knees perhaps, and they wear spurs taped to their legs like thorns. They've become feathered fiends, claws extended, on the attack.

A shirtless man touches her arm and shakes his head. When he opens his mouth to speak, Martine smells betel and sees the places where his teeth used to be. "You shouldn't be here," the man says. "Women are bad luck." The squawks of the birds grow louder. Martine backs away from the old man's breath and superstitions. When she looks into the ring again, one of the roosters bleeds from a wound on his breast. There's a glinting on the other side of the pit, where the men are jeering and shaking their fists, and Martine sees the curved blade of a knife hanging from a belt. She fights panic. It's the heat and their exposed chests and stained teeth, the peaceful reduced to the primal. The hoof. Martine knows she should leave, get herself into a more touristed area of the market, that this is the kind of intuition guidebooks say to heed.

But in the sun and the press of bodies and the smell of birds and blood, she is unable to look away. The crowd roars with every shriek and flap of feathers. The men spit betel and push closer and closer to the pit. The winning cock hovers above the ground for a moment before lunging at his opponent a last time. Its wings spread in a flash of vermillion and gold. Then there's a piercing squeal and a spray of blood. Martine closes her eyes.

That's when she hears his pleading cries on the other side of the pit; knows she's been hearing them all the while. She turns to the sound: Two men hold Charoen Wattanapanit's arms behind his back, and he is straining to get free. "Let him go! Let him go!" he yells. Two others have pinned the older man against a cement wall, and they are hitting him, punching him. There's blood around his mouth and he sags under the hands that hold him up.

Martine pushes through the heat and the smell of too-close bodies. The spectators, distracted by their sport, or wise

enough not to get involved, do not meet her eyes as they let her through.

“I’ll pay you!” Charo shouts, and still the thugs are on the old man.

Martine is aware that this is not the way, that a one-handed, one-hoofed farang is an oddity, not a savior, but she’s not going to stop; she has nothing to lose. Her right hand is a fist, and for the first time since she ate she realizes the satay skewer is still in it, has somehow become a part of her hand, like a weapon.

When he sees her, Charo stops struggling, and his sudden lack of resistance causes the men to look in her direction. They are thick bulging men, the kind Martine sees driving BMWs rather than tiny Korean cars or sputtering mopeds. She’s always felt vaguely nervous about passing these types on the street, and now she knows why.

“Let them go,” Martine says in Thai, her voice even and faraway. Her heart hammers. She feels it has risen to the base of her neck. Wonders if being a red-faced blonde will be enough of a distraction.

“Who’s this, your girlfriend?” one of the men says to Charo with a creepy smile that reveals gold teeth and pointed incisors. He’s the leader, Martine understands, and the others his entourage. He nods, and his bodyguards stop punching the old man and push Charo free. Charo says nothing, does not intimate that he has any idea who she is.

One of them points to Martine’s fist. “What’s she going to do, attack us with her toothpick?” More laughter.

Charo looks at Martine, and then, perhaps ashamed, at the ground. His face reveals nothing, but his shoulders slump and he relaxes his fists. The old man crouches against the wall, sweating in the sun, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling.

Martine considers pulling the sock-covered hoof from its pouch, and slamming it into the side of the gold-toothed man’s head. Instead she drops the skewer and turns to the old man. Leans down to speak to him. “Come on,” she says, “I’ll help you get out of the sun.”

His eyes fly open, alarmed perhaps, but he says nothing and allows her to lean down awkwardly so that she can put her good arm under his and pull him to his feet. She's conscious of the four men laughing still, the leader calling over his shoulder to Charo, "We'll come back for you, bird shit."

The cock fighting has resumed and the clamor around the ring grows louder again. The old man limps and mutters as Martine helps him into the shade under the market roof. She settles him onto a wooden palette in one of the darkened stalls.

"Papa," Charo begins when he joins them. He looks as though he wants to say more but closes his mouth and stares at the ground. There are angry marks on his arms where the men held him. Martine cannot believe this is the same man who beams at her in Family Mart, who exudes cheer and vaults over counters. He looks defeated and broken.

"You owe them money?" Martine says, forgetting to swallow her American directness.

His face transforms when he smiles, and whatever tension he carried seems to rise, untethered, into the city's haze. It's a smile of embarrassment though, not graciousness. "My father—" he says, and gestures to the older man, who is looking better already, as if a beating by local thugs is a normal part of his day. He's craning to see the action in the ring. "Gambling debts."

"I'm sorry," Martine says, though she is not sure what it is she is sorry for, or even if she is disappointed.

Charo's father struggles to his feet. "This is going to be a good match," he says, pointing to the ring. "Old Mongkut's fighting a winner."

"Papa, we need to leave now. You know they'll be back."

"Bah! I can put a dent in the account with this one," Charo's father says, waving a hand at his son as if to brush aside his concerns. He gives a nod to Martine, and limps over to the crowd.

Charo shakes his head. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes that Martine had seen as evidence of his unassailable cheer now seemed etched from obligation and disappointment.

“You work at night to pay your father’s debts,” she says.

“And you, why are you awake in the middle of the night?”

Martine scans his face. She jams her left arm into the pouch as far as it can go. She feels sweat rolling through her hair, tastes it on her upper lip.

“Let me see your hand,” Charo says.

The men roar—something has happened in the cockfight. “Hurry,” he says. “They’ll be done soon.”

Martine scans the crowd, and realizes Charo is right—no one will notice her here. The stakes are too high.

She stares at Charo, her blue eyes hard, and the events of the previous weeks flicker in her thoughts—awakening with this unfamiliar appendage, and then retreating from everything. She takes in Charo’s angular cheekbones, his kind eyes, the thickness of his hair.

Martine drags her right sleeve across her mouth. She’s shaking.

Then she pulls her left arm out of the pouch and peels back the sock.

Charo’s face registers nothing, but he gestures to her to cover up. She slides the sock back over the hoof and jams her arm into her pouch.

“You will come to Family Mart tonight?” Charo says, as much a demand as a question, and she nods.

The men by the ring spit, laugh, and exchange money. The winning bird shrieks as he is returned to a wicker cage. A bare-chested man grips the loser by its yellow legs. The bird’s neck sliced, blood dripping to the hardened ground below.

As she turns to leave, Charo calls out. *Khaap kun krap*. Thank you.

* * *

Back in her apartment that night, Martine undresses, wrestling with the sweatshirt to extricate herself from it with

only one hand. In the shower she squirts shampoo on the top of her head, then massages it in with her right hand. For the first time she takes care to lather the hoof. She scrubs it with a brush she uses to clean the tile and feels pleased when the hoof wall squeaks under her fingertips.

After toweling off, she dons a pair of shorts, then reaches for a tank top to wear under the sweatshirt. The sweatshirt lies in a heap on the bathroom tile and when she retrieves it she smells the day—the many days she’s worn it. It reeks of grilled meat and tamarind, sweat and exhaust. She looks at it for a moment, then flings it into the corner by the shower nozzle. Impatience and rage spread from the hoof through her body and the nozzle is in her hand and set to “jet.” She aims for the gray lump of cotton terry. It shrivels, hit, and a darkness spreads outward.

Outside, the humidity lingers still, and there is the smell of garbage in the street. Family Mart’s lime-green-and-blue sign blares into the darkness. A stray dog lies near the door. Already Martine can smell the sausages, fish cakes, and shrimp burgers that broil under the heat lamps by the register. She jogs toward the store, her flip-flops smacking the asphalt.

The dog watches, ears alert, as Martine steps into the air-conditioning. She halts just inside: the fluorescent brightness reminds her that she can no longer hide under the sweatshirt, that she’s traded it for a tank top. Her left hoof shines after its cleaning, though the wall is still long, cracked and curled. The smell of food gnaws at her, and she can’t help but make her way toward it and place her right hand on the glass of the case where the sausages are spinning and the shrimp burgers slide over hot rollers. Charo is emptying a box of cigarette cartons behind the counter, and he turns around, smiling, to let her know that he knows she’s there. When he sees her, he stops. Martine does not miss the quick flash of alarm at her exposed hoof, then the careful rearrangement of his features. He puts the carton of Krong Thips he’s holding back into the box on the floor. Martine raises her left hoof thinking that she might wave with it; instead she puts

the sole of the hoof to the palm of her right hand and bows in an attempt at the traditional Thai greeting. Charo puts his palms together and bows back. The *wai* is more graceful with hands than hooves, Martine thinks, and at the grief she feels at not being able to put her hands together, such a simple gesture—she begins to cry.

They sit on the floor in aisle two, among the rows of snack chips. Charo brings her the shrimp burger she was coveting. It's wrapped in foil, and he kneels down next to her and peels back the wrapping, then holds it to her lips.

Still her tears come, but the food is irresistible. She does not object when Charo pulls a bottle of green tea from the case, twists the top and holds it up for her to drink. Thai pop music plays over the loudspeakers and Martine lets the lyrics run together and disappear as she swallows.

When she's finished the sandwich, Charo wipes her mouth with a napkin, then dabs away leftover tears from the corners of her eyes. He picks out a brush from the beauty aisle and carefully removes the tangles from her hair.

"Just a moment," Charo says, then disappears into the back of the store. Martine hears the clang of metal on metal. When he returns he has a small, frayed duffel bag slung over one arm. "I brought some tools to take care of your hoof," he says, as he unzips the bag and pulls out a pair of nippers, a hammer and chisel, and a rasp and lines them up on the floor. Martine has been scouring Chattuchak for tools she might have found at any good hardware store and she understands suddenly that her crisis was not the tools she could not find but rather the lack of a partner to wield them.

"Can you help me?" she whispers.

Charo drops to his knees in front of Martine and puts out his hand.

She begins to shake all over. The fact that she can't control her body mortifies her, and she looks down at her pale knees. Charo lifts her hoof gently into the palm of his hand. Then

he traces the thin wisps of hair where flesh meets gelatin. He turns her arm over and examines the bottom of her hoof, the soft tissue that forms a V down the center, the almost imperceptible white ring that hugs the outer wall. He runs his fingers down the front of the wall to the point where it curves longer and splits.

Martine closes her eyes. It's been a long time since she's been this close to another human being. Charo's face is too near; she feels dizzy and tries to take a deep breath. As if he senses her discomfort, he stands quickly and heads toward the brightness of the drink cases. Martine feels the absence of his touch on her arm, right at the place where touch dissolved into the unfeeling wall of the hoof.

Charo returns with a can of iced coffee, which he pops open and gulps quickly. Martine tries to remember why everyone she's known in Bangkok seemed so distant, so unknowable. Charoen Wattanapanit is here, she thinks. His presence reminds Martine of some life she knew before Thailand. She feels comfortable with him—a sense that he will not, like others she's known in this country, disappear. She reaches for something to say about the men in the market that afternoon, how she understands his troubles, but she cannot risk shaming him. She settles for an offering of sorts: "My name is Martine."

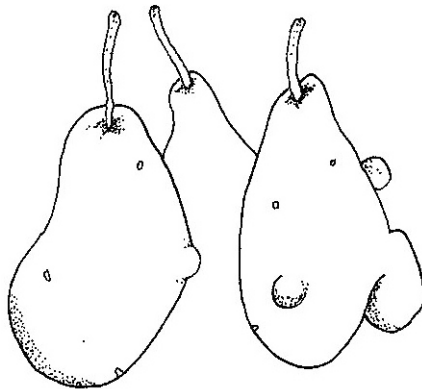
"Martine," Charo says, and he kneels, sets his empty can on the floor by the rasp, and puts both hands on her shoulders. "Those men, they come here sometimes, to Family Mart."

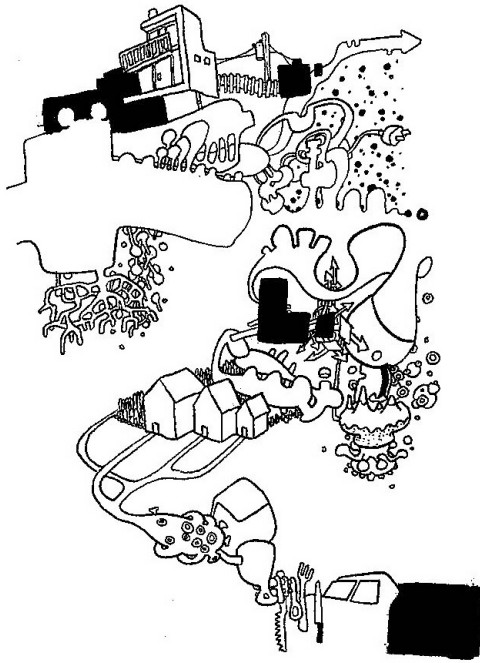
She searches his face, the gentleness around his eyes, and she can't tell if he's worried for her or if he's asking for help, for money. It doesn't matter. She's flooded with relief at being invited into a predicament that has nothing to do with being a farang with a hoof. She shrugs in the way that Thais often do, as if to say there's nothing to be done.

Charo sits back and drops his arms to his sides, looking relaxed for the first time since the door chimes signaled her arrival. They both look to the tools on the floor.

“Do you know how to trim it?” Martine asks. Images fly through her head: The ruthlessness of the thugs in the market, their punches, the red-hot metal of horseshoes being forged and nails that pound them into place, blood. She is in this now, too.

“Don’t worry,” Charo says, picking up her hoof. He lays the sole flat against his upper leg. He pinches the nippers to mark the place where he would cut away the hoof’s growth, then he presses the handles together. Snip. Charo glances at Martine to make sure he isn’t causing any pain. After he trims the excess growth away, he files the rough edge of the wall with the rasp. Soon waxy shavings appear on his jeans, but he keeps filing, moving the rasp around the half circle of hoof with care. Martine can see the hoof growing shorter and more rounded. She feels as if she’s getting a haircut; she’s surprised by her anticipation of how the hoof will look when Charo is finished. He draws the rasp across the now-rounded edge of the hoof wall a final time, then sets the instrument on the floor. Then he picks up the hoof and holds it in both hands, as if considering its weight. The sight of them, neatly folded around her newly trimmed hoof, makes Martine’s breath catch in her throat.





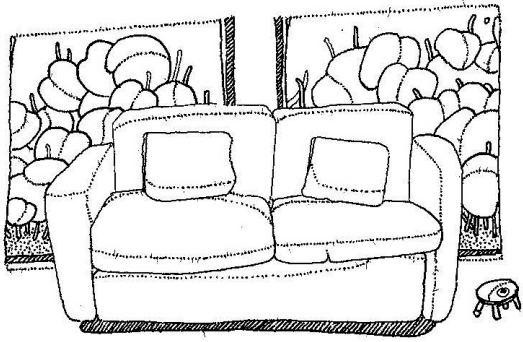
GOOD STOCK

Tomaž Šalamun

Translated from the Slovenian

by Michael Thomas Taren and the author

I transformed lakes into a fish beak
and built them fences, high fences.
Round handles in the elevator, by my throat.
The sky scrapes itself and washes itself.
Baba shuts his eyes.
Baba grows thirty arms.
There are grey millstones on each of his arms.
Baba will redeem us.
His legs are eaten by Muddy Vale.
He gurgles ash mud and boils,
he whistles and soothes like Giorgio's
dark green Mercedes.
Which was in fact owned by The Hospital
not by my father.
Giorgio looked like my uncle Bojan,
and every one falls from the sky,
every one, even if he totally conceals it.
All these green Mercedes ended on
airstrips like grasshoppers.
Ronche Airport didn't yet exist,
we couldn't use hands for anything.
All that we have put on the grill,
we cooled in the sea.
But the best field glass was owned
by the dentist Lukez, who gaped
exactly at the spot in the sea
where I later saved Braco from the shark.
He was ash pale.



SEVEN STORIES

Jedediah Berry

Leave of Absence

Reports were coming in from across the border. The old grammar was compromised, and the river had failed to report for weeks. E and I were sent to investigate.

In the scrapyard at the edge of town, a salesman distracted us with trays of copper fittings. I kept moving, and radioed for E to find me. I signaled again and again, but she must have switched off my channel. I was on my own.

Worse news: the river was frozen. In the ice I saw empty dresses floating. I stepped carefully, cataloguing the dresses according to cut, color, and pattern. Men in work clothes brought heat lamps from the forest, installed them on the dykes, and aimed them at the ice. Interrogators! I strapped on my galoshes and followed them back to their hideout.

In a clearing, I found E sitting on a worn blanket with a pile of old magazines. She showed me an article about the two of us, a hike we'd taken across the glaciers of Iceland. The article was dated from over a year before, but I remembered none of it.

"You've been gone all this time," she said.

Countermeasures

The window washers had been spying on us all morning. They stood on their suspended scaffold, faces pressed to the glass, hands cupped over their foreheads. At lunchtime, they ate sandwiches and carrot sticks, then spied on us some more. Later, as though remembering their cover, they washed windows. It was late, and we knew they'd never finish in time, so S and I went out to help.

“Pulley system’s on the fritz,” the bald one explained.

“And there’s only enough solvent to finish the east side,” said the one that looked like my uncle.

Solvent? Sure enough, when they swept their squeegees over the glass, the glass wasn’t getting clean. It was getting vaporized. One strong wind, and all our secrets would blow from our offices.

S had his knife out. I wrapped my arms around the scaffolding, then gave him the signal. He cut the ropes with one broad stroke.

We fell fast. Down past the offices of our underlings, down into the shadows of the surrounding buildings. S screamed and laughed. “Just like Berlin!” he shouted, but I couldn’t recall anything like this from Berlin.

The window washers tried to get ahold of their tools. The bald one sent the bucket of solvent flying, and it spilled over the one that looked like my uncle. He vanished in a puff of steam.

S stopped laughing. This was getting dicey, and we needed a way out. I grabbed some loose ropes. My plan was to create a cat’s-cradle brake.

My hands remembered the old forms: Ovenrack, Nurse’s Anguish, Owl Claw, Broken Horse. When I let go, it looked like the sun was caught in a net. I knew I would have to file a report on this one.

The Partisans

A forest of tall pines. Pale brown needles crunched under our boots. We passed centuries-old farms and churches, small family cemeteries. None of this was on the maps. We’d been told to expect a reservoir, a rutted dirt track, a pump-station safe house. Instead we were deep in enemy territory, and the sun was going down.

S leaned back and howled, wolf-man style. He was losing it. I grabbed him by his lapels and pushed him against a tree, harder than I'd meant to.

"This is just what they want," G said. "Gentlemen, we have to keep our hearts bound up in razor wire."

We camped that night in a grotto, near a double waterfall. Mattresses were strewn alongside the water, but we knew better than to use them. Downstream, some French teenagers passed around a bottle of liquor. They cavorted around their campfire, singing "Frère Jacques," repeating the first two lines over and over, because they couldn't remember what came after *dormez-vous*.

One of them approached us. He was tall, and he looked like he'd seen some things. "Your fire, it doesn't seem so hot," he said. "You will come and sit with us?"

The French girls smiled at one another, then gazed into their own fire, hugging their knees through flowered skirts.

We joined them. G took a deck of cards from his satchel and began to teach the girls Pinochle. S roasted fish on the sharpened sticks he speared them with.

The leader took me aside. Quietly, he said, "You are the Hounds of Gibraltar, no?"

So that was how we were known in those parts. I said nothing. He pulled two cigarettes from his shirt pocket, stuck both in his mouth, and lit them. He handed me one. I didn't smoke, but I wasn't about to let some French kid show me up, so I puffed away.

"We intercepted a pulley train this morning," he said. "Some real old-guard shit. We were outnumbered, but we knew the trees." He shrugged. "We did what we had to do, you know?"

I looked around the campsite and saw, for the first time, the corpses piled up at the edge of the firelight. There were so many of them, still in their fatigues and helmets, their guts spilled over the ground. These kids were butchers!

I went back to the fire and put my hand on G's shoulder. He'd just dealt the cards for another round.

"Last game," I said, praying that he wouldn't see the bodies and freak. "We move at midnight."

The girls smiled at me. One of them swept a strand of hair behind her ear. I recognized her: she was my sister. One sad look from her, and I understood what had happened. That she'd taken that acting job in Vichy, then fallen in with this crew. That she'd had to play along to survive, just as we were doing now. Just as we'd have to keep doing—but for how long?

I went to S. His fish was burned to a crisp, and the spear was starting to catch. His other hand was on the butt of his pistol.

"Up there," he said. "Do you see them?"

Along the ridge, a dozen shapes moved. At first I thought the trees themselves were marching, but those were just the legs of the animals. Like deer, but almost as tall as the trees. They dipped their heads to keep their antlers from getting caught in the high branches.

The leader of the French teenagers was beside me. He leaned close, and I could smell the liquor and tobacco on his breath. "Ghosts," he said to me. "Only ghosts."

Secret Meeting

The train moves slowly through a scrapyards. In the dining car, E and I play a round of Scrabble. Old dogs eye us from the heaps.

I get a call from Central. It's G. He says we're late to the target. He says, "Skip breakfast and head for the roof." There's something strange about his voice. I mouth to E that we might have to abandon our game.

"Scrabble?" G says. He must have heard the clacking of the tiles. "Scrabble is for amateurs."

He hangs up, and now I know the truth. *Amateurs* is code for an agent in distress. He'd been forced to make the call.

"Act like we don't know Tuesday from a fire truck," E says, and I'm grateful that we're on this assignment together. She plays *bluebell* across the top of the board.

The train is speeding up, but the scrapyards stretch on and on. E draws new tiles from the sack. No letters on them, only symbols. I glimpse a scarab, a spade, and a steam shovel. Then the train's brakes squeal and the tiles go flying.

I take her arm. "We have to move."

We find an access hatch and go topside. From here, we can see that the scrapyards are actually a city under construction. On a hill at its center is an observatory.

The train engine, a hundred yards up the track, glows bright red. It'll burst any minute now.

"There," E says, and points to the zip line attached to a utility pole. Previous infiltrators must have left it for us. Did they make it out again? No time to worry—we leap from the train and glide down into the city.

The citizens are wearing overalls. We loosen our ties and muddy up our pants, trying to blend in. A man in a denim cap nods to us from an alley. "They're waiting for you," he says.

At the other end of the alley, my father and the agent known as the Dandy are seated at a picnic table. My father's hands are tied behind his back, and there's a handkerchief covering his eyes. A lit cigarette dangles from his lips. My father doesn't smoke!

The Dandy smiles and gestures for us to sit. He shows us the spread of cheeses. There's also honey, nuts, bread, and wine. We eat. We know the rules: not a word spoken until all the food is gone.

E removes the cigarette from my father's mouth, gives him almonds dipped in honey, then replaces the cigarette when he's done chewing. I want to introduce them, but it'll have to wait.

Finally the Dandy opens his mouth to speak, but his words are drowned out by the noise of explosions from the tracks. The train engine goes first, then the cars behind it, one after another, each a brisk pop.

I'm clutching something in my hand: the bag of tiles from our Scrabble match. There are still a few tiles left. I spread them out on the serving platter, but they don't spell anything.

Crossing

G mixes parts from a dozen different board games. Dice, tokens, cards, pegs, and small wooden swords swirl in the box top. *Circusing*, he calls it. A kind of divination.

It starts to rain, so we order takeout. When the deliveryman arrives, he gives me something to sign. I remember at the last moment not to use my real name, and add a few extra syllables.

Instead of a receipt, the deliveryman hands me a note. He has light brown eyes and a somber mouth, and I can tell that his mind is sharp. He goes back into the rain. Light from an upstairs window has stamped a golden rectangle on the lawn.

G is beside me. I hide the note in my pocket.

"We need to pack the rappelling gear," G says. "Orders from up top."

Later, at the edge of the ravine, I read the deliveryman's note by the light of the moon. G is halfway to the ravine bottom. The taut rope quivers and groans as he descends. I crouch beside it and draw my knife.

The Gatekeepers

I was guarding the old signal tower. My sleeping bag would have kept me warm—it was rated for most any

temperature—but sleep wasn't an option. I'd seen movement along the ridge. Paratroopers, maybe.

I walked the perimeter. The slopes looked clear. Then, by the light of the moon, I saw them: three figures in black fatigues, moving from tree to tree, silent and swift.

My weapon was sound based, straight out of R&D. I aimed the tube at one of the figures and whispered into the mic, "Quick, get down."

The agent heard my voice as though it were a friendly transmission. He dropped to the ground, and his teammates followed suit. They lay completely still, waiting for new orders.

I went to check the opposite slope. A man with a golden sun mask stood on the ledge, gazing down into the valley. The spirit of the signal tower! No one had seen him before.

"How long till dawn?" I asked the spirit.

He pointed at a boat on the river. It gleamed silver, and left a silver wake.

"One of ours?" I asked.

The spirit shook his head. Under the mask, I thought I saw my father's eyes.

"I'll get the lights going," I said.

The generator was at the base of the tower. I turned the crank. For a mile around, blue globes lit up in the trees. On a nearby limb, an owl opened its enormous eyes and looked at me. The owl, too, wore a mask.

Out

I wanted out. Not *out* out, but out for a little while, out there, where the radios broadcast nothing but call-in requests and ads for dry-cleaning services. Where a mole is just a blind animal in the dirt, and an operation is something you get from a doctor.

"Out?" said K. She'd brought her baby to work, and she was distracted. "Fine," she said, "but when you get back, I want

you fit, and bright eyed, and ready to master the universe.” She stamped some papers, pressed a button, and the floor opened beneath me. I landed in a convertible. The radio was on, and David Byrne was singing about a beautiful highway.

I was on a beautiful highway, headed west. Or maybe northwest: I’d left my compass in my work bag. I could see mountains wearing hats of snow. I was out, out!

My license had expired two weeks before, but the soldiers at the chokepoint saw the look in my eyes. I’d prepared the look just for them; it said, *I’m a man with nothing to lose, and my lawyer eats witnesses for breakfast.* They waved me through.

Freedom! Or something like it. Ice cream shacks, and drive-in movie theaters, and junkyards, and bridges over rivers clogged with gambling barges. I was on my way.

E was at the border, on her way back from a few weeks in the field. “I heard a rumor,” she said. “Assignment of your career, they’re saying.”

I didn’t have the heart to tell her the truth. We kissed in the field out back. Stalks of wheat tickled our elbows. “With you it’s like everything’s a clue,” I said.

“Keep the satellites in check,” she told me. “Your frequencies have been a jumble all season.”

I drove. In diners, in the company of cheery strangers, I ate cherry pie and slurped coffee from white mugs. Cash only, but for once I had the cash.

So long as you go west, E had told me, you can keep going west. There’s no end to it.

It was true. Sedona came and went. The redwoods shrank to the size of broccoli in the rearview. I thought about my grandparents. I thought about how my mom would turn sixty next year. I thought about E, about the smell of her, something between smoky tea and rich soil. Robert Johnson was singing about going down to the crossroad. I went down to the crossroad. Broken codes to my left, a game of marbles on the right. The future was in the rearview, and something like the end of the world was out front.

I drove until the skies turned red, then pulled off into a campground: ten bucks for a spot by the river. My tent was a barnacle at the edge of an alien sea. I bedded down for the winter and watched the waves leave messages on the shore. On the ninety-ninth day, the pay phone started ringing. Two days later, I answered it.

“We need you,” K told me, and then she said something about a hovercraft defector, and a code made of butterfly names, and a dog that showed up at Central with a forty-year-old mystery tucked under its collar.

“Keep talking,” I said. “I have you on speakerphone.”

The line went dead.

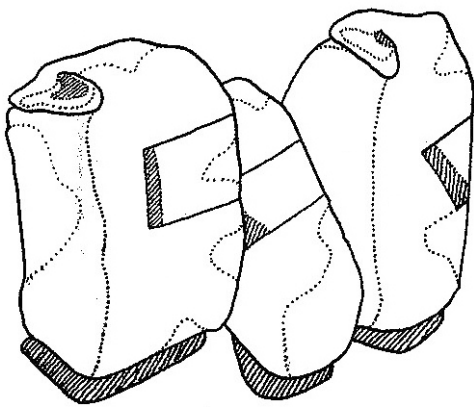
That was a lie, though. There’s no speakerphone option out here. It’s just me and the owls, and the vagabonds and strays, and the letters I write but never send.

“I want to reorganize our files,” reads one letter. “I think the enemy is onto our system.”

“Enemy?” I write in response. “It’s only us out here, all the way to the horizon.”

The fire crackles. In the morning, I receive deliveries of bread, paperbacks, and seed packets. I plant the seeds but the packets have no pictures on them, and I don’t know what’s going to come up, come spring.





THE BOY WHO WENT TO THE NORTHWIND
Traditional (Danish)

There was once an old woman who had an only son, and as she was very weak and old the boy went into the store-room to fetch the flour which she was to use for dinner. When he passed the staircase, however, the Northwind swept through the yard, carrying the flour away with him. The boy returned to the store-room for more, but the wind came again and swept it away, as before. When he came out the third time the wind again robbed him of his burden, carrying it away and spreading it over the fields and meadows. The boy now became very angry, and as he considered the treatment which he had suffered a shameful one, he decided to go to the Northwind and demand the article of which he had been robbed. He started on his voyage, but, as the distance was very great, it took him a long time to reach his destination. At length he arrived at the dwelling of the Northwind.

“How do you do?” said the boy, “and thanks for the last time we were together!” “How are you?” returned the Northwind—his utterance was thick—“and thanks to yourself! What do you wish?”

“Well,” answered the boy, “I wish you would be good enough to return the flour of which you robbed me when I was bringing it out of the store-room. We have very little, and when you proceed in this manner we must all starve.” “I have no flour,” replied the wind, “but since you are so poor I will give you a table-cloth which will produce all that you need as soon as you bid it thus: ‘Cloth, spread yourself, and bring the finest and best dishes!’”

Now the boy was well contented; but as the distance was too great to permit him to return in one day, he stepped into an inn at the roadside, and, when all the guests were ready for supper, he laid the cloth on a table in the corner of the room, and

said: "Cloth, spread yourself, and bring the finest and best dishes!" The words were hardly uttered before the cloth was covered with all that they could wish for, and everyone thought that this was an excellent treasure. This was especially the thought of the innkeeper's wife, and in the night, when all were asleep, she stole into the boy's room and laid in its place another and similar cloth, which was not capable, however, of producing even an old bread-crust.

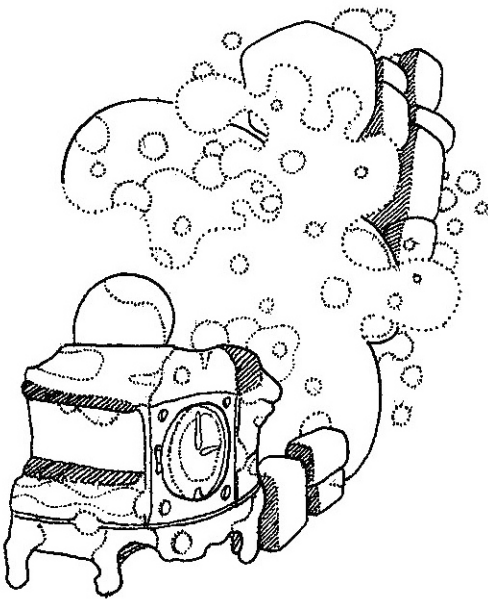
When the boy awoke he took his table-cloth and pursued his way. Later in the day he arrived home. "Well," he said, "I paid a visit to the Northwind. He was a very good-natured fellow, and he gave me this table-cloth, which will produce the finest and best dishes as soon as you place it on the table, saying: 'Cloth, spread yourself, and bring the finest and best dishes!'" "Maybe," answered his mother, "but I shall not believe it until I see it done." Her son hastily pulled a table into the middle of the room, laid the cloth on it, and repeated the formula, without the least effect, however.

"I shall be obliged to go back to the Northwind," said the boy. He started at once, and in due time reached the place where the wind dwelt. "Good-evening!" said he, entering the house. "Good-evening!" cried the Northwind. "I wish to be paid for the flour of which you robbed me," continued the boy. "The table-cloth which I received is good for nothing." "I have no flour," answered the Northwind, "and all that I can give you is the old cane which stands in yonder corner. But if you say to it, 'Cane, strike!' it will strike on until you call, 'Cane, stop!' This cane I can give you."

As the distance was rather long, the boy, on his return home, stopped at the same inn where he had been before. As he suspected the innkeeper, however, of having stolen his table-cloth, he stretched himself on a bench and appeared to fall asleep, snoring loudly. The innkeeper, in the mean time, thought that no doubt the boy's cane possessed some wonderful power, and therefore prepared himself to replace it with another which looked

exactly like it. As soon as he touched the cane, however, the boy shouted, "Cane, strike!" The cane at once began to dance upon the innkeeper's back, and with so good effect that he jumped over tables and chairs, crying: "Make it stop, make it stop, for heaven's sake! If you don't, it'll kill me! I will give you back your tablecloth!" When the boy thought the innkeeper had had enough, he said, "Cane, stop!" Seizing his cloth and thrusting it into his pocket, he walked away and returned home safe and sound.

The magic cloth proved to be good payment for the flour.



THE ELEPHANT TOKEN

Brian Conn

This is how two women came to the attention of those of us in the Elephant Token Room, and how we could not tell which was which. We could not tell which was the bow and which was the bowstring. Very little comes to our attention in the Elephant Token Room. It began when S. P. Murchison spoke unexpectedly to the Sleighmaker:

“She came today to mail a postcard—that woman whose hands you took such an interest in.”

These two men were playing a round of Candy Land, having been all morning on the other side of the island, at the hotels. The afternoon’s light filtered pink through the lace curtains of the Elephant Token Room, and Mr. Gwynneth had begun his daily polishing of the bar with cider vinegar and soon would brew the tea—and the scents, I took the time to think, now of vinegar and soon of tea, complemented certain visible features of the room, for example the piebald surface of the ancient floorboards and the film of dust on the window looking out over the banana tree; and (I thought further) it was perhaps this relationship between scents and visible features that underlay the half-formed recollections of the room that I found in my thoughts when I was away; for I did find such recollections in my thoughts, but never could say precisely what it was I was struggling to recollect, precisely as though the object of my recollection was not a thing but a relationship between things, which we have difficulty in naming.

“Was it the sad-faced woman,” said the Sleighmaker, “or the cruel-faced woman?”

“On and on you go about the faces of these two women. You asked me about a woman with an injury to her hand and I am telling you that this woman mailed a postcard today and I have seen her.”

Then the Sleighmaker fell silent, and we all began to watch him. It is usual with us to mention a certain kind of event that sometimes occurs on the island, if we have seen it. And even if there has been no such event it is usual to answer speech with speech, not attentive speech but only a gentle murmured discourse, the same as we bring to the windows in the evening, when it rains. But now the Sleighmaker was silent, and we sensed that there was something unspoken and vexing between him and S. P. Murchison. In the Lollipop Woods the difference between these two men is only the difference between a blue gingerbread man and a green; but in life the Sleighmaker is a colossus of a man who has the role during hotel performances of throwing a wild pig, whereas Murchison had his growth stunted long ago by a chemical. We had time to think of these differences, as well as others. At last the game concluded, one of the men having won and the other lost; but it was only when the board and cards and gingerbread men of Candy Land had been stowed in the box, the box covered with the lid of a different box, the box and lid together stowed in the broken wardrobe, and the door of the wardrobe tied shut with frayed twine that the Sleighmaker began to speak.

He had been making rounds of a certain hotel at night, he said, in order to collect the shoes that the guests had left for polishing. The halls were deserted at that hour, for it is the habit of guests to sleep and rise early. The carpet and all the walls of this level of this hotel were of a color that once had been taupe but that had faded to a different color, less distinct than taupe; and under these circumstances it was easy to feel (the Sleighmaker added) that he had penetrated the remote and obscure locale, now abandoned, of the dreams of someone who had died. As he turned a corner of the hall, he heard the ice machine rattle in the alcove beyond, and then, in the silence, the scraping of ice on ice. When he arrived at the alcove he saw a woman with her back to him and her hands in the ice chamber, as though manipulating something there. Quiet steam drifted over her face, and there was

the scent of ice. When the Sleighmaker came near, she startled and leapt back.

“Excuse me,” the Sleighmaker might have begun to say, had it not been for the sight of her face. She was haggard, not in the way that all guests are haggard, but in the way that betokens illness, or violence—and her features were set not in surprise but in terror. “Is anything the matter?” he would have asked her then; but she fled into a nearby room, room 249.

In the ice machine the Sleighmaker discovered a penknife and a human figurine carved of ice. The face of this figurine had a familiar look, he said, but soon melted under the warmth of a drop of blood that happened to have fallen there. There were two more drops of blood elsewhere on the figurine, as well as a little blood on the rest of the ice and on the penknife.

As the Sleighmaker sterilized the ice machine, he knew that the guest in room 249 would bear watching. She was a woman of unusual habits. He paused in his cleaning to stretch his long arms from wall to wall and press out against them—a gesture of exaltation. He sensed that one of those peculiar series of events was beginning for which the island is best beloved by us who have made it our home, and which so often have their inception in a scene witnessed alone in the dark of island night between walls of a color less distinct than taupe; and he eagerly awaited the following afternoon, when he would report this beginning to those of us in the Elephant Token Room.

But when he looked at the hotel register to learn about the guest in room 249, he discovered that this room, which he had always known as a single room, was now a double, occupied not by one guest but by two. Two women. Then he felt that he could not present the story to us in the way he wanted, not until he could tell us which of these two women he had seen. The hotel had photocopies of the passports of both; “and the face of one is sad, and the face of the other cruel, but I cannot tell which is the face of the woman I saw. But all we need is to discover which of these women, both guests in room 249, has on her hand

a slight cut, such as might be made by a penknife and might draw some dozen drops of blood. Even the cripple”—he meant S. P. Murchison—“should be able to understand that.”

We listened to the latter part of this account with a certain carelessness. We were glad to hear of guests worth watching, but we did not know why it was so important to know the difference between these women. Surely if one would bear watching then they both would. Nevertheless, as the afternoon wore on, I too found myself wondering which of the two women it was who had on her hand a slight cut—she with the sad face or she with the cruel—and which had unblemished hands, white and new in my imagination, like ice.

The next day I saw these women myself, and began to understand the difficulties of the Sleighmaker. I had arrived at the Elephant Token Room earlier than the others, and had taken a seat on one or another of the creaking sofas, near one or another curtained window, to cast my eyes over a coverless magazine of the previous decade. Suddenly the light dimmed, as though an object had passed in front of the window. This happened only for an instant, so that in the next instant I doubted that it had happened at all; then the light returned, and I heard the tinkling of the bells that hung on the door of the general store below, and voices under the window.

The general store under the Elephant Token Room is of the kind that only island people frequent, being filled with canned goods that smell of the barge, and owned by a flat-nosed ageless woman who herself eats nothing but papaya. But the voices that now emerged from it and took up their discussion on the veranda were the strident voices of guests—the voices of women. They would be the two women of the Sleighmaker’s account, I knew; when we find guests associated with a shadow over the window, and at the same time guests involved in the carving of idols in the ice machine, then these are the same guests. I set my magazine aside, descended the narrow stairway that turned left and left

and left again to the vestibule, and stepped out into the light to behold them.

The Sleighmaker had called their faces sad and cruel, but he had seen only one, late at night, and subsequently had been misled by their photographs. Now I saw them in the light of the sun and knew that they were not a sad woman and a cruel woman, but a kind woman and a proud woman. And I had this thought: that I could understand how the Sleighmaker had made his mistake, for kindness is cruelty to the proud. That is as it came to me at the time, but now I cannot tell whether it is correct, and if it is correct I cannot tell whether it explains the Sleighmaker's mistake as I thought it did then. Moreover, in the time it took me to think it, I had lost track of which face was which; the two women were moving very swiftly to and fro, crossing and re-crossing the knotted planks of the veranda, and talking, talking without pause, both of them, loudly and simultaneously, and now one of them was raising an object aloft as though to strike the other, a cypress wreath—and as this wreath passed across the sky and in front of the morning sun, my eyes filled with light and I was struck by a weakness.

A dove plunged through the air in front of me, and after it, like a thunderbolt, an owl. I leaned on a barrel filled with palm fronds, thinking that I would fall. When I was able to look again the women were walking together up the road, back towards the hotels. They had left their wreath behind—one of those that had arrived unbidden on the barge during a long-ago holiday season, and since then had lain undisturbed atop a certain crate in the shop. It was blackened in spots, and smelled of smoke.

The dove fluttered around a jackfruit tree. It had not been caught, then. I did not see the owl.

It is a mistake, when we have witnessed prey in flight, to imagine that the prey feels the emotion that we would feel in its place. The experience of prey is different from our own. Mr. Gwynneth had taught me that, once during the evening, when the hurricane was due. But the weakness that had struck me at

the sight of the wreath passing before the sun was that peculiar weakness or panic that comes from a sudden apprehension of instability, as during the first moments of an earthquake; and it resembled so strongly the instant of apprehension that I imagined in the breast of the dove, the instant when it had sensed the hunter but not yet hurled itself into flight, that I made this mistake, and imagined my own weakness in the dove; and I even congratulated myself on having escaped.

I went into the shop, where I found Warda the aged shopwoman spraying cash with bleach. "That woman bled on the cash," she said. "She gave me bloodstained cash." That was the woman with the injury to her hand, the woman of the ice machine. I asked Warda to describe the face of the woman who had bled on the cash, whether it had been sad or proud or kind or cruel. She hesitated until I wondered if she would answer at all; then, "It must have been a careless face," she said, "for her to do a thing like bleed on the cash. Pained."

"Pained."

"Because she was bleeding."

Having thanked her, I went next door and mounted the staircase to the Elephant Token Room; and there, finding the narrow landing suffused with a melancholy green-glass light, I paused to put my thoughts in order. It would have been natural, now that the Sleighmaker had brought news of the two women to the Elephant Token Room, for me to add my own account. But my report would be even more equivocal than the Sleighmaker's: lights in my eyes, an owl and a dove. A weakness. There was a thought somewhere in all of it that could not be put in order. At the same time, the light now falling onto the landing seemed to gather itself in a cryptic pattern, luminous lines in the grooves in the false wood paneling, luminous points in the screws in the brown plastic protectors on the edges of the steps, like the mysterious lights deep in a sealed bottle; and when finally I ascended the last flight of stairs to the Elephant Token Room it was not the final ordering of my thoughts that moved me,

but rather the impulse, more immediate than thought, to move more deeply into a space which is both cryptically luminous and irrevocably sealed.

In the Elephant Token Room Mr. Gwynneth had come out from his lodgings and begun his polishing, and there was the smell of vinegar. I resumed my seat on the sofa but not my magazine. Before long S. P. Murchison entered and stood looking out the window, over the banana tree and towards the hotels; and from time to time he raised his finger, and shook it. But when I took out the box with the lid of a different box and began to set out a game of Candy Land, he came away from the window and sat with me.

“It is minute by minute for me,” he said. “The limit.”

I leaned forward. “Something has happened.”

“Nothing has happened,” he said at once. “Always you are thinking that something has happened. You are watching the guests, and if the guests are of the ordinary type then you are watching the mangroves and the quicksands.” He rummaged in the box for a gingerbread man, but left off immediately. “Certainly a man may have some small transaction by an accident,” he said, “and it does not mean anything has happened. He merely has had some small transaction, by an accident. It is easy to misunderstand in these cases.” And again he glanced out the window, an anxious glance, as though people would even now be seen hurtling from the roofs of the hotels towards the window of the Elephant Token Room, on ziplines, in order to misunderstand.

“It is the matter of these two women of the Sleighmaker,” he said. Then at last he took a gingerbread man, placed it on start, and related the following incident:

He had been told to go to room 249, he said, the room of the two women, to investigate reports of an unwanted clock. He found a double room in immaculate order, clothing neatly in the drawers and toothbrushes neatly by the sink; but one of the two beds had been stripped of its sheets and its blankets. These were nowhere to be seen. Moreover, as he had been told to expect,

the room contained two clocks instead of one. One clock read the correct time and the other read a time twelve minutes in the past. It was only the matter of the additional clock that S. P. Murchison had been called on to address, and not the matter of any clock's accuracy; therefore he removed to room 248 the clock that read the correct time, and concealed it in a drawer there, under a menu.

Then he ought to have been done; but he took another step. He fetched fresh bedclothes from the laundry and remade the bare bed. And when he had done with everything, he saw that the newly tucked pillows of the bed he had made lay distinctly lower than the pillows of the other bed; and, investigating, he discovered that this other bed, the bed he had not made, had two sets of pillows, piled one set atop the other and tucked together under the bedspread. He pulled aside the bedspread, and then, with a premonition, the sheets: underneath the neatly made bedclothes was none other than the second set of bedclothes, also neatly made. One bed had been made atop the other.

There was something grotesque in it, S. P. Murchison said, this making of one bed atop another, as though there were some guest, flat like a projection, who nevertheless required a bed, the bed beneath. "You see my difficulty. To take it apart would be to interfere with guests. But I had already taken it apart a little. It was mussed. So I carried away everything that I had brought. And then—I remade the bed. The one atop the other. But it was a bad feeling—a bad feeling. And now when the next person comes, somebody with towels or chocolates for the pillows, they will find this bed, and when they look at the lists of the day they will know that it was I who was there, and I who fetched bedclothes from the laundry; and they will think that I am a sorcerer. I will explain again and again but they will misunderstand. It is these women who are the sorcerers, and by an accident I did a little sorcery for them—but only what I had undone, by an accident. So in fact I did nothing.

"And in fact it was nothing anyway, this bed."

We had given very little attention to Candy Land. Outside, the light rain of the island had begun, washing away nothing in particular but rendering the room habitable. The people of the Elephant Token Room sat quietly here and there, having arrived while S. P. Murchison gave his account. Perhaps they had listened to him or perhaps they had listened to thoughts of their own.

“And moreover I know that the Sleighmaker will give me no peace,” S. P. Murchison went on, “but will ask me which woman’s bed had the two sets of bedclothes and which had none, and which woman’s bed was faced by the slow clock and which by the true clock. How do I know which woman’s bed is which? But he will ask me these things.”

Tea was served. With us this is brewed bitter and served white. In the rain I could feel the sea nearby—and the docks, where ropes would be wet, and wooden ships creaking in the gentle surf, with the crew below decks. It was the time for lying on one of the woolly rugs, where the traces of some intricate pattern had long ago faded to an ephemeral mottling, and for thinking of the fate of raindrops.

“I will help you if you like,” I said; and, when S. P. Murchison returned me a blank look, “We will bring the second clock back to room 249, where it was. Then you will say that you never went to that room—you fetched the bedclothes for a different room, and became busy, and did not have time. You will say that the list is wrong. I will come with you.”

It surprised me that I had offered to do this for S. P. Murchison. But after the wreath and the sun, the weakness of the dove, I too felt vulnerable, not to misunderstanding but to an obliquer attrition. And perhaps I thought that by helping S. P. Murchison in this way I might accomplish my own withdrawal from the affair of the two women. After all we most commonly act when we have mistaken ourselves for somebody else.

Soon S. P. Murchison and I were walking together down the mud road and across the market fragrant with island

foodstuffs, towards the district of the hotels. As we walked, the sun came out and the island dried—in an instant, as it does. But in the hotel the rugs remained damp, and in the elevator there were water droplets on the buttons, and a scent that I took for rain. The door closed behind us, sealing out the ordinary light and bathing us in a light of underwater green. The display offered the unchanging legend “OD.” The mechanisms of these elevators are of the kind that accelerate and decelerate so slowly that the passenger feels no movement at all. As we waited in the perfect but fictitious stillness for the doors to open on a scene different from that on which they had closed, I listened for the hum of a distant engine, the creak of the cable above us, or any other perceptible sign of a mechanical apparatus; and, hearing nothing, I had precisely the time necessary to generate but not evaluate the idea that we could not therefore be rising, but must be falling, albeit very slowly, as though through a viscous liquid.

The doors opened. The scent I had taken for rain was stronger here, but it was not rain: it was the scent of ice. The corridor appeared hazy, as though the air were filled with steam; there was the rattle of the ice machine, and the scrape of ice on ice. Both S. P. Murchison and I remained in the elevator. The objects of the hotel were visible through the doorway: the crooked rattan table, symmetrical and lustrous as though made of wax; atop it the orchids, fleshy like meat, and the magazines of wealth; the small pillbox alcove in the wall, in which was mounted without controls or explanation the white handset of a telephone—all of it obscure in the haze; and the walls, even under ordinary circumstances less distinct than taupe and now less distinct still. Without recalling what specifically we had come to do, I felt that we were too late. Whatever was going to happen here was already underway.

The hotel creaked around us. In these carpeted corridors, where footsteps are inaudible, this is the sign of someone approaching.

Perhaps in those of us who are long on the island the sense of danger becomes clouded. But as I saw S. P. Murchison groping for the button to close the doors, I experienced a moment of illumination: an expansion, a limp banner suddenly alive in the wind, the drawing of a bow: I apprehended the danger that we had put ourselves in, not its nature but the sensible fact of it, the danger. These sequences of events for which the island is beloved by us do not always end well for guests. And I had time to think the following: Mr. Gwynneth had been wrong. The dove does experience fear. The dove experiences fear at every moment, and it is we who do not; but we have forgotten that.

The doors had not yet begun to close. S. P. Murchison pressed the button a second time, and many other buttons as well. And at last, as the creaking of the hotel grew louder, as though the person who was approaching had rounded a corner and was now in the very corridor of the elevator—at last, then, they did begin to close, these doors.

And they closed in time. The elevator chimed.

“There is something the matter with that floor,” said S. P. Murchison. “Do not let it worry you much; maybe I will not dislike being known as a sorcerer.”

I did not know whether the elevator was moving up or down. S. P. Murchison had pressed both kinds of buttons. When the doors opened it was on the level of the indoor swimming pool. The indoor swimming pool itself was not visible from the elevator, but there was the scent of chlorine and coconut lotion, as well as a ubiquitous preservative hum, the sound heard within a refrigerator; and these are the signs of the indoor swimming pool. When we stepped out of the elevator we saw it, the indoor swimming pool itself; and there, by themselves beyond the twin glass doors and the concrete channel lined with imitation life preservers, were the two women.

One swam laps while the other sat on the concrete lip, dangling her feet. It was not possible to compare their faces. We would have to discover which one was swimming, I thought; and

if it was the one with the wound we would have to sterilize the indoor swimming pool.

The one sitting turned to look at us. Her eyes were red as though from weeping, and indeed she was weeping still.

“I will talk to them,” said S. P. Murchison. “Why not? Now I am a sorcerer.” And with a flourish of his body, as though he were wearing a cape, he swept into the area of the indoor swimming pool.

The weeping woman rose to meet him. I fled.

I soon found myself in a small conference room with four walls the color of cantaloupe flesh and no windows. A stack of steel chafing dishes, empty, stood atop a white tablecloth next to nine boxes half-filled with brochures for vitamins.

There was a coffee maker. I sat in a chair of some kind. My fear had gone, but already today there had been the episode of weakness on the veranda of the Elephant Token Room, and now that there had been a second episode, the episode of fear in the elevator, I thought it likely that there would be more episodes of this kind. I thought that it would become a chronic condition.

At the same time, a certain chafing dish in this conference room happened to stand in such a way that its corner reflected and also distorted the hue of the walls, so that between the flat cantaloupe light of the room and the burnished cantaloupe light reflected in the steel curve of the chafing dish there arose a relationship which happened to capture my attention; the room smelled of glue and encouraged me to recollect other rooms that had smelled of glue; and for a while a strong web of simple impressions held me in a state not unlike serenity.

Sooner than I would have liked, S. P. Murchison burst in. He wore a dazed expression. I too was dazed. He said, “They have asked me to take them to John the Eremiter. They have gone to room 249 to gather their walking things and we are to meet them in the lobby.” He looked around at the half-dressed conference room but seemed not to see. He passed his hand over his face. “The one believes herself haunted. The other also believes her haunted, but by something different.”

“Different,” I said.

S. P. Murchison only looked at me. His eyes had become yellow.

“What are the two different things they suppose are haunting her?” I said.

“How do I know? I am telling you this happened. They speak words and words and none of it amounts to what I might call anything. If we knew what they thought to be haunting her then perhaps we would come to an end of this. The one asked me is there a medical doctor in the hotel and I said there was, but the other began to scream and so I said there was not. And the other asked me was there a Roman Catholic priest, but the first began to weep and so I said there was not. Then I told them that I was a sorcerer and neither of them would stop, so I mentioned John the Eremite because of his solitude; and when they learned that he is neither a medical doctor nor a Roman Catholic priest nor a sorcerer they both demanded to be taken to him. I told them the condition of the road prevented it, but they did not understand.”

John the Eremite was an Australian who had come to the island some years earlier for the purpose of repossessing power boats, but had been bitten by an animal, it was never known what kind, and forced to remain a week or so in the infirmary. After that he never left. He lived in a kit-built geodesic semidome behind the water treatment facility. The road was impassible except on foot, and unfit for guests.

“If these women want John the Eremite, then I will fetch him,” I said. I felt that I owed this to S. P. Murchison. “You bring the women to the Elephant Token Room, and I will bring the eremite”—for he was not such an eremite as all that, but only as though preoccupied, and often could be persuaded to follow an expedition that was presented clearly to him—“and perhaps after all they will have something to say to each other.”

S. P. Murchison threw up his hands.

It was in this way that I had a walk by myself in the middle of the afternoon to the water treatment facility. The service road that leads to this facility is not a paved road, but a

mud track that had been used by bulldozers when the facility was built and then left. On either side rose greenery, which smelt of tar although no tar was visible. I kept with me still some quality of the cantaloupe room, which made me feel certain of myself, as though I were working towards some end.

In this state I remembered an event of the morning. I mention this event now because it was at this time that I recalled it and not before. What I remembered was a thing that I had seen in the dawn. I had been roaming the roads; I rise by nature earlier even than guests, and often roam but seldom think of it after, as though the silent and solitary events of dawn occupy a part of my life set off from the other parts. But now, perhaps because the solitude and silence of the service road were so like that of the dawn, the morning came back to me, and the thing I had seen then. It was a shooting star, brief and low, beginning in the east where the light of the horizon faded into lavender above, and extending suddenly downwards like a flaw in the sky, and then vanishing into the sliver of white sun that rose at that moment above the horizon. I had been on the road behind the telephone station, where the wilderness begins.

Such was the nature of my recollections on this road. And I remembered to feel grateful for this moment on the road during which it was given to me to think them, as well as to regret other days, when I had found no such moment, and some event of the dawn had perhaps escaped unremembered forever.

At length I arrived at the semidome of the eremite. He was standing before a folding table set between the semidome itself and the weedy verge of the water treatment facility, and before him on the table lay a large burlap sack from which beach sand spilled, white as diamonds. He had thinned since I last saw him, and looked at me with apprehension, as though uncertain what it was that had come to confront him. He crept forward to greet me.

“It is only I, John,” I said, “come from the town.” And at that he shook my hand and looked as he had of old.

“Damned nuisance,” he said when we had settled on two folding chairs before the semidome. “There’s a thing that comes in my tent at night.” He called his habitation a tent although it was a semidome.

“An animal?”

“Hardly an animal. It’s to do with a sack of grain—one of those affairs that goes on over three days. I’ll tell you.” And he gave this account:

It was three days ago that he had obtained the millet. Before then he had been in the habit of going every so often to buy sacks of rice from Warda the ageless shopwoman; he cooked this in his solar steamer, and it made the greater part of his diet. But recently a dream had recollected to him the pleasure with which as a boy he had devoured a dish of millet. There being no millet to be had on the island, he had ordered a sack of it by telegram from a distant supplier; and it had arrived three days ago. He had wheeled it in his carrier from the barge to the semidome and stowed it in what he called his cellar, which was no more than a small hole in the floor lined with clay and covered with a board. And he had cooked a batch of it that very night. But no sooner had he taken the first mouthful than it had set his stomach boiling. It did not agree with him. Confused and stricken, he climbed into his cot and spent the night in a dismal half-sleep.

In the morning he looked in on the millet. It seemed to him that there was less than there ought to be, but he told himself that there would naturally be less, for he had eaten some. But he was very hungry this morning, as though he had not eaten any after all. Then he covered it up and went away.

That evening he found that he again desired a bowl of millet. He remembered that it had not agreed with him, but he thought that this time it would. But he was wrong; again it set his stomach boiling, even worse than before, so that it was in a kind of delirium that he washed up and put himself to bed. And he had dreams that night, vivid dreams, he told me, of a kind that he

had never had before. He did not mention what kind of dreams he meant except that they had been vivid. He awoke at dawn, ravenous, and saw in the colorless yet peculiarly blue light of that hour that the cellar lay open: the board had been flung aside, and the millet strewn about the floor.

He refitted the board and lined the hole of the cellar with fresh clay. And in the afternoon he carried the sack of millet to the sea, to throw it in. But he did not throw it in. "For it may be of use," he thought; and this way of thinking is familiar to those of us who live on the island. Instead, he brought it back to his semidome and stowed it once more in the cellar.

The island day is long. Guests do not know how long it is, because there are steps taken in the hotels, architectural and chemical steps, to conceal its length. But those of us in the Elephant Token Room know the length of the island day, and John the Eremite knew it too. And so it did not surprise him, nor did it surprise me to hear, that when evening came he found himself again yearning for a little millet—millet of the kind he had enjoyed as a boy. He had not forgotten the experience of the previous nights, but with the island day behind him he felt as though all that had happened to someone else. Whereas the boy who had enjoyed millet, so long ago—that was truly himself.

So for the third time he ate millet, and became ill, and lay down. And of that night, which was last night, he remembered no dreams at all, but in the morning he did not know who he was; and the semidome with its open cellar, and the millet that lay scattered to all sides, and even his own acutely hungry body, all seemed novel and mysterious to him, as though he had mistakenly waked in some other life that bore no relation to his own. He spent the morning studying the semidome and the other objects of his surroundings, and his existence began to take shape around him, although he only learned that he made his home on an island when, about noon, he happened to find the shore.

Returning to his semidome, he gathered the millet up and tucked the sack under the board. Still he was not certain

whether he was himself or some invention of the dreamless night, but it seemed to him that the millet that lay strewn across the floor of the semidome was the key to the affair. Therefore it was his intention tonight to sprinkle fine sand in a circle around the plywood, and inspect it in the morning for footprints.

“Though I do not think I shall find any; I do it only to present evidence to the manufacturer. For I intend to make a complaint,” he said. “They have sold me faulty millet. It is infested by a spirit.”

When I did not immediately reply, he said, “An empty-dreams spirit. There is a certain type of man—a hunger that does not respond to any actuality.” He fell silent, looking into the sky with distrust. “The great emptiness of it blotted out all the rest and perhaps myself as well. Yes, I would be very surprised if there were not the dreams of just such a man in that millet. What’s your thinking?”

I clapped him on the shoulder. “I think I am pleased to find you already contending with spirits.” And I explained to him about the two women, and told him that S. P. Murchison had promised them that he would come.

“I?”

“In your capacity as an hermit. One woman refused a doctor and the other refused a priest, but both will accept a man who lives alone in a semidome behind the water treatment facility.”

He chuffed. “I don’t know what *I* shall tell them.” The sun was high in the sky and his knickers stuck to his thighs as he rose from his folding chair. “As you can see I’ve not been able to manage my own troubles.”

“Nevertheless they must have something. They are guests.”

“Then I suppose I must come.”

He went into the semidome and emerged wearing a pith helmet and wheeling a burlap sack in his carrier. “I shall make

them a pageant with the millet," he said. "That way I shall be rid of it. And it may be that we shall see some effect."

Before we set out he opened the sack and showed me the millet. It was a buttery-golden stuff, silky to the touch, that brought me a feeling of longing as though I would have liked a dark winter. I have never had a dark winter and did not properly know what the term meant; but that was the longing produced in me by the millet.

"Quiet on the way while I think of it," he said.

Because it was I who had fetched him on this errand it fell to me to wheel the sack of millet in the carrier. He walked ahead without a word until we stood in the vestibule at the foot of the stairs of the Elephant Token Room; then, as I took the sack of millet from the carrier and settled it over my shoulder, he spoke.

"We ought to have brought an offering." He tapped at the wall with a split fingernail. Affixed to the paneling of the vestibule with clear tape was the namesake of the Elephant Token Room, the elephant token itself: a scrap of pink pasteboard in the shape of an elephant, the tea-stained relic of a long-vanished game that had once belonged in the broken wardrobe. Because it is so small it is often forgotten, and even when it is not forgotten it cannot be looked at for long before one feels one has seen all there is to it and must look at something else.

"To the spirit of the place," said John the Eremite. And he began to tell me what it was that we would do when we came to the two women. I looked at him as he spoke, but from the corner of my eye I could still see the elephant token; and likewise on the periphery, not of vision but of scent, I detected a fragrance, so faint that it could not be identified or even properly distinguished, but presented itself only as an insubstantial aberration of the ordinary scent of the air in the vestibule of the Elephant Token Room; and I knew that this was the scent of the two women, who were awaiting us above.

John the Eremite had concluded speaking, but I did not know what he had said. This, then, was our offering to the spirit of the place: an unheard discourse and a momentary distraction. I followed him up the stairs to the Elephant Token Room, which we found much changed.

All the furniture, the broken wardrobe and the rugs, the lamps with fringe on their shades, the crates filled with magazines, and all the endless musty sofas, all had been piled in the corner, all except the smallest table, which had been left in the center of the bare room; and all the people had gone except for S. P. Murchison and the two women, who were seated at this smallest table, the women holding but not drinking cups of tea and staring past each other, so that it was not possible to see both of their faces at once except by sitting between them, as S. P. Murchison was.

“An open space,” he said with a mystic gesture of his hand.

As though all of this were precisely as he had expected, John the Eremite directed me to the kitchen, to cook the millet. “Cook it in butter,” he said. “That will increase the potency.”

It had been some time since I had been in the kitchen of the Elephant Token Room. I closed the door behind me. From the ceiling hung countless pans, very old and very black, and countless cauldrons and sieves and mighty whisks. I took a lump of butter from the ice chest and began to toast a little millet. Soon the smell of it filled the kitchen. Millet is not the food of the blessed, but the scent of millet toasting in butter is the scent of blessedness. From the other side of the door came voices. I could not understand them and they could not smell the millet, and I thought that this was fair.

There was a knocking at a door, not the door between the kitchen and the Elephant Token Room, but an unexpected door—the back door, at the bottom of the kitchen staircase. I had never known this door to be used, and did not know who would use it now. Nevertheless it was from this door that the knocking

proceeded. There was no light on the kitchen staircase. At the bottom I groped for the knob, and then, finding the door locked, for the bolt. At last a gap appeared in the dark, filled with the implausible light of afternoon.

It was Warda the aged shopwoman, holding in her arms a dead owl. She had found it here behind the shop, she said, at the edge of the trees, when she had gone to take out the rubbish. And she had thought of me. "When you asked this morning about that woman I forgot the word." She spoke very slowly; it had long been thought by some of us that this was why she was so old, because of the time she spent speaking. "But when I saw this behind the rubbish I remembered the word," she said: "starving. She looked starving."

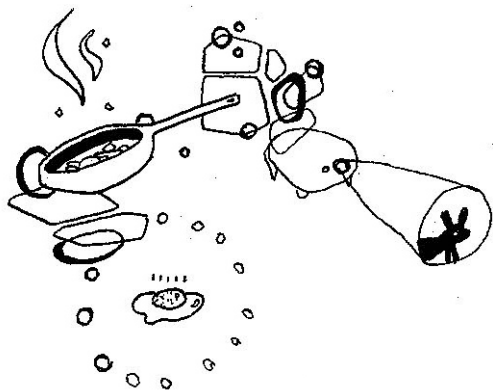
The owl appeared smaller now than it had in the morning, perhaps because it was dead. But indeed it was also truly very small—emaciated. Nevertheless I did not doubt the identity of this owl, the owl that had failed to capture the dove—that had failed to capture all doves, and had starved.

Warda went to the edge of the trees and placed it there, with the rubbish. Then she stood up in the sunlight and looked back at the window of the Elephant Token Room; and as she did so, a shadow fell across her face and indeed across the whole scene; and I wondered if it was the same shadow that I had seen depart from the window of the Elephant Token Room this morning. Perhaps I thought this only because of the owl; perhaps the owl reminded me of the morning and caused me to think that the day was unfolding itself symmetrically, and now that the owl had been seen the time had come to see the shadow. But wherever the shadow came from, I felt that a period of time had ended. A natural period of time, one shadow to another. That is a day. And now that it had ended I felt an omission in this day, an omission on my part that could not be recovered. I had seen, today, the things that humans see: the banana tree, bitter tea served white, high clouds and a shooting star and the magazines of wealth. But something had escaped me.

“I had better check the millet,” I said, but Warda had already turned away. And as I mounted the steps I was in no hurry. In the dark of the staircase, which smelled a little of bone, I knew that when I reached the kitchen I would not find the millet. That was over now. The pan would be there, smeared with a little grease, and the blackened millet would lie strewn across the countertop. The air would smell burnt and cold. I would find S. P. Murchison slumped over the kitchen table unconscious, with something clenched in his fist, and when I pried the fist open I would find within it a single human incisor. John the Eremite would be sitting very still at the smallest table of the Elephant Token Room, alone, staring ahead as though unseeing; I would go to him, and as I closed his hands over a cup of tea and guided it to his mouth to steady his shaking I would understand that indeed he no longer saw: he would be blind.

That was what I knew, there in the dark of the back staircase. That was as it came to me. And perhaps in the end it happened in precisely that way, or perhaps it was a little different; it was not that kind of knowledge, the knowledge of sunlit thinking people who mind whether it was an incisor or a premolar in the fist of S. P. Murchison, but rather the indiscriminate knowledge of objects—of an arrow loosed at the shore from a bow of legend, passing high over all the people of the island, high over the quicksands and the mangroves and the hotels, which knows the place where it will come into the sea.

It was that kind of knowledge, the knowledge of a certain spot among the changing waves. The women would have vanished, and when S. P. Murchison went the next day to room 249 he would find it occupied by only one woman, a very different woman, who wore a fur. And on the handle of one of the two mugs that we picked up from the smallest table of the Elephant Token Room, one but not the other, just inside, where a finger might rest, we would find a spot of red; but the dishes of the Elephant Token Room have seen long use, and after we had bleached it away we would debate whether the mark had been a woman’s blood or only some other stain.



VISITORS ARE RARE ON THIS ISLAND

Dean Young

While everyone else was out tiger hunting
and pleading for a new blue to come into
their eyes, I swear I was just trying to open
a window when a substance, perhaps
ectoplasmic, perhaps swamp gas
coalesced into a young woman,
her nightie nearly as distraught as herself.
Like me her agent had forced her to land here
to avoid a mysterious, impenetrable, meat-smelling
fog, her shipmates picked off one by one
by what? A shudder her only response.
The doctor, so courteous and courtly
upon arrival, had detained me too
for my own protection he said
after some sort of wolf had nipped me.
Hence all the injections and now this 50 cent vamp
who'd fallen off the Twilight caboose
was stealing my scene with minimal cleavage
saying, herr doctor was conducting experiments
so heinous even the undead were appalled
not to mention the ratings board.
Well, the budget had to be going somewhere—
it sure wasn't going to me and the effects
I'd seen so far were cheese although I expected
more from the boys smoking weed in the lot
exploding manikins. Makes me glad my mom
died last year and can't see me, an aspiring
vegan breaking his leash to chomp the doc's
brains while the whole island goes up in flames,
still hoping for a contract for a sequel.
I mean really dead, not staggering around
with an eyeball dangling down a cheek
looking for a baby to eat.



THE LOVE SONG OF GOOSEALOT AND HENEVERE

Dani Rado

Goosealot is in love with the wheelbarrow. And we're in love with Goosealot. We tell his last love, the three-foot plastic Santa, not to get upset. We tell it never to suspect that love is not fleeting.

* * *

Each day in the yard, Goosealot waddles up to his wheelbarrow and cranes his neck over one of the wooden handles. Some days the left. Other days the right. But always his head hangs over the jutting piece of wood as if severed. Goosealot, we warn, heroes like you shouldn't stick their necks out.

* * *

The yard is big and brown. Wind sweeps the dry layer of dirt from the fields of struggling wheat past the fence, over the barn, around the stoic ass at his trough, against the little chicks who narrow their eyes to black slits, across the yard and into us, through us, then out the back door. After, when we look up, Goosealot is there, he and his wheelbarrow a silted silhouette of love. How, we ask, are we going to move the compost without the wheelbarrow?

* * *

Goosealot's loves have included not only the wheelbarrow and plastic Santa, but the old kitchen chair on the porch, the shovel, the baler, the piece of gutter that fell from the barn's roof, and the ass's trough. After he has moved on, they come to

us to cry. Over coffee and a slice of rhubarb pie, we do our best to comfort them.

* * *

The chicks love Goosealot. They love his plumage. They love his waddle. They love the fine lines of his beak, his dark eyes, his arched neck. We tell them that they aren't his type. It's not an age thing, we say, it's an animate being thing.

* * *

We are unable to fertilize the fields without the wheelbarrow. We place a torn tractor tire in the yard and hope it catches Goosealot's eye.

* * *

One of us suggests we move the wheelbarrow while Goosealot sleeps. Or turn it over. This one of us is convinced that the positioning of the wheelbarrow is entirely to blame for Goosealot's infatuation. It's not infatuation, the rest of us say, It's love. It may be fleeting, but it's love all the same. This one of us counters, The wheelbarrow sits there like it wants it. In the dead of night, we remove this one from us.

* * *

We are sad to be one less, and take our pie and sit with the cracked Santa that has been in the same spot in the yard since last winter, because it was there that Goosealot first fell in love with it. By the time love faded, it was well past Christmas. Dirt had blown into a small pile by its side. A crack appeared. Still, the plastic Santa does not want to be moved. It's waiting for Goosealot to come back.

In fact, we never disturb Goosealot's former loves. The gutter is still fallen, the shovel and baler remain untouched, the kitchen chair lies broken on the porch, and the ass's trough is too heavy to move anyway. We don't know if Goosealot will return to any of his old loves, but if he does, we want them to be easily found.

* * *

We ask ourselves what is it we're looking for when we look out the window and see the rattle of time that is wind sweep up and over us. There aren't enough windows for all of us to look out at once, so we cannot ask ourselves this question in unison. Instead, some of us stand back, blanking our minds of everything, so even if we are not asking the question, we are not not asking the question, until it becomes our turn to approach the window and stare out on the field of former loves.

From a distance, you can hardly tell when wheat is dying in a field. Goosealot and the wheelbarrow have been very happy lately.

* * *

We try to approach the wheelbarrow while Goosealot goes to the barn for feed. There are things that need to be hauled. But Goosealot senses a disruption in the aura. He emerges from the barn, charges at us, neck straight and tense, squawks roaring from his beak, wings extended like a viscous angel. We run back to the house to lick our wounds. We pray Goosealot will forgive us. We're starving for Goosealot's love.

* * *

As the chicks mature, the promise of eggs stirs in their bellies. And ours. When Goosealot passes, they swoon, not like

limp leaves, but like blossoming flowers. Our windows sweat with our condensed breaths as we watch our hero shamble over the crusted earth of our waning farm.

* * *

Soon there will be eggs, we whisper. We investigate the smokehouse to see if there is ham for our breakfast. Someone mentions biscuits, gravy, jam; thoughts of food cut through the blanket air of the smokehouse and our fantasies.

* * *

The chicks' nests are woven with stories of gods and Goosealot.

Is this our history or future? Not one of us will venture an answer. Our stomachs rumble with the boding of eggs eggs eggs.

* * *

We sweep our hands under the warm rumps of the matured chicks and gather only splinters in our fingertips. At night we slip needles beneath our skins to remove them. It's like we're sewing ourselves to our fates with these threadless stitches.

* * *

We drool in our sleep when we dream of ham and eggs. Some of us drown. Sometimes the thoughts of food crowd out even our love of Goosealot. He senses this. We hear him weeping to his wheelbarrow in the early hours, before the rooster wakes. We want so badly to take him a slice of rhubarb pie, but we've bound ourselves to the house, to the porch, to the coop of missing eggs, to our threadbare lives.

* * *

Of all the chicks, Henevere has grown the most. Her nest is on the highest platform in the coop. She seems the matron or the mother superior. She reeks of chastity. Even Goosealot fails to move her.

* * *

One day one of us one plays the fox and sneaks to the henhouse. There, beneath Henevere, are dozens, hundreds, thousands of eggs.

We rush the eggs back to the house, two at a time, one gently in each hand. It's impossible to break a healthy egg by squeezing it. If they are unhealthy, we don't want to know. Who wants to know of nascent illness?

* * *

In the morning we lard the cast iron pan. Heavy with gristle from years before when we were fat on food but not love. It takes three of us to lift it to the stove. We would not go back, we say as the grease pops and stings our bare arms. We line the eggs along the counter. Goosealot stands on our porch and watches us through the window. One of us retrieves ham from the smokehouse.

* * *

Henevere, in her loneliness, is circling the coop. Goosealot cranes his neck around and watches her. We know from the back of his head that his gaze is one of longing. Henevere bends down, pecks a grub from the dry earth. The white plum squiggles a moment and is gone.

* * *

We crack the first egg. The snotty glair cascades from the shell, pulling with it the sun yellow yolk against the blue glaze of our bowl. But in the bowl is the slickened embryo of a barely de-gilled chick.

* * *

The old rooster preens his cockscomb. If he knows he's been cuckolded, he says nothing. A wise move. Who would choose him over Goosealot?

* * *

We're inside, but not safe from the dirt that finds its way through the cracks of doors and windows. We had never told ourselves that we lived in a world where hatchlings didn't die.

We debate whether or not to eat the eggs.

* * *

Someone calls out, Look! Goosealot's approaching Henevere! We rush to the window, make it sweat with our breaths. Quick, to the wheelbarrow! A flag unfurls, trumpets sound, a cavalry charges from the house. The ass looks up, swishes his tail at our approach.

But one of us lingers behind and with two fingers I slide the chick embryo up the side of the bowl and, after making an incision, slip it between the ribs on my left side to finish its incubation.

* * *

We use the wheelbarrow regularly now, though we can tell its sorrow from the sag of its wheel. No one brings it a slice of rhubarb pie because the only thing we can comfort is our own stomachs through omelets peppered with beaks and tiny tri-toed feet.

* * *

Not *we*. I don't eat.

* * *

If they notice I'm the only one not fattened, they say nothing in my presence. And since I'm always present, they say nothing at all. I hear only teeth grinding bits of calcium and the popping of thick round slices of ham in the skillet.

* * *

There's elation on the farm for the first time since the wind turned dry. They hold court around the table and feast, trusting the fields are being fertilized with Goosealot and Henevere's love. The other chicks now lay their eggs and drop them in Henevere's roost. When the pile is high enough, we are allowed the eggs Henevere deems to give us. Sometimes she's generous and one of us uses the wheelbarrow to cart them away. We're free, someone says, Free to love at last.

* * *

The rooster and I sit on the back porch. His cockscomb hangs deflated over his right eye. His left eye looks suspiciously at my left set of ribs. It's been growing, I know. If I don't eat soon

the shape of the chick will present itself under my skin, a miniature mountain of flesh. The rooster pecks an ant from the step on which I rest my feet. Then another and another. He pecks around and between my toes, but soon he can't keep up and the black dots begin their roving wave up my legs. He works feverishly, stemming the insect tide for as long as possible.

I feel a kick in me. Weak, but it's there. I lift my shirt and cup my hand under the silhouette in myself. The rooster sees this. He steps back, flares his wings and beats them. The ants hang onto my flesh for dear life against the ensuing wind. The rooster lets out a cracking BAWK! BAW-BAW-BAW-BAAAAAWK!, then scurries away. What's he trying to tell us, my little chick-a-dee?

* * *

I sit on the porch with a mug of black coffee warming my hands. The others are working in the field and I watch their heads rise and dip in the waves of wheat.

* * *

The others eat eggs—scrambled eggs, fried eggs, eggs benedict, eggs and ham, hard boiled eggs, poached eggs, raw eggs; sometimes they make custard with beaks and claws sticking from its smooth top like fossils fighting their way up from tar. But me and my chick-a-dee sneak to the front porch, steal handfuls of oats from the trough to choke down.

* * *

Ants have built colonies in my legs. The rooster hasn't joined me on this porch for months.

* * *

We're throwing a gala for Goosealot and Henevere to celebrate their love and the newfound prosperity of our farm. Some of us say it's not so much newfound as found again, revived, re-incarnated even. I touch my chick-a-dee. What will you tell me when you burst forth? Will you swoon for Goosealot? Will you lay the eggs the others devour?

* * *

My thinness is threatening to give me away. I tuck pieces of ham and eggs under my tongue at meal times to spit out later. Chicks follow me to gobble up the treats I dispense. Cannibals, I tell them, You're a flock of cannibals. Occasionally they pluck a juicy ant from my calf.

* * *

Goosealot is in love with Henevere, and we're in love with Goosealot. They walk in stately procession into our kitchen and sit at the head of our table. Our table is round, but they're like a magnet, causing the compass to swivel due north, always towards themselves. Henevere lays her basket of eggs on the table; the legs tremble. When the meal is done, slices of pie are passed around. I take mine to the front porch for fear I might arouse suspicion.

* * *

The chickens are stirring in the coop. The others are stirring in the house. The ants are stirring in my legs. Chick-a-dee, when will you stir again?

* * *

I hear explosions. I look towards the flat night over the fields but see nothing. I hear them again. They're coming from

inside. I set my plate of untouched food on the porch, the prongs of the fork aimed at the field, and go in.

* * *

The others have flecks of white and brown shells stuck in their hair and skin, impaled in their eyes. The walls drip thick strings of yolk. Goosealot and Henevere crouch under the table. Some of the others dive over them, throw their bodies in the line of fire to protect them. Eggs are knocked off the table. Half-formed chicks slither from the cracked shells.

There's a mixing bowl on the counter. Two chick-a-dees stretch their slick necks over the edge and splosh onto the countertop like a bag of mud. They gimp along, a slime of half formed evolution in their wake. An egg still on the kitchen table trembles, then explodes. A chick embryo, similar to my chick-a-dee, flies across the room. It stays curled in its sleep position until it's splayed against the wall. Then another and another. I duck down. I check my ribs, but have no room for more chick-a-dees. Eggs continue to burst.

Goosealot tries to flap his wings, but is muffled by his guards. Evolution is rejecting the fruits of his and Henevere's love.

* * *

The ass climbs onto the porch to reach his trough. He flicks his ears, either at a fly or the screaming inside. I pull my ears back, pull myself into my animal self and crouch farther over my belly, protecting my chick-a-dee from the shrapnel of shell.

* * *

When all the eggs are done and we, no longer sensing danger, emerge from our hiding places and go outside, Goosealot stands on the porch and we step down into the dirt. He tells us he

will go on a quest for indestructible eggs. We're so in love with Goosealot, white feathered and long necked. He'll come back with endless eggs, golden eggs, hard-boiled eggs, scrambled eggs, salads of eggs. Eggs that can withstand his and Henevere's love.

* * *

The trumpets sound and the banners raise. The ass is harnessed and led to the porch. One of us lifts Goosealot onto him. The ass's tail twitches like this too was a fly. Henevere dabs her black dots of eyes with a white kerchief, then hands it to Goosealot as a token. We put our arms around one another's shoulders. Heroes inspire us to such acts. We stand like this a long time. It takes that long for the ass to sidle out of view.

* * *

The ant colony in my legs is getting closer to the embryo inside me. I go to the barn and find an old lamp. I sprinkle the remains of the oil onto my legs and light it. The ants become a peppered river of flames flowing up and down me. I run from the barn, away from the errant timber of stray straws of hay, and roll on the ground. I am the unmistakable smell of dinner being prepared.

* * *

It's been months since Goosealot galloped away, cutting through the swaths of wheat into the sunset. If he returns, I won't be able to see, since I'm confined to the rocking chair in the corner of the living room just off the kitchen. Occasionally one of the others rewraps my burns, smearing on a layer of cool fat first. Mostly I'm left alone. It's painful and hot and I don't enjoy the rocking though I believe my chick-a-dee might. I do it, though,

because the others tell me I must in order to heal. They still don't know about chick-a-dee.

We're low on food again. The stream of eggs dried up and the wheat's rotted in the field since Goosealot's abandoned us.

* * *

At night I sneak out, crawl to the field and lie on my back on the hard cool earth. I slough my clothes and my bandages, and with those come my skin. I reach to my sides and grab fallen stalks of wheat. I pull them through my teeth to strip them of kernels. When I inhale I see the outline of the chick in my ribs against the moon.

* * *

We've come full circle, I want to say, but so many things are wrong with that. Our stomachs experience the same hunger as before, but elsewhere in our guts we're stirred to new things.

* * *

I watch others die. The ants have hollowed me out.

* * *

There are days the others sit, miming pie into their mouths, believing Goosealot's gone forever. From my chair I see the rooster's blaze cross the window. The blanket, soiled and rough, slips from my lap. One of the others turns from his place on the porch. His mouth is still open to the bite of pie that is not there on the fork that is not there. He places this fork on the plate that is not in his lap. He points to my ribs, to where my chick-a-dee curls. Egg, he mouths. Egg, and points.

* * *

They drag me to the table and lay me over it. My legs hang over the edge. There is no one to save me or chick-a-dee. Henevere, I say as they hold me down, she gave me this. She has them all, all the eggs.

* * *

They release me and rush outside to find her. I push myself up on the table. I sit there a long time, afraid to leave the house and see what I've done. When I finally do go outside, I see that Henevere is bound to a stake. Her body is so tightly wrapped, she has no choice but to stand stoic. I gimp to the edge of the crowd. The rooster has returned and comes to stand near me. I hunch, allowing my shirt to hang straight down over the protrusion of chick-a-dee. One of the others reads the charges of treason. There's the stealing of eggs, the hoarding of eggs, the eating of eggs when we had none to eat. But most damningly, there's the sabotaging of eggs. She's mixed hen genes with goose genes and conceived unnatural spawn. The one of us reading the charges wears a patch over his eye. We're all victims of this.

Twigs are gathered round her feet. The torches approach, and from their light we see Goosealot's shadowy figure in the distance, galloping toward us. Then he's bursting through us, sword ablaze and after any one of us.

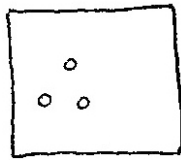
The rooster's head falls at my feet and before I have time to look up, my mid-section is undone. My chick-a-dee slides from the wound and I fall to the ground to meet her. Goosealot continues to chop his way toward Henevere as the headless rooster runs circles through the crowd. The others scramble away, horrified.

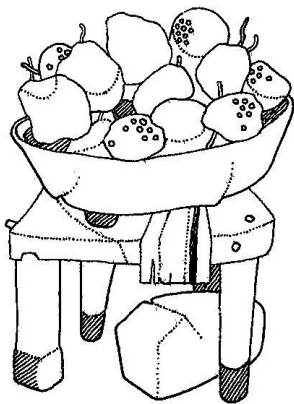
* * *

I try to brush as much of the mucus from my chick-a-dee as possible. She begins to slowly work her joints; to stand, the weight of her head still bent and resting in the dirt; to flap her nascent wings. Goosealot reaches Henevere and the lovers embrace. After a few sputtered starts, my chick-a-dee lifts off the ground and, like a mangled phoenix, hobbles through the air and pulls away. From my vantage where I lie, I see our land, the galloping Goosealot, and a line of archers aimed not at the knighted goose, but at the sky where my chick has gone.

* * *

There's a release of arrows. No one ever said this was a world where all things born were promised life.





THE SEASON FOR CRANES

Genevieve DuBois

The cow was broken again. John had stood in the indigo of settled night and listened to the heave and whine of her body caught in the grip of what could maybe be called pain. While she ate plugged into the feeder, he'd leaned on the stall door and watched her listing to the left and her hind leg buckling beneath the weight. Maybe it was just a thrown bolt and maybe it was something worse and so John had risen in the chill dawn to fix her as best he could. She was the only one he had left.

He stood in the kitchen and poured the coffee in a gleaming arc. He lifted the pot up then down then up again the way his mother had poured coffee when he'd watched her as a boy in this same kitchen. The gesture was ritual. His toes curled into the bumps and dips in the worn linoleum through his socks as he felt for the solid earth beneath him. Still vague with the wisps of dreams.

John drank his coffee in one long swallow and ran his raw tongue across the roof of his mouth thinking of the long hours ahead and of the work he'd have to fill them with. He pulled on his boots and a light jacket and stepped out into the gray membranous morning.

This was the time he felt nearest to God. Before all the colors resolved. When even the notes of the diving swallows that built mud nests under the eaves of the barn sounded muted and damp. Beneath the broad empty midwestern sky the quiet land stretched out in all directions as if the cities smudging the horizon did not exist to touch it. As he crunched across the gravel drive he felt the space of his farm low and broad and beyond that his neighbor's farm and beyond that his neighbor's neighbor's farm too. The soft undulations in the earth barely distinguishable in the downy morning light and rolling into each other and the

meatfruit plants waist-high all bent toward the east like wan sunflowers.

He stopped to check on the nearer rows and broke the silence open with an ugly word. Something had gotten into the near-ripe fruits and chewed holes in the skins of the heavy green orbs closer to the ground. The three-toed prints of some tiny earthbound bird littered the ground still soft from the storm three days ago. They were too broad for feral chicken but new species appeared more often now. Even yesterday in town Janssen had been telling stories of black mouse-like creatures that chewed holes in planked wood like termites and scattered like ash.

He would put out the pulsars that afternoon before he went to the airport. He disliked the urgent flashes of those little orbs and the eerie glow they gave the fields at night and the way the fruit tasted when he used them. They were not supposed to affect the meaty taste of the fruit—the ads used to say *Just like the steak you remember*—but when he ate a pulsed fruit he always found a strange gamey taste at the back of his tongue that made it difficult to swallow. Despite all this he had few options left he could afford following the cropeater famine and then the bans on the old pesticides. The stores all paid the same for the fruit regardless.

When John stopped to feed the chickens he noticed them fidget and squawk in a nervous manner. They clustered in the darker shade of the coop. There were no foxes or coyotes anymore to trouble them but occasionally a stray dog would find its way into his fields. Though he had not seen one in months.

He looked around and seeing nothing he went into the barn. The sun just rising.

He used most of the old winter stalls now for storage and the smell that he smelled as he eased himself into barn-shadow was that of too much dust tinged with mildew in the ignored crevices between boxes and old tools and equipment. Soon he would hire some local boy to haul this junk away and make better room for the new cows he had ordered. Soon. Funds were tight but he needed them back. An investment.

In the nearest stall to the door the cow clanked and rustled in the hay.

Hey, Bessie.

He patted her flesh-and-blood flank and the skin shuddered under his touch as to the graze of a fly. Bessie was one of many Bessies he'd had—he'd called them all Bessie—and now she was the last one. Her serial number was worn nearly unreadable. He'd sold the rest to keep the farm afloat in the hard years. Why she'd been the one he kept he was not sure. She'd always been the faulty one. She broke down for reasons the mechanic could only shrug over. Some defect in the original wiring that left her leaning on fences or kneeling in the dust or inexplicably going dry. Yet she was more cow than the rest of them had been—those patchwork creatures of machine and organic tissue—and keeping her around the place made it feel more like the farm he distantly remembered. His father had been one of the last stubborn holdouts. The kind of man other farmers snickered at. Even then the last Holsteins and Jerseys were only kept as pets. Everyone agreed the milk produced by the new cows was healthier. Tastier. Cheaper. And when he'd purchased the new batch they'd promised him the latest most advanced models without defect or unpredictability. An economic surety.

Bessie snorted and swung her head around to look at him with one soft brown eye and a gleaming blue light. At first the electric blue eyes had unnerved him. When he closed up the gate at night the pinpricks of blue would watch him like will-o'-the-wisps unblinking. He missed them now. The herd all together and the soft clicks and whirrs as they settled down to sleep. The steady lisp of their mouths plugged into the feeders.

Now he only had Bessie left and she was broken again.

I'll call the mechanic, he told her. She'll fix you right up.

He needed to get this taken care of before he retrieved his daughter Paloma from the airport. Paloma's real name was Delilah Rose after her great-grandmother but she insisted on the new name now and even the mail from the college said *Paloma*.

When he thought of her sitting in the leaf-spotted courtyards of her school back east (all brick and money the way schools should be) he thought of her curled around notebooks and novels like the students in the brochures and he couldn't see it. He tried to forget the ghost of the small girl running around the farm in her rolled-up overalls. Tried to forget the little ghost chasing starlings.

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John, I don't understand why you keep that junk around. It's not even useful to you anymore.

He listened to the sounds behind Lisa's words. That soft rasp most people associated with smoking was actually from the thyroid surgery she'd had years ago. She'd taken up smoking on occasion to give people the excuse to ignore it.

It's all right, he said. I don't mind.

That's the point. Anyway I'm booked solid this week so if it's not an emergency, I'll see you on Monday. Ten-thirty.

It's not an emergency.

I know. See you Monday.

She hung up. All he heard was the buzz of static in the long distance from the satellite that had exchanged his voice for hers. The absence of a signal. The emptiness between stars.

He stood for a moment listening.

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He arrived at the airport late and found Paloma sitting alone on a bench in front of the terminal. She'd cut her hair again into a pixie cut almost as short as his. She didn't stand up until he stopped the car and got out. She put her suitcase in before he could take it from her.

How was your flight, he asked.

The same.

It's good to see you, he said.

You too, Dad.

Time grew heavy and elastic as they drove in silence. Paloma looked out over the fields at the silos in the hazy distance and the waves of starlings that rose and fell like scatterings of seeds.

It's not a good time to be a farmer, she said.

It's never easy, he said. They have no idea how much work it still is.

He caught himself in the stereotype she had once accused him of being: overfull with the pride of a dying breed.

Anyway, he said.

You don't watch the news really, do you.

He looked at her. There were new lines around the corners of her eyes. She was turning into a woman who would be nothing like himself and maybe nothing like her mother.

I watch the skies, he said. What else do I need to watch?

It was a joke about his bird-watching and his smile pulled at the scars on his cheek. His daughter sighed and looked out the window.

There's so much that happens outside your little world, she said. You've never even asked me about what I saw this summer in South America.

I did, he said. I asked you if you had fun.

That's never the right question.

Fine, he said. What did you see?

Birds, she said.

He glanced at her. Yeah? What kinds?

Not like that, she said.

He eased the truck precisely along each slight curve of the road while smaller cars flashed around him. A truck hauling a new batch of gleaming silver chickens pulled level with him and they drove side by side until he took the exit for home.

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Paloma came downstairs to dinner and frowned at the steaks he'd seasoned and grilled and set on the table.

You know I'm a vegetarian, she said.

You think I can afford beef? These are from our plants, he said and gestured with the spatula toward the window.

She looked sick. Dad, do you really take me for one of those self-deluded fakes?

He wrapped up the one he had made for her and put it into the fridge to keep for tomorrow. He wasn't angry. Just thinking that he should have known better. She picked at the salad that was just lettuce and yellow tomatoes.

What are you studying these days?

Art.

Art? What happened to international studies?

They're not mutually exclusive.

What kind of art?

Photography. It's the medium of witness.

Okay, he said. What do you want to witness?

She grinned for the first time that evening. Everything. Everything exactly the way it is. Look, she said. She retrieved her bag and slid a photograph across the table. He leaned across the table letting the edge dig into his gut. He saw the curve of bright feathers blurred in a green morning. There was a wildness in it that echoed what he felt in the early morning hours when he turned his gaze to the sky.

It's nice, he said.

Thanks, she said. She took the picture back.

You know, he said. We have something we're famous for here.

She cocked her head.

Cranes, remember? They'll be migrating south again. Winter's coming.

Oh, she said. Oh, yes.

I can show you. I know the best places.

She nodded. Sure, she said slowly. That would be nice.

She took her dishes to the sink and set them in without washing them.

It seems different, she said. The light of the setting sun caught the paleness of her face and the thinness of her bones and he remembered when she had first cut all her hair off at six years old to emulate him and how upset Sarah had been to see it gone. But mostly he noticed how young and frail it made her look then and now.

What does?

The farm. There's something dismal in all of this. You, here, by yourself. That falling-down barn. Those endless rows of meatfruit plants. It's disgusting. They're so ugly, Dad. Can't you see how ugly they are?

He waited.

She looked at him. What about animals? I saw the chickens. Do you still have dairy cows?

Just Bessie. Just the one. But I'm getting some more in soon. The new models. I talked it over with Frank, remember Frank? And we think now I can finally do it. They should arrive the day after tomorrow, in fact.

He had been waiting to tell her this all day. Remembering how she loved them once. He saw the anger in her. He saw the bright spark of sudden vindicated disappointment.

Oh, Dad.

What?

It's wrong, what people do to animals. How can you condone twisting life this way?

He felt himself go cold. They would not exist if it weren't for us. What would you do, set them all free? They need us.

She shook her head. She gathered her things and walked up the stairs.

What? he said. What's wrong with making a living? He stood at the table and watched her go.

He did not see her again that night. She stayed in her old room. The rooms in this house had not changed in the twelve

years since Sarah had quietly removed her things from them down to the last dusty heirloom of her grandparents and her great-grandparents and left him with nothing of hers but a pair of sewing scissors and a daughter. To change the rooms now felt impossible.

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Monday morning when he checked the pulsars he again found the fields empty of anything stunned or disoriented or dead so he adjusted the frequencies. He wondered if it was birds, and whether others had been seeing in the early morning shadows something small and quick and smooth. But he had other chores to tend to and so he tended to them, not wanting to think of what he was losing or what new trouble might be here. He had been fixing the paddock fence and was nearly done resurrecting it from its advanced state of decay. The old feeders had been cleaned and new bedding and mash and troubleshooters had come and he'd paid the Adams boy to haul a load of junk away. Despite the burdens on his mind John whistled old church songs as he worked. There was something right in all of this. Some movement toward instead of away.

He was inside momentarily for a missing tool when Paloma came at last downstairs. The sound of her bare feet on the wood was like something dreamed. A light wet noise.

Coffee?

He pointed to the pot and she made a face.

Got anything fresh?

If you make a new pot, he said.

Right.

You know, he said, standing with the dirt and cobweb of the barn settled over him. Later after Lisa comes by we could drive out to the marshes to see the cranes coming in. When I was a boy I'd see hundreds. Thousands of them. We took you a few

times. Your mother and I.

He cleared his throat. You still want to?

Her answer was slow in coming. Okay, she said.

* * *

Lisa showed up a little later that afternoon smelling of rose water which reminded him of his grandmother but it was different on her. He liked the way she took care of herself even though her line of work meant getting dirty all the time.

She was on the phone when she got out of the car so he waited on the porch. Paloma came up behind him with a floppy paperback in her hand and pushed past him to give Lisa a hug. Good to see you, kid, Lisa said as she hung up.

Sure. You too.

Lisa had always been good to his daughter. Noticed her. He'd never thanked her for that.

Bessie's on the tilt again, he said.

Lisa looked up at him. I know. That's why I'm here.

He showed her Bessie still leaning against the stall and the sparks dancing around her mechanical ear and her mechanical leg now pawing uselessly at the empty air unable to get any traction. Paloma stood behind them watching.

She was looking better until this morning, he said.

Well, Lisa said. Let's get her up.

Lisa opened the stall door and Paloma darted in.

Oh, you poor thing, Paloma crooned and stroked Bessie's face. Lisa, you can fix her, right? Is she in pain?

Lisa shrugged. Probably.

Bessie's blue eye stared straight ahead at him and her brown one sagged and swept its lashes. He watched the women tend to her. Both of them seemed to see Bessie not as she was but as a problem to solve. But Bessie was looking right at him with both eyes. He felt a sudden affection for her.

He thought: Bessie and me. We're doing just fine.

I can jury-rig her for now, Lisa said at last. It looks like she needs some new parts. I'll have to come back tomorrow.

Do you want to come with us tonight? he asked. We're going to see the cranes migrating.

She smiled. Sounds like fun.

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Here, he said.

They got out of the truck into the chill of the evening. A low mist hung over the marsh. The women walked down to the edge of the water among the reeds. He stood back near the truck and watched them in the fading heat of the red sun sinking beyond the dimmest line of horizon. The insects rose like sparks around them. If there was cold he did not feel it though the women stood down near the marshes with their jackets wrapped close around them against the changing season. They watched the sky. He listened for cranes and heard none. He'd come here before and seen them filling the skies. Where were they now when he needed them? He listened and heard the rattle of the reeds and the lisp of water against the crumbled shore and the shush of the tall grasses that lined it. It was the silence of a place left behind by breathing things.

There, Lisa said. She pointed.

Two cranes circled over the water with their wings spread wide so the orange light filtered through the bladed feathers. Their backs hunched with the downward beat. He felt the arrowed force of them. They stretched their scarlet-crested heads forward at the ends of long necks. Paloma held the camera to her eye and he felt a sudden sharp joy that he could give this to her. The pair landed in the shallows and their smooth grace gathered angles. He looked for others.

Paloma took their picture and then turned around and took his picture, too. He held up his hand with his palm out.

It's not the season for cranes yet, he said. I hoped there'd be more. It's better in the spring. When they're coming home.

It's okay, she said. They're beautiful.

We can wait to see if more come, he said. They'd been away from the farm long enough and already he was feeling the pull of it.

That's all right, she said. This is good enough.

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When they returned there was a whole stretch of ruined fruit at the end of dusk and new prints in the earth. The pulsars weren't working. He'd have to do something else, which would mean multiple new permits. Expensive certifications. He said nothing of this and told Lisa goodbye.

If you want I can come back tomorrow too, she said. To make sure the repair takes. I can look over the new shipment for you too.

Thanks, he said. I appreciate it.

She hugged him. She seemed about to say something more but laughed and moved away in her own silence. He went inside not wanting to watch her go.

Paloma sat at the kitchen table. She said, Dad, how can you stand it here?

It's not all bad, he said. He couldn't hold a smile. What about the cranes?

She gave him a sad look. Of course I liked the cranes. That just makes all this worse.

All what?

I don't think that ground could grow anything but those damn meatfruits anymore. There's a kind of dirt that's alive and this isn't it. This is the kind of dirt that's best for burying things in.

He had nowhere to set her anger so he nodded and went outside under the deep burn of the stars to put the animals down

for the night. Overhead he saw the dim shapes of crows flying and he paused in the middle of the drive and listened to the wind rasp in the fields and the harsh cries of the birds and said to himself, This is it. This is all.

* * *

The heifers spilled down the ramp. Their biological parts were stiff with travel and so they moved unevenly. He waited for them at the bottom with the paddock door open. They stumbled into it bleary-eyed. Hard-hooved against the dirt. Some of them found the feeders and then they all did.

He walked around them nodding as he went. Good cows, and he could see the improvements that had been made. The sleeker lines and the smoother motions. The organic integrated more completely with the mechanical. He felt life returning to this place. The silence that had plagued him softened now by the rustle and grind of livestock.

Paloma didn't come outside until the driver had left with the truck. Her face bleak. It's wrong, Dad, she said. You shouldn't keep these animals.

They feed us, he said. Milk. Cheese. Butter. Cream. Us and the world.

We don't need milk anymore. We don't need them anymore.

That's not true, he said. That's not true at all.

Dad, she said. I remember the cranes, okay? I remember the cows. I remember when that old one out there came walking down the ramp all gleaming and new. I remember all the birds and foxes and little rodents that used to live in the nooks and shadows of this place. I remember how it felt when I couldn't find them anymore. I remember how it felt when Mom left. I remember what this place used to be and it's not that place anymore. I don't see how you can watch birds and not notice how many of them are gone. It's not home. For me it's not home.

Home's not something you choose, he said.
Is that why you're still here?
When are you going, then?
Tomorrow. I bought the ticket already, anyway.
Okay, he said. If you have to.

* * *

Lisa drove her to the airport.
She asked me to, Lisa said when she got to the farm. I figured you were busy.

Paloma hugged him hard but did not look at him. I'm sorry, she said.

It's all right, he said, not knowing exactly what she was apologizing for but knowing it didn't matter. He swallowed the lump in his throat and said goodbye.

When Lisa got back she offered to inspect the cows and called them choice stock excepting the one. He'd put Bessie in with the rest of them to socialize and he saw beside them how old and awkward and misshapen she seemed. Inefficient.

I need to talk to you about Paloma, he said.

Then I'll need a beer, she said. She went inside and helped herself and while she was gone he watched the cows circle in the paddock. There might be something wrong with him. When Sarah left she ripped something in him out by the roots and left an emptiness gaping there. There was no surgery for that. No way to cross that space and close that distance.

I don't know how, he said.

How to what? Lisa said as she came up behind him. She sat on the steps and he sat next to her.

How to talk, he said. To Paloma.

Well, she said. Life's complicated at that age.

She likes you better than she likes me. Maybe you could say something.

Say what?

I hoped you'd know.

I wish I knew, she said. I gave up trying a long time ago.

Her eyes were somewhere else when she spoke. Her mouth was pink and wet with beer. She wasn't wearing lipstick and he thought it had been years since he had seen a woman wearing lipstick.

Trying what? he said.

Her laugh seemed wrenched out of her. Fixing things, she said. Ironic, isn't it. I guess I fix what I know and let the rest... She trailed off. Her fingertips drummed a tinny rhythm against her beer.

He looked out at the cows in their paddock. They stirred. They seemed unsettled.

Lisa's eyes widened and he thought she was looking at him, but when he moved and his shadow fell across her face she moved too.

He turned around. Dark shapes moved against clouds gathering in the shape of rain in a wind that spoke of rain coming. Undulating shapes in the sky made up of many individual beating wings moving together and separate as the same reflection in a broken mirror. When they landed they hopped and flapped like newborns unaccustomed to the solemn weight of worlds. Their kin still circling overhead in the swoop and yaw of the rising wind. Their presence gave the sky shape and form and made its hugeness tangible and heartbreaking in that same immensity.

God, Lisa said. They're so beautiful.

He remembered as a boy standing in a field not far from here his rifle hanging forgotten in his hand. The task of killing forgotten. He stood with the same look on his face and wonder working through him burning out everything but that moment and the cries of cranes as they splashed into the water one two three. In them some impassive vindication of the beauty of the dying season.

Now they watched the cranes hover and flutter and drop in the slant of the afternoon into the silvery leaves of his fields flickering like the surface of oily water.

What are they eating? Lisa said.

The cranes pinned small wriggling reptiles with their beaks. They snapped them up and swallowed them the way he'd seen them swallow snakes. He watched a crane move long-legged among the meatfruit plants. Its eyes glowed yellow and watchful beneath that splash of red. The crane extended its wings to six or seven feet and every feather caught the last razored edge of light. He felt the throb of some old wound within him.

Long after the frenzy had died Lisa rose and walked over to the fields and toed the fallen pieces of the cranes' prey and held one up and called something back to him he did not hear. He was looking at the paddock. Bessie was sparking so badly the other cows wouldn't go near her. Their blue eyes blinked rapidly in distress. But then the sparking stilled, and John decided it could wait.

I can't tell if this is a lizard or a bird, Lisa said more loudly. It doesn't look like either.

What is it?

She brought one over. It was not much longer than her hand. The delicate neck twisted around and gashed open. Thin feathers clung to skin smooth and dark as a frog's. Dulled cat-slit eyes stared above a mouth that was hanging open and full with tiny needle-sharp teeth.

I've never seen anything like it before, she said. There was a light in her face that left no room for him.

He touched the tiny raptor with one finger. Feeling the coolness beneath the skin.

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When Paloma was five she knew the names of every bird on the farm. He took her with him when he walked his fields and

she repeated the names back to him. Barn Swallow. Black-billed Magpie. Hawk. Sparrow. Blackbird. She loved them as much as he did. Look, he'd say. Look how they find secret places to hide in. Look how they always come back. Look how they make their homes in the least expected places. Look how they carve out the sky.

Paloma stretched out her arms. Look, she said. I'm flying too.

* * *

John woke to the sound of screaming: unmodulated, animal. He got up and went downstairs pulling on his boots and ran out into the darkness.

In the paddock he found Bessie covered in blood. It was not Bessie's blood. The gash on the side of the moaning heifer with the spotted ear told him how Bessie had come in low and hard and pinned her against an old part of the fence. The time-softened wood had torn a hole in the heifer's soft side and exposed the pink and bloodied mush of her flank and she kicked. Like trying to get up. To give birth. To run. Bessie tottered. Blood smeared on her wet soft bovine nose. She made a clanking sound deep in her throat like the hollow distorted pinging of a railroad crossing. Her leg was twitching and the seam between flesh and steel had torn.

Bessie, he said. Bessie.

Sometimes this happened. Sometimes the wiring went so bad something in their heads went wrong. The other cows huddled at the other end of the pasture and regarded everything with bright blue eyes. Down near the ground among the leaves of the meatfruit plants he felt new eyes watching, too.

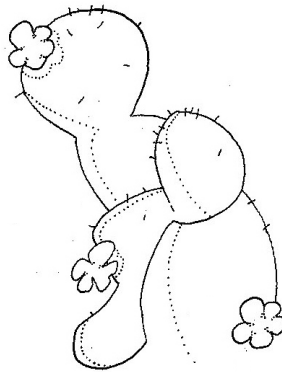
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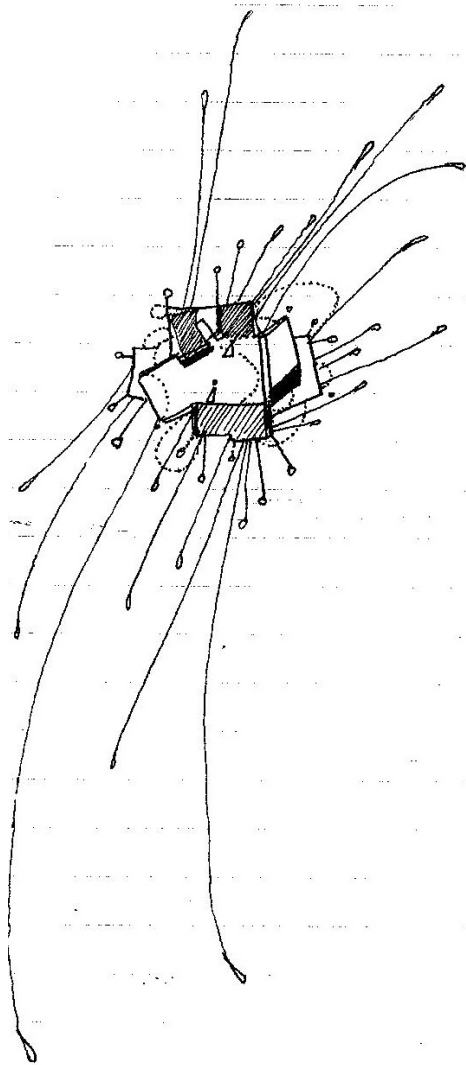
He takes Bessie out to the far paddock he no longer uses. The walk is longer than it needs to be but he moves without hurry. In the darkness there is no light but the stars and the setting moon and the distant yellow light of the porch. Bessie is calm now. She clanks along beside him and he hears the grind deep inside of her but she shows no fear of him.

You and me, Bessie, he says. You and me.

Green has overtaken this furthest field. Remnants of the original fence still surround it with soft rotting wood and lichen. He ties Bessie's rope to one of the old posts. There's a strange smell in the air. Something not quite growing things. He tastes metal. Maybe blood.

He lifts the gun to her unblue eye. Time draws down to a moment, and holds.





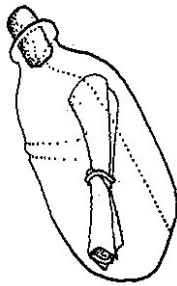
THE GIFT

Mary Ruefle

The day the living room flooded I had not left the apartment in five days, everything was spotlessly clean, I had no work to do except writing my thoughts in a journal, the thought of which filled me with terror and boredom. That fateful and final morning I was in bed reading, unable to concentrate because of what I had done the day before. The day before I had ordered by telephone a large box of glace apricots from Australia. The catalogue, South Sea Gifts, showed the fruit in a handsome wooden crate, lined with gold foil. They cost \$86.20 and I had them sent to myself with a gift card that said *from Mary to Mary*. I was uneasy because I now had no money to buy groceries with and it would be some time before the apricots arrived, even though I had them sent express, which cost more. I looked forward to them arriving but at the same time they would, when they arrived, only remind me of my stupidity and terrible guilt. My guilt was tremendous. To have used the last of my money sending myself a gift of glace apricots! And the gold foil—that had cost more too. The cheaper “home boxes” had more apricots in them, but were without gold foil. The gold foil looked so nice, shining beside the golden apricots. Of course I had been looking at a photograph, and I worried that the picture was somehow “touched up,” because I once met a food stylist whose job it was to make photographs of food look better than the food itself; she used glycerin and starch and hairspray to make things luscious and shining, crisp, fresh, mouth-watering in a tantalizing way. I didn’t want to open the box and be disappointed. I also thought of ordering a circle of white cotton mosquito netting, but came to my senses. At least I could eat the apricots. What would I do with mosquito netting? I just like the way it looks—you can drape it over anything and the draped thing becomes soft and

mysterious. I read an article once about a woman who was an intensely intellectual Buddhist and she wanted to make her house as empty and white as possible, but she owned thousands of books, which dragged the energy of the space down, so she simply made vertical pillars of her books and draped them with mosquito netting and got the effect she was after—the effect of owning nothing, wanting nothing, living in a windswept environment of peace. All my extravagant mail ordering—it had me feeling uneasy. I felt vapid and shallow and guilty, I loved my books and just the sight of them strewn around on low-lying tables and lined up on windowsills and stacked on the floor—along with catalogues and unopened bills—had always made me feel happy in a teeming, chaotic way, and gave me the feeling my life was full and interesting, that I was a serious and charming person. I also worried about the people who answered the phone for the catalogue companies—did they have enough to eat? Did they ever steal a glaze apricot or two? I knew they had work, they had to answer phone calls, they had to calm the caller down and answer all her questions, they had to explain the difference between a “gift box” and a “home box.” I could see them in a cavernous room, sitting in makeshift booths with earphones on. For some reason I draped them all with mosquito netting, I mean one individually wore a cocoon of soft white gauze. It muffled their voices while they spoke to the customers, the customers had to ask them to repeat what they had just said, so endless loops of repetition began to bubble up from the cocoons. That’s how I pictured it. It was then that I heard the water in the living room, bubbling up from some mysterious source. I got out of bed to investigate and as soon as I entered the hall I saw a pool of brown water advancing towards my feet. I had forgotten to put my slippers on, I was standing in my bare feet, and the brown water came on over my ankles. I waded forward toward the living room. The sofa was covered with mud and pieces of debris—sticks and clumps of leaves, the black gunk that closes off a rain gutter. There was a high water mark on the television screen, a wavy white salt

horizon that crossed the black glass. My books, too, were covered with the wavy lines of loose, disintegrating matter—detritus, I believe it is called. Some piglets were scavenging the place, eating the stuffing out of a chair in the corner, a chair I always read in. Why had I decided to read in bed that morning? I don't know. It was highly unusual. Everything was waterlogged, the legs of the table looked soft, like they were made of oatmeal, and a mass riot of spiders swarmed on top of my table, the way I've seen ants swarm under my welcome mat outside. The flood had obviously subsided. It must have happened during the night when I was sleeping. I thought for a moment that there was a bloated corpse on the floor, but it was just a sack of rotten potatoes that had floated out from under the sink and was stranded in the stagnant water, a gelatinous mass, puffed up and green. I'm ashamed to say my first thought was that I could not possibly clean up this mess by myself; I needed help. And what about those piglets in the corner, devouring my chair? Where had they come from? The place stank. It smelled worse than a sewer. It smelled like a petri dish of primordial ooze and whoever I called for help would have to cordon off more than my living room, the entire building and the block it sat upon would have to be cordoned off too. And in this way another day of potential reverie had been broken in two, utterly destroyed by my desire for an apricot, a single indiscretion for which my habitat had become a village of sticks on the banks of a rising river, where trade winds blew and the rains came and the mosquitoes bred, and where mosquitoes breed, one will be needing some netting.



THE ISLAND UNKNOWN

Matthew Cheney

I have discovered a Victrola on the island. There is no other sign of civilization, just lots of sand and a few rocks and one big palm tree. And the Victrola, standing like a sentry beneath the tree. It's one of those cabinet Victrolas, one of the new ones, expensive. I opened the cabinet to see if there were any records, and there were. I put one on, but I didn't understand it, perhaps because sunstroke and dehydration were setting in, and I was still angry at the captain for declaring me a degenerate and marooning me here.

The noises coming from the Victrola sounded like a particularly enthusiastic and utterly out-of-tune klezmer band.

This was not to be my salvation.

When I saw the Victrola, I had thought I'd solved whatever metaphysical riddle my marooning posed, and that if I could just find the right record to play, an army of friends would arise from the ocean and carry me back to the ship, patting me on the back and sticking a cigar in my mouth, their own mouths issuing great waves of chortle.

But no, the only waves were the briney ones bumping against the beach.

"Be quiet!" I screamed at the waves. They would not obey, so I tore the record off the Victrola and threw it into the ocean as a warning.

I tried another record, but it was exactly the same.

They were all the same.

All the same.

I stared at each label, trying to divine differences and meanings, but the best I could come up with was that the labels were a deep red-purple color I decided should be called "maroon," and thus I had found my own label.

The words on the label were not English, nor the alphabet one I recognized—the precise, intricate letters looked like some sort of runes, but I know nothing of runes, having spent my few years of education learning to tie one thousand knots. I had hoped it would get me a wife, but women, I discovered, are more complicated than knots. I became a private investigator, and I roamed the shipyards, and one night I turned into a stowaway, because the divorce racket had grown depressing, and I figured some time on the sea would do me good. I hid in a box of toaster ovens, and then one day a swarm of turtles infested the hold and a long-repressed terror of animals with shells overtook my senses and sent me screaming to the top deck, where a bevy of salt-scarred sailors tackled me and loved me and made me think I was one of their own. But I was not one of their own, which, had I been more perspicacious, I would have guessed from the Army helmet they stuck on my head, because I had seen all the old movies with John Wayne and Randolph Scott in which people of the land torment people of the sea, and vice versa, and their differences can never be overcome until combat in the last act, but we had no combat out on the empty sea, and the sea was endless, without act breaks or intermissions of any sort, and so we had no sacrifice and no reconciliation, and I was the landlubber, and eventually the sailors who had loved me so well and so tenderly fell into a routine of hour after hour and day after day throwing sand in my face and spitting tobacco through the bullet hole in my steel helmet, until one day they ran out of sand and tobacco and they took the helmet back and they tossed me to the island here, without even the grace of a box of toaster ovens for old times' sake.

The Victrola skips. Its needle bounces like a mosquito across the record. I begin to understand the sounds, I begin to hear their words: *The history of my life has never been read. A reckless, hard-hearted life I have lived. I left my true love with a fair broken heart. I left my true love in sorrow and pain. I left my true love to sorrow and sigh. I hope we all meet in the—*

No, this is not true. The Victrola tells the wrong story. It lies and lies and lies again!

I throw sand across the record, causing it only to skip more and issue more words I understand: *A story I'll tell of a poor rambling soul. He's lost, I've been told, on the Island Unknown.*

The history of life is the history of the dead.

I cover the Victrola with sand, until there is nothing but a mound in front of me, and the words have turned to soft, distant moans. I lean against the mound and let the sun slash across my skin, I let the dry wind sear my eyes, I wait to burst into fire or fall into dust.

I wait.

There is movement near my feet. Turtles climb ashore, lines of them, waves of them, endless numbers, and the sun explodes off the silver toaster ovens on their backs. They pile the toaster ovens around me like an igloo, and then they dig through the sand with their little claws and uncover the Victrola and clean off the record and set the song singing again.

I cannot escape the dark prison the turtles have built for me, I cannot destroy the Victrola. I hear the turtles out there, singing along and dancing.

It must be night now. The turtles sing louder.

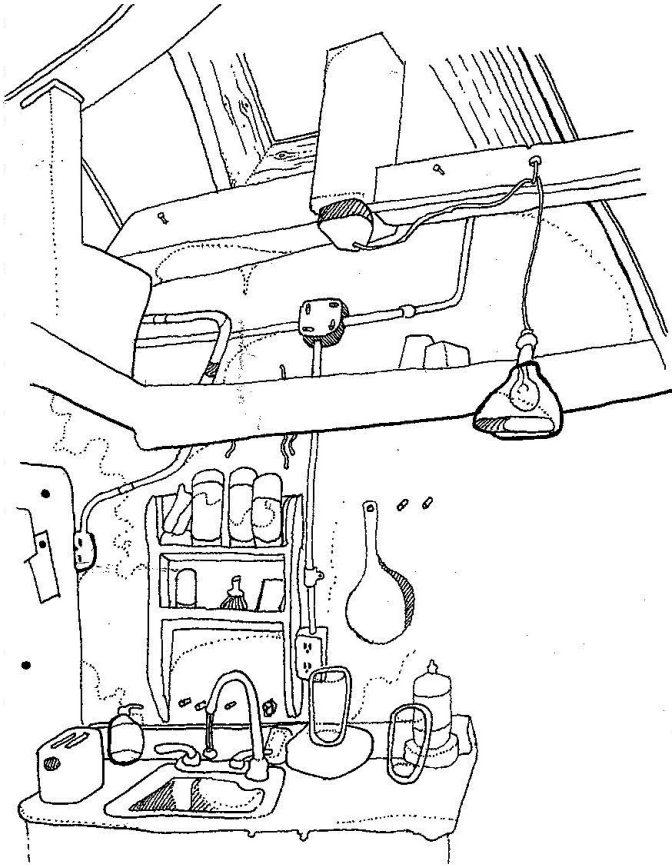
The sound of the song and their singing echoes across the steel of the toaster ovens. *He's lost, I've been told, on the Island Unknown, he's lost, I've been told, he's lost...*

It is late now, but the turtles never tire and the Victrola never stops.

Listen!

Can you hear them? Can you hear them?

Please tell me I am not alone.



SANT ANDREA, RED ISLAND
Tomaž Šalamun
Translated from the Slovenian
by Michael Thomas Taren and the author

How am *recht*. How afraid. Today
out of my mind. With my hands

grabbing the moon's platter's
sounds. Let's say: you throw

dumplings into a big dredger.
The dredger has dreadful rakes.

If I don't get enough magnesium,
I get cramps. I don't yet again dare

to swim from island to island.
Naked. From island to island, to

jump in water and to swim across
the sea. Metka doesn't

allow me because of the jet skis
The fear intensifies her sunsets.



AN ACCOUNT OF MY NEIGHBOURS,
BEING THE PEOPLE WHO STOP ME FROM WORKING
Edward Carey

I cannot tell you how disgusted I am with people since I came to this city. I live on the fifth floor here, there's only roof above me. From the small window in my bathroom, right above the lavatory—if I stand on the lavatory seat—I can see down the well of this building. I can see it extremely clearly. This well is in the middle of our building, a shaft, a vacant spine, a column from top to bottom full of empty space. From my window, when I stand on the lavatory seat, I can see into that square, all the way down to the bottom, and more significantly from that window I can see into the windows of my neighbours. I have better things to do, of course, I'm a very busy man, you must understand that, but I am disturbed in my business by my neighbours. Consequently, I have not achieved nearly as much work as I had hoped since coming here.

Perhaps I should make clear that I am a man with much work before me. By profession I'm a writer of children's tales and an illustrator of them too. I like my work. No. I *liked* my work before coming here, but now as I settle down to write and to draw, only my neighbours' faces and activities come to me. I am falling behind. I no longer consider magicians and princes and ogres and kings and fairies and knights but only ever, every day and every night, my neighbours.

There are noises, you see. Many noises are to be expected, of course. You cannot live anywhere these days without the interference of noises. It is true. I understand that. I am a reasonable man. A tolerant one. But my patience is not inexhaustible.

Let me come clean: I have the most acute hearing.

I don't go out very much myself, I'm very busy, you see, I have much work before me, so staying at home as I do, which

is my place of work, I have an opportunity of hearing a great deal of the goings-on of this house. It seems to me that the most interesting sounds of a house are generally those that come, not at night as those pitiable people with feeble nerves will suppose, but rather during the hours when everybody is supposed to be outside at work. It is then that a house relaxes into itself and reveals its true secrets.

Here is a little of what I have discovered.

Mrs. Dubboney downstairs, as soon as Mr. Dubboney has left for his job as the proprietor of a pet shop, always has a bath. Yes. I know this from the pipes—her baths last sometimes two hours, she scrubs herself in the bath, she scrubs and scrubs. Sometimes, on the way downstairs—you will understand of course that there is no lift here so that I must perforce use the stairs that pass in front of the Dubboney flat—sometimes then, on my way down, I perch at her door. Sometimes, believe me, sometimes, Madame Dubboney has visitors. I have considered telling Mr. Dubboney this, I have on occasions gone into his pet shop and even spent some reasonably pleasant moments observing the rainbow of colours upon his goldfish, but I have not spoken to him, for I am a very busy man.

There are such noises.

I have, I confess, looked through the rubbish bins in the hallway on the ground floor. But don't think I'm the only one. Everyone's doing it, I can't be blamed. Everyone here looks at everyone else's rubbish. I am certain of it.

There is a man downstairs, a young man—Peter Schank of flat two—who is filled with the noise of youth, who whistles. The noise of his whistling comes right up the well of the building from his ground-floor flat, into my bathroom window, and from there—should I not be actually at the window—into my apartment and into my very ears. I admit he is quite a capable whistler. But he whistles almost entirely the same music, it is Handel's Fireworks Music that he whistles, and I hate it. I have hated it ever since my Aunt Anita, an unmarried and very unfortunate woman with

large lips which she smacks together a great deal, yes, ever since Aunt Anita gave me this music as a present one Christmas, back when I was still talking to my family, I cannot think of Handel's Fireworks Music without thinking of Aunt Anita and her lips and subsequently I despise that music. And it is, please note, precisely that music that my downstairs neighbour chooses to send up the well and no other. Over and over.

But this is nothing.

There's a man I've seen through another window—David Henry Pruce—who spends his days making himself up. I think it is possible that he may be a retired theatrical of some sort. Sometimes he wears a big false ginger beard, at others a small moustache, sometimes he is clean shaven and wears a dress—he has very many different costumes. Making himself up and getting into costume takes him hours—I know because I've seen him, I can see from my bathroom window down the well into his bathroom window, which, it's true, has frosted glass, but sometimes he opens it a little bit, and from a certain angle I sometimes catch glimpses of him. This David Henry Pruce pretends to be different people. An unobservant person would suppose that there are many different people living inside David Henry Pruce's flat. *Wrong!* It is the same person, only always wearing different clothes. When he has finished preparing himself, he slips out into the street—I've seen him!—and in his guise for the day he walks about the neighbouring streets or sometimes, if he feels his disguise is particularly good, he'll walk farther into the centre of the city into Market or Cathedral Squares and take great pleasure—I've seen him, I've seen him!—bumping into people, and apologising. How he loves to bump into people and apologise to them. Today he's gone out in army uniform.

But this is nothing still.

There's a man one floor down who has tried to show me his pictures. *Pictures of women!* I have of course not let him inside.

And there is a spy who comes into our block two or three times a week, going from door to door with the excuse of selling

a newspaper but really, she does not fool me, in a desperate urge to talk to people, anyone, just to talk. They are so terribly lonely, these people!

My neighbours, I am certain of this now, put all their junk mail in my letter box. (All our letter boxes are downstairs in rows just by the entrance door.) I hear them do it, they choose to do it, on occasions, together, in a group, just after the postman has left, or even—they have no shame—when the postman is still there.

But this is nothing, nothing yet.

There are two brothers, family name Hivvy, in flat six. They both go out at night, but in very different directions. I hear them go, they stop me from sleeping. One brother writes the word “LOVE” all over the streets, on pavements, on walls, on shop windows, with an aerosol spray can. You will have seen this word “LOVE” graffitied here and there, the other brother writes “PRUDENCE,” you will have seen this word about too, I think, though it is not so numerous. After a night spent spraying “PRUDENCE” here and “LOVE” there the brothers return home and I always hear them, for on returning there is always a great noise of merriment coming from their apartment, they laugh and laugh as if their disgraceful night’s activity is the funniest thing in all the world.

Oh, but this is nothing, nothing at all.

The old bald and hunched man, Christopher Dutton, from flat nine, works, I have discovered, for I am nothing if not cunning, at the Catacombs Museum. You can tell from the little badge he always wears on his V-necked jumper. You will know the Catacombs Museum, it’s not far from Cathedral Square and it’s there, twenty metres below ground, that the bones of some one hundred thousand people are collected together, stacked up in neat rows of skulls and leg and hip bones. These bits and pieces, bones of our forefathers, have been taken from ancient graveyards that have been removed to make room for more apartment blocks—just like this one, with wells in the centre of them so that the noise of your neighbours may stop you from working. The old bald man from flat nine has been stealing from his place of work. I know this, I know it. For some time now, he has been stealing

the bones of the dead and stacking them up in his room, he has a catacomb of his own in his apartment, I suspect he has filled two rooms already and has begun work on a third. I know this because I hear him walking up the stairs and on occasions I go out to watch him carrying a large canvas bag which I cannot see through but from its bulges know for sure to contain a skull or two, or even arm and leg bones. Oh yes! Innocents may suppose the bulges to be similarly innocent, to be not skulls, for example, but lettuces and cabbages—*nonsense!* They are skulls taken from the ossuary near the cathedral.

The young woman, on the top floor, a single mother, has a monkey for a baby and breastfeeds it herself! Incredible, isn't it. But, *true!* Yes. I've seen her many times. For that baby of hers does not make baby noises but, I swear to you, the screams of a monkey—mostly when I've settled down to work. Yes, I've seen her walking out of her apartment, and she always covers the baby up when she does so, she smiles and says good day if we see each other, but I know, I know—"You, woman, neighbour of mine, you have a monkey for a baby, you cannot deceive me." The baby's blanket slipped once, and I saw the face very clearly—*pure monkey!*—I shrieked then, I admit it for I am easily disturbed, and rushed back into my apartment and slammed the door. The young woman who breastfeeds the monkey has not spoken to me since that day. For she knows that I know her secret.

And there's someone also in this block who gets up on the roof and smokes cigarettes there. It's true I haven't seen this antisocial individual yet, but I have seen the cigarette butts, they fill the guttering. I keep clearing them away. And still they come back. Still they come back more and more.

* * *

Terrible news, woeful discovery, see below:

I am most concerned about Mrs. Dubboney. I have learnt her awful secret, poor lady, and I feel for her utterly—I am nothing if not compassionate. For I have discovered that Mrs.

Dubboney has ailments that are usually peculiar to fish. They try to keep this very quiet and who can blame them. But I know, I know all about her, for she happens to live beneath me, two floors, and her name is Mrs. Marguerite M. (I do not know what the second 'M' stands for yet, but I have seen it often enough on her mail) Dubboney. Oh yes, I have been doing a little research and it all adds up. She is terribly ill. I think it may come down to the fact that, to speak in fish terms, the temperature of her oxygen tank is too high. This is because Mrs. Dubboney has taken to closing all the windows in her apartment that connect to the well of the building. If she would only open them again, I am certain she would feel better. I see her sometimes on the stairs, she is indeed looking terrible these days, and she never greets me as she used to. I think this is because she has trouble speaking, though she is all the time, and very like a fish, gasping for air. Around her jawline, or in fish terms, about her gills, there is a definite discolouring. I will not have this explained away as the poor application of makeup. Her gills are rather lilac in colouring and I am certain that poor Mrs. Dubboney of flat twelve is suffering from ammonia poisoning. I know this because, listening out, I feel certain that she is moving around less in her tank, in her flat, though sometimes she suddenly and for no reason gets up and darts about, hitting the walls of her tank—I mean, of course, of her flat. Poor Mrs. Dubboney, why will Mr. Dubboney not take note? I know that some fish, just like people, remain apart from others and in their solitude darken in colour, but really this is something else, this is something terrible. She has, I am certain, begun to put on weight, her belly is very swollen, and I feel sure that if I saw her droppings, which I have not, they would be white and mucoid. Just the other day I saw Mrs. Dubboney on the stairs, she rushed her bulk past me but not so fast that I didn't notice that she had spots on her face. I have found her ailment in the book I have bought, secondhand, entirely to help her, of fish diseases—*An account of fish diseases, being a description of the ailments of fish and containing descriptions of cures*. She

has *dermocystidium*, poor old girl. Terrible raised swellings are becoming lesions all over her body. I wonder what she is taking for them. It is possible that her husband, more knowledgeable I should think than me, is giving her potassium permanganate, but this will do no good, none at all. I noticed, before Mrs. Dubboney closed her well windows—thus, making it much harder for her to breathe and for me to help her in her illness—that she had begun to take baths in malachite green. I thought this colour at first to just be the hue of her favourite bubble bath, until I read that bathing in malachite green is indeed known to be very beneficial to certain fish ailments, but not, unfortunately, to Mrs. Dubboney, and not for *dermocystidium*, no, no, not at all. The only cure for *dermocystidium* is surgical operation. I have written all my discoveries down for the Dubboney family, childless alas, and posted it under their door, for I fear unless they operate soon Mrs. Dubboney may be utterly done for.

* * *

I have discovered who it is that smokes on my roof! Ah, yes, you may not believe me at first, but you will come to see that I am right. There can be no other explanation. It has taken me many weeks to figure this out. But at last, yesterday, I had it. Before, my investigations had always led nowhere; I have always heard a little tapping, but took this to be the noise of some plumbing or some distant sounds, certainly it was not the noise of a person, for a person is quite a heavy thing, and a person would be instantly known to me if he sat upon the roof directly above me smoking cigarettes. And yet someone was there smoking, for I have seen the cigarette butts mounting up. But never had I yet caught sight of the person. I had heard the light tapping noise, or perhaps it could be described as a sort of scampering which I at first attributed to a pigeon on my roof, but now I know for sure. For yesterday, I happened upon Mr. Heck with his dog, a French bulldog, on the third-floor landing returning from a walk. The

dog, always off the lead once inside the building—a thoroughly unneighbourly behaviour—was a little way behind Mr. Heck, who was getting his keys out and unlocking his door. Mr. Heck went into his flat (there’s nothing much in the hallway, I’ve seen it several times), his dog came scampering after him, and then suddenly it dawned upon me: I had heard that scampering before, it was the same scampering as I hear on my roof, and I looked down at the little dog in amazement, and the little dog, as if it had understood me, turned and looked at me, such a melancholy look, and I whispered to it then, “You smoke on my roof, don’t you?” The dog did not reply of course, certainly he didn’t, the dog is a dog after all—what do you think—and not blessed with speech, but I saw in that look, before the dog turned away again and trotted inside his master’s flat, the very wrinkled look of an habitual smoker, a look that was an admission! An admission that said—“I, I the French bulldog of Mr. Heck, I am the one that smokes on your roof.” And then, later that day, I suddenly understood that the dog’s look was not melancholy but in fact nonchalant: it did not care that it smoked upon my roof, and, what’s more, it has no intention of stopping. And the dog, I recall precisely, smelt very much of cigarettes. It is true Mr. Heck smokes too, but he smokes Marlboro Reds, and the cigarettes on the roof are Winston Lights, and the little dog, I would swear to it, reeks of Winston Lights. I have written to Mr. Heck.

* * *

I have no peace!

There’s a lady just beneath me, Meredith Jones, a retiree from the post office, always neatly dressed, who whispers all day long, to her radiator, “fuckfuckfuckfuck,” I’ve heard her, I’ve heard her, I hear her now, “fuckfuckfuckfuck” through the day and through the night, it might by others be confused for the rattling of the radiator, but I know better than that. Such a filthy woman.

Is it any wonder then with such neighbours that I get no work done?

My neighbours stop me from work. I have no peace, none at all. I'm quite hemmed. I can't get these neighbours of mine out of my head.

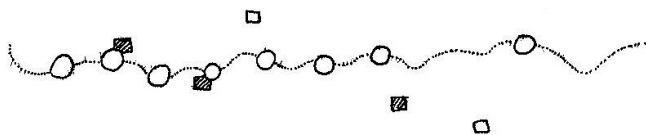
I fill my pages with them. I get them down on paper, I draw them. (Of course, being a children's illustrator, there is something a little cartoon-like in my portraits of my neighbours, I cannot help that. I am what I am.)

No, no work can be done, none at all, not whilst Peter Schank still whistles, not whilst the man downstairs rustles his pictures of women, not whilst the spy comes up and down the stairs with her newspapers for sale, not whilst the Hivvy brothers giggle, not whilst Christopher Dutton clanks purloined bones, not whilst the neighbouring monkey-baby howls, not whilst Mrs. Dubboney is dying with a fish's illness, not whilst Mr. Heck's French bulldog smokes on my roof, and not whilst Meredith Jones speaks obscenities to her radiator. *Not a bit of it! No work! No work at all!*

There is nothing for me in life but my neighbours. There is no room for anyone else. So I have prepared this account for you, I have put a copy of in all your letter boxes—you, who after all fill my box with your junk mail, you for whom every day is one great circus of sounds, a cacophony of bad habits, you, poor lonely, lonely and desperate people—and I ask you, my dear neighbours, if you wouldn't mind please keeping the noise down in future.

I would be so grateful.

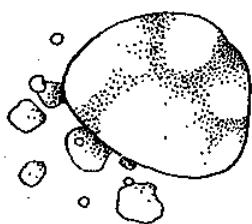
And then I might attend to my own business.



TWILIGHT
AD Jameson

Lily had been cursed at birth by a witch. She'd been condemned by a wicked godmom. Now an adult, she never had any luck, she couldn't find love, she never got hit on, laid, she never got any, or any that she wanted. She was surrounded by substratum men: A werewolf who never bothered to call her, or howl at her. Vampire boys, pale creations who didn't eye her neck. A Frankenstein's beast, big and broad, but stupid, making stupid use of a dumb borrowed boner, and always needing to be recharged. Rotting zombies whose moans she deplored, and who couldn't care less about Lily's body, wanted Lily only for her brains.

What a life! What a curse! What a forlorn state. She'd spend her remaining years single, unloved, uncoupled. The best she would ever do, she knew—she had been certain of this, since the age of sixteen—was to pick up some decrepit mummy from a forgotten antique shop basement, a dusty, musty stiff that she could sleep curled up against and then, come morning, stash back underneath her bed.



THE UNTRANSLATABLES

Caitlin Horrocks

He was a collector. He put the words in notebooks, on the backs of envelopes, or on index cards, like recipes. He collected them in computer files with names like *ilunga* or *hyggelig* or *Scheissenbedauern*—“to be disappointed when something turns out better than expected.” Regardless of the pride he took in these lists, this was never the kind of disappointment he felt.

He believed that one day he would put all the untranslatables in a scrapbook dictionary. It would be large and heavy with startlingly sharp corners and he would put it on a shelf and wait for the woman who would notice it. Leaving her in his living room, he would go to the kitchen to make coffee or pour wine. Lingered, he'd listen for the sound of the book being pulled off the shelf, the slight grunt as she realized how heavy it was, and sat down with it on the couch. He would wait for the woman who loved his untranslatables, who would say, “There is a word called *gökotta*, which means ‘to picnic at dawn on Ascension Day and listen for the cuckoo’s song.’” This, he promised himself, was the woman he would marry. The only woman he could marry—but his book was not yet done. There was no purpose even in inviting a woman to his home before it was, because he would not be able to learn the one thing about her he needed most to know.

Many of the untranslatables were German, but not all. *Luoma*: “to give up something, but peacefully and wholeheartedly; as after a long illness, or a deep suffering, and to step, however wistfully, into the next part of your life.” Finnish, verb. *Mamihlapinatapei*, from Yagán, an indigenous language of Tierra del Fuego: “a wordless glance between two people, lingering and meaningful. They can be strangers or lovers but they are both hoping very much for something to happen. Neither risks initiating.”

There was a temp at the insurance office where he worked with whom he'd once shared this look. He'd never seen her again. He felt both grieved and pleased that he had enacted the true meaning of *mamihlapinatapei*. He felt closer to those faraway people. We understand each other, he thought, even if I do not understand the temp.

He treasured even the words he could not pronounce, could only write by tracing: *ιστορίες με αρκούδες*, “stories with bears,” for anecdotes so improbable the listener doubts their veracity, though hopes ardently for the tale to be true. His house filled with thousands of words. They burst out of desk drawers and underwear drawers and cutlery drawers. English looked poorer, more enfeebled, by the day. He wanted to tell someone about all these words. He wondered what the temp might have said, or if she would have dismissed him for telling stories with bears.

He surrendered himself to *toska*, about which Nabokov had once bragged: “No single word in English renders all the shades of *toska*. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for.”

And in the throes of *toska* he acquired *kummerspeck*, “griefbacon,” extra weight gained through emotional overeating. And when he wanted so much to *cafuné*, to gently run his fingers through someone's hair in Brazilian Portuguese, that he could barely breathe, he calmed himself by reciting more playful words like *tingo*, which on Easter Island meant to slowly remove all the objects from a neighbor's house by borrowing and not returning them.

One day, even his untranslatables could not console him, and he began to write descriptions with no words. He knew he could just make up a string of syllables, but he didn't feel like he would be good at it. He would need an ear for it, and that went on an index card: *a feel for the sounds of spoken language, an instinct for what noises will best suit a particular meaning*. He chanted nonsense syllables to himself in the shower, knowing that they might be

incantations in some language he had never heard, or that had long since died, or had yet to be created.

He realized that he might be a *korinthenkacker*, a “raisin pooper” so taken with trivial details he spent all day crapping raisins like his Post-It-obsessed office manager. But his untranslatables did not feel like raisins. They felt immense, so immense they could not be contained in a house, much less a scrapbook, and the man began to build a shed in his backyard for them. The untranslatables filled the shed before the roof was finished, and in a rainstorm the sheaves of paper grew soft and damp and then mildewed, and he could find no word for what he felt when he looked at them, at the work of so many years rotting in his hands.

But one must exist, or else he was feeling some emotion that no human, in all the ages of the earth, had ever felt, and that was such a lonely thought that he thrust it immediately from himself. He redoubled his research, searching for this word, and then began to worry that perhaps the word was already in him, hidden in plain sight, mistakenly assigned to a utilitarian object. *Toast*, perhaps, was meant to mean something grander than warm, crispy bread. *Milk*, or *eat*, or *check the mail*, or *check* or *mail*. The world then was so potentially deceptive he gradually stopped talking, because he could not be sure what he meant, much less what others meant. He wrote even more Post-Its than the office manager, but he still lost his position. “Poor communication skills,” the dismissal letter read.

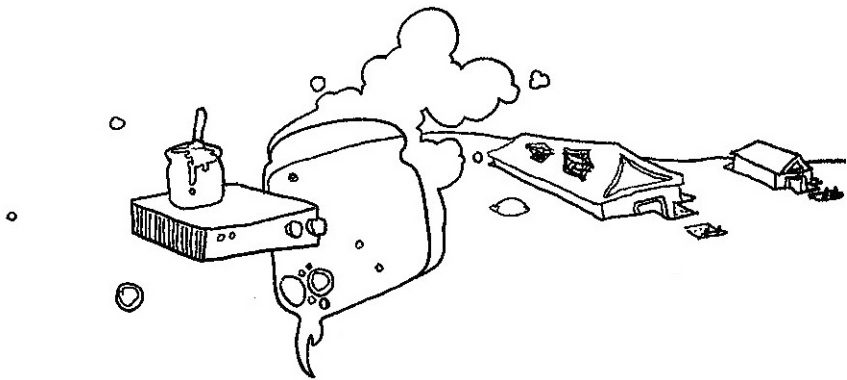
Acelanda, a place where much blood has been shed. *Orenda*, a single human’s will set against the encroaching forces of destiny. That was a Huron Native American word, which, given the decimation of the Hurons, took on extra resonance. He wondered about a new category of untranslatables: words that, given historical events, became ironic or inefficacious. Words that did not even mean themselves, once history was done with them.

His house softened and rotted like paper, while grass grew tall and fiercely, and the city came and posted new words

on his doors and windows until he left. He felt *Torschlusspanik*, the “gate-closing panic” of feeling one’s life narrow to a tunnel. And finally he felt as if he were living with *yoko meshi*, “boiled rice eaten sideways,” the stress of trying to communicate in a foreign language. His whole life, he had been eating and eating, all of it sideways.

That was the last of his definitions-without-words: the loneliness, the tension of the tongue, the torque of a jaw that has held as many words as it can, and a heart that is still empty. He did not believe he could be the only person who had wanted for this word. He knew it must be out there somewhere. And so he kept a single sheet of paper, a chewed pencil end; the paper was blank, waiting. He waited with it, desperate to hear the word in someone’s mouth, to recognize it. To recognize her. *Luoma*, he sometimes tried to tell himself. *Luoma*. But he swallowed down the word, and crouched, listening, until his whole body was an ear.





THE WHITE HORSE GIRL AND THE BLUE WIND BOY

Carl Sandburg

When the dishes are washed at night time and the cool of the evening has come in summer or the lamps and fires are lit for the night in winter, then the fathers and mothers in the Rootabaga Country sometimes tell the young people the story of the White Horse Girl and the Blue Wind Boy.

The White Horse Girl grew up far in the west of the Rootabaga Country. All the years she grew up as a girl she liked to ride horses. Best of all things for her was to be straddle of a white horse loping with a loose bridle among the hills and along the rivers of the west Rootabaga Country.

She rode one horse white as snow, another horse white as new washed sheep wool, and another white as silver. And she could not tell because she did not know which of these three white horses she liked best.

“Snow is beautiful enough for me any time,” she said, “new washed sheep wool, or silver out of a ribbon of the new moon, any or either is white enough for me. I like the white manes, the white flanks, the white noses, the white feet of all my ponies. I like the forelocks hanging down between the white ears of all three—my ponies.”

And living neighbor to the White Horse Girl in the same prairie country, with the same black crows flying over their places, was the Blue Wind Boy. All the years he grew up as a boy he liked to walk with his feet in the dirt and the grass listening to the winds. Best of all things for him was to put on strong shoes and go hiking among the hills and along the rivers of the west Rootabaga Country, listening to the winds.

There was a blue wind of day time, starting sometimes six o'clock on a summer morning or eight o'clock on a winter

morning. And there was a night wind with blue of summer stars in summer and blue of winter stars in winter. And there was yet another, a blue dawn and evening wind. All three of these winds he liked so well he could not say which he liked best.

“The early morning wind is strong as the prairie and whatever I tell it I know it believes and remembers,” he said, “and the night wind with the big dark curves of the night sky in it, the night wind gets inside of me and understands all my secrets. And the blue wind of the times between, in the dusk when it is neither night nor day, this is the wind that asks me questions and tells me to wait and it will bring me whatever I want.”

Of course, it happened as it had to happen, the White Horse Girl and the Blue Wind Boy met. She, straddling one of her white horses, and he, wearing his strong hiking shoes in the dirt and the grass, it had to happen they should meet among the hills and along the rivers of the west Rootabaga Country where they lived neighbors.

And of course, she told him all about the snow white horse and the horse white as new washed sheep wool and the horse white as a silver ribbon of the new moon. And he told her all about the blue winds he liked listening to, the early morning wind, the night sky wind, and the wind of the dusk between, the wind that asked him questions and told him to wait.

One day the two of them were gone. On the same day of the week the White Horse Girl and the Blue Wind Boy went away. And their fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers and uncles and aunts wondered about them and talked about them, because they didn't tell anybody beforehand they were going. Nobody at all knew beforehand or afterward why they were going away, the real honest why of it.

They left a short letter. It read:

To All Our Sweethearts, Old Folks and Young Folks:

We have started to go where the white horses come from and where the blue winds begin. Keep a corner in your hearts for us while we are gone.

The White Horse Girl.

The Blue Wind Boy.

That was all they had to guess by in the west Rootabaga Country, to guess and guess where two darlings had gone.

Many years passed. One day there came riding across the Rootabaga Country a Gray Man on Horseback. He looked like he had come a long ways. So they asked him the question they always asked of any rider who looked like he had come a long ways, "Did you ever see the White Horse Girl and the Blue Wind Boy?"

"Yes," he answered, "I saw them.

"It was a long, long ways from here I saw them," he went on, "it would take years and years to ride to where they are. They were sitting together and talking to each other, sometimes singing, in a place where the land runs high and tough rocks reach up. And they were looking out across water, blue water as far as the eye could see. And away far off the blue waters met the blue sky.

"Look!" said the Boy, "that's where the blue winds begin."

"And far out on the blue waters, just a little this side of where the blue winds begin, there were white manes, white flanks, white noses, white galloping feet.

“Look!’ said the Girl, ‘that’s where the white horses come from.’

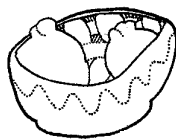
“And then nearer to the land came thousands in an hour, millions in a day, white horses, some white as snow, some like new washed sheep wool, some white as silver ribbons of the new moon.

“I asked them, ‘Whose place is this?’ They answered, ‘It belongs to us; this is what we started for; this is where the white horses come from; this is where the blue winds begin.’”

And that was all the Gray Man on Horseback would tell the people of the west Rootabaga Country. That was all he knew, he said, and if there was any more he would tell it.

And the fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers and uncles and aunts of the White Horse Girl and the Blue Wind Boy wondered and talked often about whether the Gray Man on Horseback made up the story out of his head or whether it happened just like he told it.

Anyhow this is the story they tell sometimes to the young people of the west Rootabaga Country when the dishes are washed at night and the cool of the evening has come in summer or the lamps and fires are lit for the night in winter.





FOUNDLING
Elizabeth McCracken

Once upon a time a public library sat on the banks of a New England turnpike. At rush hour, exhaust fumes rolled into the lobby, like methane off a swamp; the tiles of the front hall were brown, sticky, made of hemp, or the earwax of widows. The library had been built in the mid-nineteenth century and renovated six times, most brutally in the 1970s, when the city installed the sort of Plexiglas windows that seemed designed specifically to strain the vitamin D from sunlight. They bricked up doors; they set the book return in the middle of the façade, a sort of oven door that rotated open and shut and dropped whatever was placed inside into a closet behind the circulation desk: books, magazines, open Coke bottles, firecrackers, garbage, and, one morning, just before opening, a baby girl. The head of circulation found her there, bundled and padded, nestled among the mass-market paperbacks. Beneath the swaddling she wore a pink bodysuit that said, *Mine!* She was not brand new but she was close. “Little volume,” said the head of circulation. “Little monograph. Where did you come from?”

Of course he took her across the foyer to the children’s room, where he heard the great guillotine whoosh of the paper cutter. In the backroom the children’s librarian, a young untidy woman, stood slicing construction paper into diamonds.

“See what someone returned,” he told her.

“That’s a baby,” said the children’s librarian. She snugged the blade down and locked it. “What’s a baby doing here?”

The head of circulation said, “Book drop.” The baby stirred, and the head of circulation’s knees rediscovered the wide-legged bounce they had once performed nightly, when his own boys, now in college, were babies, a dance half comfort, half ceremonial appeal to the Gods of Sleep.

“Who would leave a child at the library?” asked the children’s librarian, but then she corrected herself, because of course mothers left children at the library all the time, mothers believed that public libraries were safe places, when actually they were hotbeds of exhibitionists and peep artists, asbestos and dropped thumbtacks.

“Who would leave a *baby*? Come here, you,” she said to the baby, and the head of circulation handed her over. The baby’s head smelled of gentle, unctuous, edible, craft-room paste; her hair was fine and blond, her eyes closed, as though against great light. The children’s librarian repeated, but gently, “Who would leave a baby at a library?”

The head of circulation said, “Let’s keep her.”

“You and me?” said the children’s librarian.

“The library,” said the head of circulation.

“We’d have to ask Mrs. Diaz.”

Mrs. Diaz was the glamorous, exacting director, famous in the city for refusing to buy Nancy Drew or Hardy Boys books, because she thought they were dreck. She wouldn’t even accept them as donations. When the children’s librarian snuck animals into the children’s room—a vast plastic gerbil metropolis, a pregnant guinea pig, every hand-me-down aquarium from a family moving across country—Mrs. Diaz found out and evicted them. She was excellent at turning things away.

“Will you do it?” the children’s librarian asked. Despite the dangers, she wanted to keep the baby, too.

“I don’t have coverage,” said the head of circulation. By now it was nearly nine. You could hear the metal thunk of the first eager patrons of the morning trying the front door.

The children’s librarian carried the baby up the stairs that took her past the bulletin boards feathered with community flyers; into the 700s, the art section, where four dusty technical copies of the same Raphael *Madonna and Child* looked down at her instructively. Up the three steps into the 800s, Literature, past the bust of Shakespeare on his plinth, and she had the idea

if the baby were awake she would introduce him. At the center of Literature, shelves formed a room around a fleet of gray metal desks. Inside, the women of Technical Services were just arranging themselves for their day's work: cataloging, pocket-pasting, slipping book jackets in mylar covers, applying stickers with Dewey decimal numbers on spines, so that the books, like orphans in a Dickens novel, could go forth into the world to lead useful lives. They—the books, and the ladies of Technical Services—might have dreamt of a different life in a private home, beloved and displayed and well dressed, and only occasionally, caressingly read, but they belonged to the city now and had to work for the common good. No one watched the children's librarian cross the room. At the far corner was a door—two steps down into the secretary's office, though there hadn't been a secretary since the last one retired a year ago, because of the city's budget cuts—and into Mrs. Diaz's tiny windowless office. A stranger might think she was the least important person in the building, but Mrs. Diaz herself would have made it clear: this was where she belonged, central but hidden, a vital organ in the mammoth animal body of the library. She had the shellacked black hair of a 1950s starlet, and a broken heart; all she wanted was her name on a renovation plaque in the front of the library, alongside the mayor's name and the date. She was in her fifties now, and just realizing that it would never happen.

It was a terrible building, no place to raise a child.

"Mrs. Diaz," the children's librarian said.

"Yes?" said Mrs. Diaz. Then, "Oh." She put her hands out and gathered the baby dispassionately into her arms, then scanned the sleeping face as though it were jacket copy.

All at once the children's librarian worried that Mrs. Diaz would decide that this was a Nancy Drew mystery sort of a baby, shaped like an interesting object but lacking intellectual heft and therefore a waste of the budget.

"She arrived in the book drop," said the children's librarian. "This morning. I don't know who, or why. We didn't call the police."

The baby gave an enormous, elliptical yawn.

“Why, *yes*,” Mrs. Diaz told the baby. Of course she wouldn’t give the child to the police. That was as good as handing her over to city hall, to the mayor. “No. Whoever left her here meant to. We’re fully equipped. We’re fine.”

This was how the baby came to grow up at the library, raised by librarians.

* * *

The circulation desk was both forbidding and welcoming, like the bosom of a beloved Victorian nanny. Behind it was a glassed-in office, and here it was that the baby had her nursery. The lost and found provided a pair of mismatched booties and a sweater, and the children’s librarian donated a velour hand-puppet of an owl for a hat, which gave the girl the look of a shaman. After a while, patrons brought in hand-me-downs, and the diminutive clothes were folded into the diminutive drawers of a superseded card catalog. Staff wheeled her through the ground-floor fiction shelves on a book cart. At first she slept in the staff lounge, with whomever volunteered to stay with her, but as soon as she could move she shelved herself at night in some hidden place, and reappeared only when the patrons were let in. Of course she attended the story hours, the craft hours, the tax workshops, the English as a Second Language classes.

In the circulation office, she flipped through books. She understood the migratory patterns of books in the way that not even the head of circulation, who ran the statistics, did. She got to know the patrons through their spilled soup, their blown smoke. She learned to read not through books—no one thought to teach her—but with left-behind drugstore receipts and love letters and cancelled checks. People would use anything for a bookmark, even a Twinkie, once, and that was the first piece of library work the girl did: she found the repair slip that told Technical Services what was wrong with a damaged book, and ticked the box marked *Other*, and scrawled in *Twinkie*.

She outgrew the children's room when she was ten, and moved her bed to the Young Adult section, though she didn't stay there long. Her manners were perfect and heartbreaking—she thanked, said hello—but she was an bedraggled child, thumbs purple from the date due stamp, the skull-and-crossbones stickers meant to designate mysteries slapped on her biceps like tattoos. The reference librarians left out nourishing food, casseroles, sandwiches, but she lived on vending machine packets from the staff lounge, purchased with coins she stole from petty cash.

She read everything. Fiction started in the hallway on the ground floor, the A's by the men's room door, and that's where she lingered, unnerving the men who came in and out. The reader's advisor, a buxom English woman with russet hair, tried to save her some time, asked her what she liked, but the girl shook her head, reshelved the book she'd finished and took down the next one. She could glance at a shelf and see disorder in books and know how to put it right. By then she was a teenager, and the new director—the children's librarian, in fact, who had been promoted—had put her on payroll, though the checks stacked up uncashed in her pigeonhole. She moved to the stacks, the three-story glass-floored addition on the back of the building that held the 0-600s, and the 900s, where, ungoverned, the other teenage shelvers had become uncivilized. They had fire extinguisher fights. They shoved each other into the dumbwaiter. They gave dramatic readings from *Sex and the Single Girl* and *Story of O*. They sinned, but who could blame them? They spent their days in Biology, and Cooking, and Travel.

Probably she fell in love more than once, but she kept her distance.

The head of circulation died. The patrons who'd donated clothing moved away. The library fell into such disrepair it couldn't be renovated: pieces of plaster fell from the ceiling; the glass floors of the stacks cracked; the skylight leaked. The city announced plans to build a new, more centrally located main library.

The former children's librarian sat in the windowless director's office and worried about the girl. Who had left her behind? A regular patron, who'd be able to come and catch sight of her: take home a book, but not her darling. Or someone passing through, who got off the turnpike, left the bundle, and got back in the car and kept driving. The reference librarians might know how to find the parents. They should look, surely.

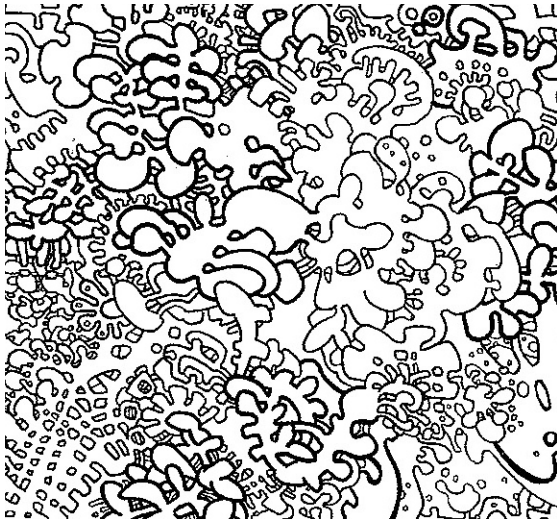
The day before the demolition crew came, the librarians combed the shelves. They loved her; any one of them planned to take her home, introduce her to bathtubs, recliners, bowling alleys, movie theaters. Who would lead her out? But all they could find was a worn hammock strung up in the stacks, and a few red stickers that said, FOR LIBRARY USE ONLY, meant to go in the reference books. She had gone.

By then the girl knew everything anyhow. She'd left weeks ago, had taken the passbook for the college fund a patron had started for her. When she speaks her accent is not from anywhere; she still smells of sweet milky library paste, that is to say, of flour and water; she glows; she is famous. Only in other people's houses does she seem entirely odd. She doesn't like houses. To feel at peace, she has to go to museums, certain big-city post offices, a handful of department stores, old railroad stations. She requires skylights trimmed in wrought iron, oak banisters, slack-jawed marble staircases worn down in the middle.

You have seen her on television, in the movies. You have bought magazines with her face.

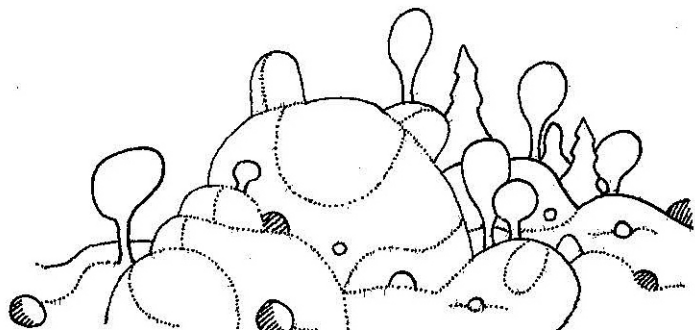
You would know her anywhere.





AHMAD THE GROCER DISCUSSES THE CAT CRISIS,
JERUSALEM CIRCA 1979
Steve Almond

It's like they own the place. You can see for yourself. They go where they like, knock over my trash for the neighbors to see. You can't walk up a flight of stairs in this city without one of them, two or three, staring at you with their haughty green eyes. They copulate wherever they like. They fight. That horrendous wailing—you have heard it, too?—a sound like low women make. And before you can reach the alley they are gone. I am a reasonable man, not without pity. I have lived in this neighborhood fifty years. Fifty years! Ask anybody here, whatever sort of person. Ask them about Ahmad. But these animals, should you try even to feed them, offer a little kindness, hold out for them a shred of meat and you will return with bloody hands. It will not work! They are like the visitor who upends your furniture, insults your wife. They only want to lie in the sun and lick themselves and look upon the rest of us with pity. It's like I've said: they believe they own this place. Into the sea, I say—may the water cure them of their disdain.



HEARTS
Mathias Svalina

My mother had a heart of gold. She died when I was twenty-one years old. I had a heart of stainless steel. Sometimes when I was running & it was beating really fast it rang like a small bell.

My oldest brother had a heart of aluminum. My next to oldest brother had a heart of brass. My little brother had a heart of lead. It was so heavy that it was difficult for him to move. When he shifted too quickly the inertia caused his lead heart to sway violently in his chest & he was left breathless & confused.

My father had a congenital heart defect. A wide pink scar bisected his chest, looking slick & wet. His chest had been opened so many times that the bones in the center of his rib cage were no longer fused together. When he went in the water he couldn't dive deep or his chest would pop open from the pressure.

At my mother's funeral my oldest brother greeted all the relatives. We'd told her siblings that they needn't make the trip in, they'd been here just the month earlier to visit her in the hospital, but they did. Her brother & two sisters sat in the front row of church pews as the pianist played somber music for the arriving mourners. Her brother had snuck in a coffee that smelled like anisette. My oldest brother made everyone feel welcome. When he shakes your hand his hand bends to fit around yours.

My father sat with his twin brother, the one with the healthy heart. They'd looked identical as kids but as they'd grown, one healthy & one sickly, they'd veered away from each other. Now, because of their aging, my dad's gout & blood pressure, my uncle's shot liver, they were beginning to look identical again. I had taken care of the details for the funeral. The priest & I had planned the songs & readings. I'd met with the crematorium to arrange for her remains. My next to oldest brother had accompanied me & scowled silently, arms crossed over his burly chest.

During the funeral my little brother sat in the far corner, his skinny body propped against the wall. His clothes, somehow always too big for his bony body, dripped off his frame, his shirt coming undone, his tie slack.

After the ceremony we put the box of ashes into a slot in the memorial wall behind the church. My dad had bought two adjacent slots.

After all the crying & the sunlight, it was just him & us brothers standing there. He leaned against the memorial wall. He rubbed his fingers across the cut letters of her name & the dates.

“This is where I’ll go,” he said, touching a finger to the empty slot next to hers.

It was only about six months later when my father died. His weak heart finally gave out & one afternoon when I went over to borrow his drill I found the garage open, the hood of his Chrysler up & him slumped over the cold engine.

The church was less full for my father’s funeral. His brother was in the front row but my mother’s siblings had not flown in. He’d only gone to church to keep my mother happy & had ceased entirely after she died. Some elderly women whom I took to be regulars sat in the middle of the room, though there were many open pews in front of them. At the potluck meal afterwards one of them approached me, her plate laden with fried chicken & pasta salad, & expressed her deepest sympathies for my mother’s passing.

After my father died my brothers & I drifted further apart. We are not great talkers, any of us, & had mostly learned about what was going on in each other’s lives through my mother. At holidays we’d get together & watch the appropriate things on TV & talk about what movies we’d seen recently. On birthdays we’d ring one another or we wouldn’t & none felt the worse for it either way.

I was young then. I didn’t know what families were for. When I told women I met at bars that both my parents had died recently it made me seem ungrounded, like anything was possible.

One woman, sipping a gin & tonic I'd bought her, said "So you're an orphan?"

"Not exactly," I responded. That night she held me after we had sex. She asked me about my parents & I gave noncommittal answers. I wanted her to feel sorry for me because I liked the way she held me, but the truth was that death merely felt like one of those things you have to do. She laid her head on my chest & listened to my steel heart beat.

"It's like a jackhammer," she said. "I can hear the little clanging." She was silent for a bit longer & then said, "No, it's more like a watch, an old-fashioned watch where you can hear the machinery at work along with the tick tock."

"TickTOCK, tickTOCK, tickTOCK, tickTOCK" she muttered, repeating this until it made me sleepy. She had long straight hair & I liked how it felt splayed out over my skin.

"Ask me what time it is," she said.

"What time is it?" I asked her.

* * *

When my little brother called I didn't know what to say. I hadn't talked to him since his birthday the previous year, about a month after our father died. We'd both forgotten to call on each other's birthdays this year.

His hair had fallen out, he told me. The doctors figured out that the soft metal of his lead heart had been grinding off & getting in his bloodstream.

"They figure that's why I've been in & out of the hospital so much this year," he explained.

"That makes sense," I said, but I'd had no idea he was in & out of the hospital so much.

He needed to have a heart transplant. He was going to have it done in North Carolina where I lived. My parents had moved here because they had the best hospital for heart work & my father's doctor had recommended it. I'd moved with them,

my little brother, too, since we were still in high school. I'd gone to college in New York but moved back to North Carolina afterwards. I work in computer design. My little brother had gotten a full scholarship to a liberal arts college in Ohio, but due to his condition, he'd dropped out after a semester. Because of embarrassment or inertia or whatever, he'd stayed in Dayton, working a series of underachieving jobs that he'd lose or quit due to his perpetual sickness & lethargy.

He wanted a favor. He wanted to move in with me, into the guest room in my apartment, while he was preparing for the surgery. It'd be a few weeks before he was admitted into the hospital but they had a lot of tests to do. He called them "prelims."

"Of course," I told him, because that's what you tell your family when they ask for favors. I had nothing either positive or negative to think about the prospect of him staying with me.

He'd warned me, & I'd seen some photos online, but I was not prepared for the changes that had come over him in the last year. The baldness was one thing, I had friends who shaved their heads, but the way his bones seemed to push against his skin was something else; the bones seemed somehow wispier as they became more pronounced. That was unexpected.

The first night here he came out of the shower with a towel wrapped around his waist. I could see not only his six-pack of scrawny abs, but every single muscle feature on his chest & stomach. The towel wrapped around him completely twice.

We went shopping the next day. He carried a list the doctors had given him of ingredients to avoid & we spent our time assessing boxes of products like collectors.

His Eastern medicine doctors had given him a separate list of herbs & oils & teas to get & we had to go to the hippie co-op for that. My little brother wore a stocking cap over his bald head, but he looked pretty fucked up. As he was discussing the things he had to buy with a plump assistant in the soaps & medicines section, she teared up & asked him if she could hug him. He said yes & stood awkwardly as she wrapped her bare arms around

him, touching her hands to her elbows behind his back. She had thick, curly hair tied back behind her head & smelled like cedar.

After she let him go she went to the back room to find a few items that they didn't have upfront. "You two should get a room," I joked.

My brother didn't respond. There were tears running down his face. The sickness had made his eyes bug out a bit & they were strained & red.

I turned & looked at the handmade soaps. I held them to my nose. Each one was complex & earthy. Each one cost ten bucks a bar. When I looked back at my brother he had wiped the tears away.

* * *

At first my oldest brother didn't think he was going to make it out, but my next to oldest had agreed immediately. I wanted all of us to be together when my little brother went into the hospital for the surgery. A week before that, my oldest brother sent me a text that read, "My schedule shifted. Can make it! Woot woot!"

I called him immediately but he didn't pick up. In the message I told him I wanted him to stay with me but that he'd need to bring a sleeping bag & a pillow. I had an airbed in addition to the guest room, but I didn't have bedding.

Five minutes later he texted me back: "Dnt worry. Katrina in Chapel Hill. Will stay w her."

Katrina was an ex of his. He'd proposed to her & then broken it off. It had messed her up pretty bad but she remained devoted to him. Every time he was between relationships he'd return to Katrina. They'd go on some trip, scuba diving with manta rays, Southern France, or some other kind of package deal. Then he'd ditch her when he found someone else.

I called him again. He didn't pick up. I told the voice mail that I wanted him to stay with me, that it was important for him to stay with me.

A few minutes later he texted back. "Cool!"

* * *

The airport shuttle pulled up & my next to oldest brother got out. He had a carry-on suitcase that rolled. I'd been waiting outside the apartment building since he'd texted a few minutes ago, smoking a cigarette & thinking about him. I'd never seen him smile. He was always at the edge of becoming annoyed or angry but he never actually got angry. When he was younger that scowl would get him in trouble when he was out at bars. But he was a thick, tough guy & could get away with mostly anything.

He hugged me & I hugged him back, both of us using only one arm & slapping the back.

"When did you see him last?" I asked.

"Yesterday, I guess," he said.

"Yesterday?" I asked.

"On Skype," he said.

"You Skype?" I asked. My voice had pitched somewhat high.

"Why is that such a surprise? He & I Skype two or three times a week," he said.

"Three times a week?" I asked. It had never occurred to me to try to or want to Skype with him or any of my brothers.

"What do you two talk about?" I asked.

"Nothing really. TV. Mom & Dad," he said. "He tells me about what he's cooking. He's been using mom's Crock-Pot a lot lately."

"Mom had a Crock-Pot?" I asked. I'd never used a Crock-Pot. To be honest I wasn't sure what one was.

We ordered pizza. I'd been doing the vegan thing for a little while but I didn't feel like talking about it, so I just went ahead & ate the cheese.

One of my brothers had brought *Road House* & we started it up while waiting for the pizzas to arrive. My little brother & my next-to-oldest brother talked about movies & TV shows that I was not familiar with. It was like they were picking up an interrupted conversation. They made fun of my small TV. I tried to keep myself from talking about how much I hate TV, but I talked about it.

The pizzas arrived. We ate & then I put the plates in the sink to wash them in the morning. I offered beers but both of them waved them off. I drank one & then another, but all they did was give me a headache. My little brother retired to the guest room & I blew up the airbed for my older brother with the little motor.

Before I went to bed I was doing one last check of email & Facebook. My little brother had changed his status to “Pain don’t hurt.”

I clicked *Like*.

* * *

“If I make it through this OK then I think I’m going to get that tattoo,” my little brother told me on the way to the hospital. I wasn’t sure what tattoo he was talking about but I encouraged him to do just that.

My oldest brother had missed his flight the night before & took a cab straight from the airport to the hospital. My next-to-oldest brother & I were in the waiting room, killing time swapping between magazines & our phones. The doctors had taken my little brother in about an hour earlier. He seemed to perk up once he had the hospital gown on. He was talking really fast & laughing in a high pitch.

I heard my oldest brother’s laugh before I saw him. He was on his cell phone, just about yelling into it, & I was instantly annoyed with him. He walked around in a circle just beyond the waiting room seats for about twenty more minutes, talking to someone he kept calling “darling.”

Once he clicked off he sat down next to me with a huff. He smelled citrusy.

“Where’s your bag?” I asked him.

“I didn’t bring one,” he said.

A doctor came out about fifteen minutes later—far too early. As he approached us, I decided that my little brother was dead. Therefore nothing the doctor would say could upset me.

“We’ve run into a bit of a snag,” the doctor said. “Perhaps we should have assumed something like this would happen, considering your family’s history.”

My older brother stared at him. His arms were folded & his forearms looked like hairy tree trunks. My oldest brother smiled at the doctor & nodded.

“Is he—” I paused. “You know, passed away?”

“No. It’s not as simple as that,” the doctor said. “I think you’d all better come with me.”

He led us into a spare room with children’s toys piled in the corner. He pulled up two swiveling office chairs & one stool. My oldest brother sat on a chair & twisted slightly back & forth. I sat on the stool. My next-to-oldest brother stood, arms still crossed.

When they cracked my little brother’s chest they’d found that his heart was no longer a leaded thing. Instead there was a small Tupperware container full of keys where his heart should be. The doctor showed us a few photos on a laptop screen. The first had the Tupperware container covered in the blood & grime. For the last few they’d wiped it off a bit & opened the lid. In all of them a bit of his intubated face showed, slack & blameless.

“So it’s not lead poisoning,” the doctor explained. We were still facing the laptop screen, though we were no longer talking about the photos. My oldest brother was looking at the pile of children’s toys & bouncing his knees.

“So what is the plan,” my next to oldest brother asked the doctor.

“Well,” said the doctor, watching my oldest brother walk over to the pile of toys & begin to poke through them, “We’re a bit stymied. It’s got to be one of the keys, but how we can’t know which.” He turned back to the photo on the laptop. “It could be more than one of the keys, even. Do you recognize any of these?” he asked us.

The keys were anonymous. No skeleton keys or fancy ornate ones. No clunky office building keys. Just normal keys for suburban doorknobs.

“That one sort of looks like our old house key,” I said. “But then again, it looks like my apartment key as well.”

My oldest brother held up an old toy police car, the kind that you roll backwards & it speeds forward. “Check this out!” he said. “I used to have this same car, except it was a taxi!”

“So you need to remove at least one of the keys,” my next-to-oldest brother said.

“Yeah, in a perfect world,” the doctor said, “we could figure out which one it is by swapping them out & charting his reactions.”

“What do you mean by a perfect world?” I asked.

“One where we could crack his chest open every day,” the doctor said.

* * *

For the next week we went to the hospital every day. My little brother was pretty drugged at first then he wasn’t. As before he seemed more spirited in the hospital.

“Keys!” he said when the doctor explained the situation. “I wondered what all that rattling was. Must be a lot of keys for it to be as heavy as the old lead guy.”

“Yes, the Tupperware was filled right to the lid,” the doctor said & chuckled as if he were talking about an old shared joke.

The next week my oldest brother had to return home & to work. The week after my next-to-oldest brother had to go as well. He promised to be back immediately if there were any changes. He made me promise to call him every day & I agreed, though I hate talking on the phone.

Then it was just me visiting every day. We'd watch TV together, mostly *Law & Order*. The hospital only got about twelve channels but there always seemed to be a *Law & Order* marathon on one of them.

One day I was there, at the snack machine getting Doritos (I'd given up on the vegan thing), when suddenly I was on the floor & there was a nurse kneeling over me. I could see right down her cleavage. She was an older woman, maybe late fifties, but she had some large breasts. I started laughing & she said "You with us?" I kept laughing but then the laugh turned into a cough & then I was just coughing, unable to stop.

The doctor who'd explained the key situation happened to be on hand that day. He stopped in while another doctor was checking me out.

"I think we should get an echo of his heart," the doctor said to my doctor. "You know his family, right?"

"Yep," my doctor said, both of them ignoring my presence in the room. "He's the one with the brass heart, right?"

"Steel," I said.

"No," said the other doctor, "He has the steel heart."

"Right, right," my doctor said. "Well we need to get him in there quick, there's nothing beating here at all."

"Interesting," the other doctor said.

"I know, right?" my doctor said.

The next day three doctors hovered around the screen as an echocardiographer rubbed her tool around my chest. They were muttering to one another quietly so that I couldn't hear, but they seemed baffled.

"Could it be?" one doctor said.

"I think so," said another, "but I've never seen this before."

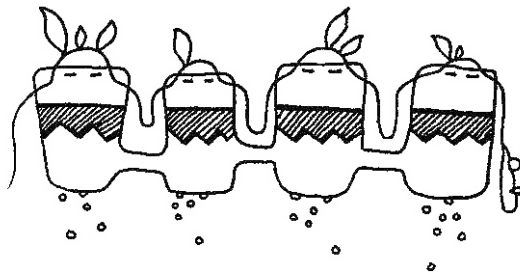
The echocardiographer changed the angle a bit & all three doctors sighed.

“Yep,” said the doctor who’d been taking care of me earlier. “That is definitely an apple.”

* * *

That night, back in my apartment, I cooked up some broccoli & brown rice. I sat down in front of the TV, my food steaming on the table. The basic cable I had gave me forty-three channels. I scanned through the channels, looking for something to watch. The news shows had too many crazed graphics running across the screen. The game shows all felt glib & moribund. The laugh tracks were too loud in the sitcoms. The dramatic pauses too prolonged in the dramas.

I wanted something specific, a particular feeling, a particular escape. When I was in college I’d planned to do a lot of traveling. I’d wanted to backpack across Europe, to swim in the clear waters off the coast of Thailand. PBS had some show with the camera sweeping over the icy mountains of Antarctica. I laid my hand over my chest. Nothing was beating there. I touched my fingers to my throat. No pulse. The food had cooled on the table. I scrolled through the names in my contacts list but I couldn’t find anyone to call.



WHAT'S YOUR FUCKING PROBLEM?

Robby Nadler

Jaxom can't keep himself together because Eli has been saying *pussy bagger* for the last half hour. Eli zigzags the backseat from window to window, hoping to get a chance to stick his long, black snout into the passing air. I can't let him, though: someone might hear him.

It doesn't bother me that Eli can talk. No—the issue is that he hasn't been able to say anything but swears since Stringer's platoon was ambushed in the Nuristan Province. The vet says it's PTSD, that Eli has a trauma-induced version of Tourette's. Of course, we didn't know *this* when we adopted him.

* * *

The call came in and Jack received the news first. Then he told me. I told Jaxom. We cried like any family would—when we heard, when we remembered, when we were eating dinner and realized we'd always have an extra chair at the table. Sometimes I cried because it made me feel like I was doing something. It's not like we could fly out to his body, and because we live near a military cemetery, we didn't have to plan. All I had to do was show up to the funeral.

Maybe the only reason people started to bury bodies in the first place was that it gave our hands something to do. I miss my son, which means I miss being Stringer's mother. That also means I miss my son.

* * *

The idea about Eli came from a soldier in Stringer's platoon. We all knew about Eli. Stringer had written letters to

Jaxom about how close they were. Eli followed Stringer into all sorts of places he wasn't allowed to be. One time, a soldier who had just been shot at flipped out because Eli was in the mess room. From that point on, Stringer ate all his meals with Eli outside.

But Stringer wasn't clear about the talking thing. He wrote that the more time he spent with Eli, the more human Eli seemed. He said they shared a sleeping bag and that Eli had started speaking. I thought he meant the dog could bark on cue or something, you know, a trick. Maybe he was clear.

* * *

A couple of weeks after we buried Stringer, one of Stringer's buddies wrote to Jaxom, told him how amazing his brother was, that he should be proud. The buddy also said he'd kill a bunch of towelheads in revenge, so Jaxom shouldn't worry about getting even. He ended the letter talking about Eli. He said that Eli refused to sniff for bombs, which meant the dog's days were numbered. The buddy thought we might want Eli as a reminder of Stringer, since the two had been so close. We'd never owned a dog because Jack's allergic, but we couldn't say no.

At first I thought the paperwork would be more complicated, but it was easy getting Eli because they were going to put him down now that he refused to sniff. A body was being sent this way anyhow, so they just put Eli on that plane too. And then he was here.

I'm now convinced dogs can know things we don't. It's probably a smell thing. As soon as Jaxom wrapped his arms around Eli's back and Jack started sneezing, you could see Eli light up, tail wagging.

On the car ride home is when it happened first. Jack sneezed and *shit* came from the backseat. I turned my head and told Jaxom to watch his mouth. He looked confused. Then Jack sneezed again and I heard it, but this was while I was looking at Jaxom, so I knew he hadn't said it. We all turned to Eli.

Jack wrote the buddy and the buddy confirmed that yes, Eli could talk. He seemed surprised that Stringer hadn't mentioned it. Eli was a sponge for language, the buddy wrote. The dog had learned all his words—good and bad—from Stringer. *That's that, I guess*, was all Jack said. And we accepted it. I suppose we were all so enamored of the fact that Eli could speak that it didn't matter what came out of his mouth. But it grew old. I'd walk him and Eli would blurt out *sandy cunt face* when we passed the women on the block. When we watched *Jeopardy* as a family, Eli would answer questions with *who's your daddy?* and *what's your fucking problem?*

Jaxom thought this was the coolest thing in the world. He said it was like Stringer could talk from the grave, that he had his brother back. I told him Stringer had never used that sort of language, but then remembered he'd called me a cowardly bitch when I tried to talk him out of enlisting. He'd said this was about making the world safe for Jaxom; I'd told him the war was about contracts.

Jack's sneezing worsened, so he lived in the basement, the only place in the house Eli wasn't allowed. Then I wasn't allowed in there because I carried Eli's fur on me, unless I had just showered. I missed holding my husband in bed.

* * *

I started keeping Eli in my room because Jaxom said Eli was keeping him awake.

When a dog has a nightmare, it looks like something awful from the sky is about to descend. The dog writhes with all four limbs in the air trying to swat it away. His stomach convulses. He cries.

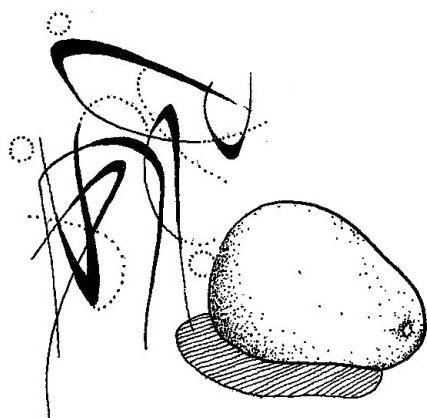
When this happens, Eli launches into me, and I wake him up. He looks me in the eyes and breathes deeply, but fast. He doesn't know where he is, and for a second I think he's just a regular dog until: *asshole*. Then he licks my face and I can taste his breath.

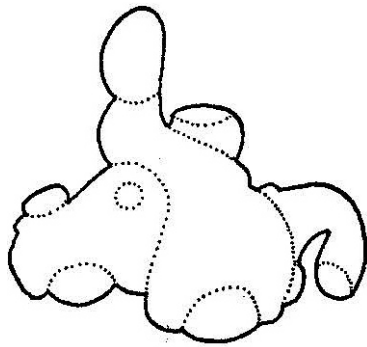
* * *

Jack and I decided last night, but we didn't tell Jaxom. He thinks we're driving to another one of Eli's therapy sessions at the vet, where the vet asks Eli about life and Eli responds with *what's it to you, faggot?*

The only thing out of Jaxom's mouth aside from laughter is a cry every time Eli runs across him and accidentally steps on his groin. They sound like brothers when I'm paying attention to the road and forget everything momentarily.

The other thing I've learned about dogs is that they know what you're going to do. This has nothing to do with smell unless they can smell guilt, and maybe they can. After Jack and I talked things out, I took another shower and went to bed. But this time when Eli woke me up with a paw to my kidney, I turned to him, and he said *mom*. Not *motherfucker* or *son of a bitch*. Just *mom*. In the darkness his black coat bled into the air, and I only knew him by the warmth of his body, the hot breath he blew at me to let me know he was still there buried in the night.





EMPIRE GUIDE TO NAMING COLONIES IN AFRICA

Iheoma Nwachukwu

He pretended to be John Brown. She was Victoria.

“Your Majesty, permit this fool to sup upon a royal nipple,” he said and bowed, then bent at her tipped breasts, making her chortle because his waxed moustache always tickled her.

They lay in the half tester warmed by a stone bottle filled with hot water. The cretonne curtains had been left tied on each side of the bed. The sheets they lay on, showing a smiling sun in the centre, smelled bad. Brass knobs on the bed’s metal frame reflected poor light from the candles on the dresser. A blank paper, a pen, and a red book with the title *Empire Guide to Naming Colonies in Africa* looked back in the tall mirror on the dresser.

His right hand with its thick thumb travelled down her flabby nearly white stomach to her dark rosette of hair. She stopped laughing, shook her body from side to side and moaned, “Aaah—my Niger area, Fre-de-rick. Ee-e-sh, you don’t think the Queen was—aaaah—you don’t think the Queen really lay with that servant, do you?”

First he guided her hand to the fork of his body, where he throbbed with aching ardour, and returning his hand to her tuft, lifted his face and (abandoning the game) said, “I want to plunder your Niger area, blast the Queen.”

Soon they pushed into each other, jabbering the nonsense of sex. She was loud as usual and tonight her “Ahhh—my Niger area! Niger area!” lifting off the bed, segued into, “my Nigeerial!” as her excitement coalesced to a single point.

It came to him later—in post-coital embrace. All the time, his eyes rested on the tear-shaped wall clock beside an oil canvas of himself as King that George Hayter only agreed to paint after months of begging.

He had been thinking how amusing it was that she called her vagina “Niger area” because she thought her lower hair black as this race-type along the River Niger.

He started when the other thought came, like a burning torch that appears in the distance. That’s the name, he thought. He shook her awake.

“Flora, Flora. Wake. Flora wake for goodness sake! Remember... do you remember what you said when you climaxed?”

How could anybody remember that? Sometimes he gave her too much credit as Colonial Editor for *The Times*; he really did think she possessed super-adhesive faculties.

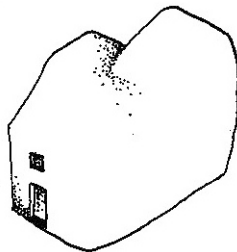
Her opening mouth first deceived him, until her eyes, hazel, closed again and she fell back against his side.

He stared at her for a moment in annoyance, letting his thick moustache lift into his nose. Flora was a failure in bed, not like his other women. She could only go once and after that collapsed into a kind of opiate sleep. But she had something the others didn’t have. He’d give her that. She had given him something now. What was it? He rubbed his wide forehead, sliding his fingers up into his thinned hair, thinking.

Then it came—Nigeeeria! flooding his brain with light. “Aaah,” he cried, “Eureka!” Slapping his head, beaming, he rolled off the bed swinging his penis here and there. Her eyes flew open. She asked him to come back to bed but when she saw that he only went to sit on the backless chair in front of the dresser, her helpless eyes started to form the sleep-squint he liked to tease.

Frederick pulled the blank paper on the dresser toward him, turning once to smile at her. She had helped him solve the task of finding a shorter name for these cursed pagan and Mahomedan territories. Nigeeeria was apt. Syllables soft-falling. Incorporating the name of the river. He had been thinking of a way to use the river too, and had only come up with “Niriviera,” “Soudaniger,” “Nigershire.” All of which sounded unpleasant to the learned ear.

Smiling, he took the pen with its steel nib in his hand, looked in the mirror and nodded with triumph at his reflection. He composed himself—High Commissioner Lugard. He would write the Queen about that barony, now that he had news.





BIOGRAPHY

Vinny Lopez

“I’ve been screwing a lot of guys,” she said.

“Having sex with,” Richard said, his hand still elevating the damp mass of her curls as she dry-heaved between the toilet and the tub.

“A lot. In my mind, I have. All the time. Constant, constantly.” Wilamena was long past slurring, now just getting lost in the adverbs. He shouldn’t be thinking of the sound her forehead would make bouncing off of that lid. That’s not what a good husband would do. And he was the best.

“Yeah. Okay,” he said, trying to be graceful, or diplomatic, whichever was nicer. “Let’s stop talking.”

“Because it’s depressing.”

“What part. What is depressing?”

“I don’t know. Your biggest parts. You’re a jo-oke,” she said, gulping on that last *o* so hard that he raced her face back to the bowl. But she snapped her palms down and held fast. “You are. You had,” and she stopped to swallow a thought or a loose piece of calamari, “so much *potential*.” She said this directly to his gut like she was having the conversation with it. He caught a bad angle from the bathroom mirror, his ogre frame hunched over her, brown trails of wild hair crawling down into the stretched pouch of his underwear, belly pendulous like it was leaning in for a kiss with her face.

“I’d be careful,” he said, “about any more words you have up in there.”

She looked as if she were going to give a response, and technically she did: she threw up one last time—the one that got out the beer, strawberry margarita, Chianti, champagne—her orange curls face-first into the bowl anyway. She hit away the towel he offered and went to bed with a finger caught under her bra strap.

Wilamena had pulled it together by nine, after he'd spent the morning trying to Bisquick something into pancakes for the girls while a hangover bit on his scalp. They'd thought better than to ask why their mommy had stumbled in the door last night like she was seasick, and they were a few years from understanding the tightrope difference between getting that second celebratory bottle of wine, and chasing that celebration up and down the top shelf of the house bar. "These are *so* good," lied little Margie as she gnawed her way through the rubber base of a second stack. She was always the fixer, that one.

His wife appeared in the kitchen, showered but somehow still looking oily. "Happy anniversary," she sang in the weakest tune. "Do you know what happened to my clothes?" Her eyebrow was tilted in her classic truth angle, so he knew that she had no idea where the back half of their evening had gone; what she'd said after he'd stumble-walked her up to their bathroom for her recital. She caught his expression. "Did I do something?"

"No! No. Are you coming with us?" he said and licked his battered fingers clean.

He put his arm around her at Sunday service and sang every hymn directly into her ear. Afterwards, when they got back to the house, he said that he wanted—needed—to go for a drive. Alone. She looked concerned. And he wanted her to keep that feeling for a little while.

He couldn't help it. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink all that often (neither did she, really), he didn't yell, he didn't curse or punch or snort or get caught up in the world's various ills—so all he could do was drive around angrily and honk at people who texted at stoplights. He found himself parking in front of the ice cream place where they grafted candy bars onto your sundaes and had them put in brownies, peanuts, mint thins, caramel, put the fudge on it, two sprinkles, rainbow but then chocolate; he carried it out to his car and ate silently and thought about how angry he should be at her, all the ways he could hurt her, women at work who thought he was the *right* kind of joke. Then he prayed,

like he did in moments of weakness like this, with fudge dripping down his thick jaw line. Moped around with God about how, after fifteen years, all he had to show for it were the flecks of vomit still crusted on the bathroom floor. No, no. He had his kids, his girls. And he had Wilamena. He did. She was a known quantity.

“Dear Lord,” he began. But his thoughts choked. Lately he wasn’t sure what else there was to say, so he kept it to that, *Dear Lord*, and hoped that maybe a burning bush or a levitating trash can would finish the sentence for him. He felt the top of his belly pressing against the steering wheel, and threw the ice cream out onto the highway as he left, then softened further and called Wilamena on the way back to see if she needed him to pick anything up for the house.

Though it was still unclear to her exactly what had happened, she made peace with fried chicken that night—the most perfect peace of all—and then a couple of days later presented him with a surprise after they’d put Rachel and Margie to bed.

Wilamena handed him a light yellow envelope, which he opened. Inside was a card, thick and embossed. “I saw this on *Ellen*,” she said. In an enthusiastically serified font on one side, it read: *Biography. Your Life Is Our Business!* On the other, some contact information, some place in Des Moines. Wilamena smiled and put a hand on the top of his belly.

“Richard, I sure love you. Honey, if I said something—”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“Well I’m really proud. Fifteen years, it’s a long time, that means a lot.” She still had her smile spread wide. The entire span of their relationship, her smile had been on tap. You can’t have a sundae every day, he thought. “And I thought you’d like this. I thought it could be fun.”

“What am I looking at?”

“I think it’s like scrapbooking—but someone else does it for you. Like a yearbook for your life.”

“I have that already. They’re sleeping down the hall.” He slipped the card into his pocket. He saw in her disappointment

that he shouldn't have said it, but Richard couldn't help feeling that her hurt expression was the parking-lot prayer he had hoped would be answered.

* * *

Six months passed. He fell right back in with Wilamena and lost track of why he'd ever felt the right to be so angry. Nothing happened, no one died, Rachel got her first period and the tricky talks began about bras and breasts. From time to time Wilamena would bring up the gift she'd given him, and he'd tell her that he'd left the card at work and would get to it very soon. He promised.

But the thought of someone creating a pop-up book or novelty song out of his blood, sweat and tears made him boil. He was built like a walk-in closet, he had a scowl carved into his bone structure. Yet people were always offering him suggestions on hot picks for fantasy basketball, articles he should print out to read on his BART ride to and from the city and Walnut Creek, crappy seven-layer dip techniques. And he wanted none of it. And he never would have called Biography if Captain Critters hadn't died.

Oh his heart, it squeezed itself out until it was just a weak thing squirting powder through his veins. Margie came in crying and he carried her around the house with her arms around his leg and her feet balanced upon his foot, petting her hair and trying to tell her that the rabbit was in heaven eating all the carrots in the world. And he had Rachel help her paint a special shoe box, and they had the ceremony in the backyard. Margie was a brave girl, keeping the tears down like a presidential daughter as he lowered the box among the boughs of the plum tree that he kept forgetting to prune. Then he went into the garage and cried and cried, in a way he'd never—not even after his father's death. And he tried to convince himself: *Richard, this is Dad you're really crying for; that's what this is.* But it wasn't. It was that damned bunny.

For years it was just “that rabbit.” Or that G. D. bunny, when the girls had forgotten to clean the cage. But then, a year or so ago, as he was tucking Margie into bed at night, he’d spied the bunny looking at him while she said her prayers. Like it was listening in. Like it understood. He swore he saw it nod once. *This is a wise bunny*, he thought. And one night, when he and Wilamena had finished whispering a screaming match upstairs, he walked by Margie’s room on the way to the TV, and there was the bunny, looking back at him with those shining, understanding eyes. And so he stepped into Margie’s room, and unlatched the catch—careful, quiet—and brought him along to watch the late sports reports and remodel shows about projects he’d never do, Cricket scores, hot tub repair. The Captain just lay quietly in his arms. The nose whiskers would flick over the hair on his wrists and he’d feel it cut through his body like it was butter. He’d pet that soft fur and whisper everything into those ears. He did it once, twice, tops, four times a week.

Then that bunny was put under the plums, and the rules changed.

That Monday, with The Captain’s whiskers still tickling his thoughts, he took the elevator to the fourteenth floor of the Wild Cherry offices, sellers of the “finest in high-tween and low-tween casual-wear;” pulled up to his desk with the really pretty spectacular view of the Bay Bridge, dug the card out of his desk drawer and put it in his palm like a compass. Shifted aside the inventory analysis sheets piled all over the mahogany, and dialed the printed numbers.

“Biography!” said a flimsy voice, a Time-Life voice from his childhood.

“Yeah hi. I got this gift a while back. Probably expired, actually.”

“Let me just forward you to the ‘hello’ department so they can get some information, all right?” And there was Neil Diamond on the phone singing about Acapulco for a few seconds, then another amateur receiver. Old, old, old as dust. “Hello! I’m Doreen. You’re...”

“Richard. Richard Dell.”

“Richard Dell, I see. I have you right here! Richard, so let me just ask you a few questions, all right?”

“Sure.”

“Can I get your address?”

“72834 River Bend... I thought this was already taken care of. Listen, I’m not interested in buying anything else. I was told—”

“I’m sorry. The address you were born.”

“The hospital?”

“We’ll need the hospital, too. But for now, let’s just start where you grew up. Does that sound good?” He kept waiting for the drop, but they never asked for his social security number or credit card information. Nor did they seem interested in photos, or favorite quotes lifted from any of his toilet-top inspirational paperbacks. Just the address where he was born. His schools elementary through bachelor in business administration at San Francisco State. His current place of work and the two or three jobs before that. Five clubs of which he’d been a member. Did he have any super saver cards for any grocery stores or drugstores? About five minutes of work, all told.

“Okay great!” Doreen said after the final question. And then silence.

“Is there anything else?” he asked.

“No sir!”

“Well I’d like to know what happens next. How we proceed.”

“You do no proceeding, Mr. Dell. You can expect your publication in twelve to twenty-four weeks! Thank you for calling, Mr. Dell, and thank you for using Biography!”

“Publication?”

But Doreen had already disconnected, and only the dial tone remained to keep him company. He didn’t even bother to dislodge the phone from his neck as his fingers began typing a search into a web browser, clicking link and then link, then the right link.

Made With Web-mazing Web Editor 2.0! it said on the top bar. It was not web-mazing. Just the company name, all-caps and bold, and underneath a big photo of a leather-bound book with bold text embossed in the center of it:

YOU

Fake leather, actually. You could order in soft- or hard-bound, burgundy or black. *Finally, read the biography of someone who really matters! You!* was written under the main photo. Further investigation only garnered a contact page with the same address as on the back of the business card, and a couple of stock photos of smiling people looking off optimistically into some pleasant sunset, like the parents of the posters that lined the storefronts of Wild Cherry.

He had to stop the investigation short. There was the summer line to display, and he was being paid a good (the best yet) amount of money to work on what configuration would make the most sense for the store. The deconstructed jean skirts were testing well, and they had some great product integration with *The Wizards of Waverly Place*, so the display was being moved near the entrance to be paired with the “My-Dyed” line of polo shirts which was selling poorly. He didn’t care about polo shirts. He never cared about the products being produced at any company he’d ever worked for. His only concern was the flow. Where eyes landed, how they traveled, the way that someone wanted to believe they were discovering something new. And he was the best at that.

The truth was that Wild Cherry was about ten years out of style, junior high being a ruthlessly fickle market, and his job was to work magic with the inventory analysis and find a way to get people back into the store using new recessed lighting scenarios and—no one knew, maybe holograms. They were even sending him to a display tradeshow made of tradeshow displays

in New York in the hopes he'd come back with the stone tablets that would guide the company back to profitability. That's how the president felt about everyone these days. He and his fellow employees stared at each other all day as if they were competing to helm the Exxon Valdez.

By the time he'd returned from the operations meeting he'd already forgotten about the call. There were emails to ignore, dance camps Rachel expected him to find the money for. Respects to be paid at The Captain's resting place. The specifics were irrelevant. Just, these things would have led to the next forever and ever.

Only twelve to twenty-four weeks later he came in damp from his summer commute to find, lying on his desk, a medium-sized box with a white label. Central Shipping & Supply, Des Moines. He car-keyed the tape open. And wall to wall were the soft faux-leather edges of the book, with that giant gold word, **YOU**, printed on the front, and it slid out with a hiss of air it was so tight in there. His biography was more than an inch thick, 631 pages, each one filled with text, all of it smelling like copier toner.

A few blank pages led to the heavily seriffed first chapter. *It was breezy on the morning Richard Dell was born, which was unusual for the central Californian town of Lodi. But there was a record chill that February morning, bringing with it snow flurries that threatened to ruin the crops of grapes the area had become so well known for. Richard's mother, Barbara, had been in labor for twelve hours before giving birth to the nine-pound, three-ounce boy. Even then, he was a screamer.* A description of Lodi's climate, cultural significance, floral density, and median income continued for another four pages—including detailed comparisons to Lodi, Italy and Lodi, Illinois—before the writer allowed baby Richard to leave the hospital.

Using facts likely culled from a morning's Internet search, they began to piece together a dull narrative. He was an energetic boy! He was raised on a tree-lined street! It felt like one of those Sunday supplements his wife loved to read that profiled

this month's new actress and tried to pull some significance out of the girl's taste in coffee and high heels.

At least it had a solid feel in the hand, and would be perfect for smoothing out creased ties. He flipped farther into the book. *And there was #23 waiting for him with teeth bared, moments before the fateful hike. "His body might have been built for the game," added Coach Varnier about that pivotal night, "but you could tell his guts just weren't ready for it."* The sentence sunk Richard's ass farther back in his chair. Had they actually called Coach? Was Varnier still even alive?

"Richard? Direct reports meeting?" His assistant was at the door. He'd had the book between his legs, his elbows rested on each spread knee.

* * *

On the commute home he bunkered himself into a corner seat, and dug his fingers into the thing.

It was as awful as expected, but not as he'd imagined—that they would punch in a few details over some template, make a Mad Lib with a few embarrassing photos peppered in. But this had taken work, investigation, persistence. They'd interviewed people. A lot of people. Old teachers, girls he'd lovingly thrown tanbark at in junior high. His crossing guard with the dirty sunglasses who always drank spiked Tang from a thermos. It didn't matter.

The book wasn't about him. He barely recognized this boy.

Shy, timid, clinging to his mother's legs. Crying in kindergarten—and not just first-day crying, either: long heaves over little things like Play-Doh sticking on a sweater. This Richard, Richard Two—*Dick*, he began to call him—he whined about undercooked s'mores, was called *piggy* in the third grade because of his weight. Richard had never been called *piggy*. Maybe once. But wasn't that something about *Charlotte's Web*? Didn't

that pig save a girl from a runaway tractor? Dick made a weekly routine of watching *Solid Gold* with his mother when his father was out in the garage and couldn't catch him. Richard had only done that once.

"We tried everything," said his mother, sighing, regarding the long summer months Richard spent alone with his cartoons every day. "Soccer, baseball, church youth choir. All he wanted was an Atari. He had a bottle cap collection. He wanted Mexican Coca-Cola. He kept swearing the logo was different. We called him our lost boy—that was before the satanic movie came out with the same name." The quotes had to be manufactured. Barbara, she would have told him something about this.

But the facts were mostly true. He had collected a few hundred bottle caps, nothing ambitious, no Kremlin Kola or anything. And he'd had some social problems as a kid. Though by the time he'd hit junior high, he'd grown into himself and was fairly popular, and—Shucky.

Fuck. Damn. (—he corrected himself.) *Dang.*

There he was, painted in romance-novel embellishments. *Richard jabbed his fingers deep into the boy's armpits as the bloodthirsty crowd looked on.* There was no way they could have found this. The spelling bee incident, okay, public record. But Shucky—*tried to struggle. Richard had only one thing on his mind. "Open," he said in front of the boy's fellow classmates. Shucky continued to pull against him, but Richard dug his fingers in deeper, until finally the boy did as he was told, and opened his mouth. While the crowd of young bullies watched in juvenile admiration, Richard let a long trail of saliva drip from his mouth and fall between the boy's lips.*

"I spent half of junior high just planning how to avoid that creep," said Louis "Shucky" Corbin about the event that, to him, still felt as painful today as it did then. "I mean there were a whole bunch of us that he tormented. I guess that must have been my lucky day."

Richard was pit-stained and shaky by the time he reached his house. He had placed the book at the bottom of his bag as if it were a piece of incriminating evidence. Everyone was making

biscuits in the kitchen. He kissed his wife on her lips and both cheeks and then gave her an extra hug to be safe, hugged Rachel, who pushed against his chest and looked at him like a mall cop, then excused himself to go upstairs and make a phone call.

“Mom.”

“Dicky!”

“Hey. Hi. Listen, did anyone call you recently?” She wanted to talk about ranch dressing, the current lack of it in her home. “Mom. I don’t have time for anything but someone asking you questions about me.”

“Dicky! I don’t know.”

“Mom. G. D. it. How would you not know?” Was this what Dick sounded like? Richard huffed out through his nostrils and tried to ask again more calmly. “They may have asked you about my childhood? Maybe about my school? Football stuff?”

“Oh! I thought that was the census.”

“Mom, dangit, why, how could you think it was the census?” Downstairs he could smell meat warming and wafting, notes of hot white flour coming up.

There was silence on the other end for a good long while. Even after his father’s death, she still seemed to save space for the man’s all-encompassing commentary. “They were very interested in if you’d ever forgotten to return any library books,” she said. “I guess it says something about someone’s character.”

After dinner, TV, late-night news, the first fifteen of Leno, in bed with the windows open, he said to Wilamena: “You didn’t tell me they’d ask everyone questions.”

It took her a moment, then she caught up. “They said not to tell you.”

“Why would they say that?”

“They said it would ruin the surprise. Why, did you get the book? Can I see it?”

“No. I didn’t. A friend got one. I was just wondering.” He turned off the light, staring up into the blank section of ceiling where a fan should be installed to assist the weak wheeze of the central A/C. “He said it was pretty disappointing.”

* * *

Richard barely slept, rolling in the surf of some dream about Varnier-faced cattle with moos that sounded eerily like Bill Walsh, and dragged himself to work feeling half empty. It was not the time for this. He was prepping for the trade show at the end of the week, and there was only room in his brain for LCD displays and cork flooring. Instead, after a few cursory clicks at his desk, he closed his office door, propped the book on his knees like they were his pulpit, and continued with Dick's life.

Mostly, it was the same song on repeat: the moderate successes, the solid but not stellar football record, the graduate-night keg stands. A failed attempt at youth ministry—Dick hadn't felt secure enough to praise Jesus into a PA, unsure that he grasped The Lord in quite the same way as all of the other students, not as sure as he was about recommending glass pack mufflers to teenagers at the auto parts store he worked for.

What this book had crafted was a poor photocopy of him, like that story he'd read in high school of the homo that had the painting of himself that got older while the real guy stayed handsome. They may have had the events here—okay, some good quotes, too (especially as the biography reached his current job, and an anonymous coworker painted him as “one of those pleated jerks they spit out of Bible camp”)—but they didn't have *him* here. They didn't own him at all.

There was a knock at the door. Richard was called off to a meeting about the meetings he would have in New York, and could barely keep focus. What the hell was the point of this? Was it still about that anniversary night? Was Wilamena so unhappy that she'd pulled this elaborate revenge? No, not possible. The only thing she could orchestrate would be escorting Hot Pockets from the microwave into her mouth. *That's just the kind of wretched thing Dick would say*, he thought while chewing through an entire pen cap.

They kept conversing in spreadsheet, and he just kept repeating “definitely something to consider” every so often so he could return to thinking of the pages pulsing over in his office, creating a shape. Now that he began to see the big picture, a narrative had taken shape: Dick the slowly sinking ship, an adult but not much of a man. Days spent using the bilge pump on his life, nights out back praying to the bunny for guidance. Desperate for a sign, a direction, any possibility. Richard couldn’t help but have some brotherly concern for the man.

After the meeting he walk-ran to his desk, pulling the book from his drawer with its pages spread where he’d left them. His sausage thumbs set twin dimples on either side of the soft spine. When the weight of it was balanced between his palms, that was when the obvious had finally reached him: that he’d been reading about his present, and that he was barely halfway through.

* * *

When he freed himself from the office with an excuse about a rancid lunch wrap, he looked the part. He’d felt twisted up as he read farther into the biography, his skin getting so ghostly that he’d had no option but to take himself as quickly as possible to the nearest cement bench—Yerba Buena gardens a few blocks away, that sweet section by the tea shop—and push through pages until he found what he was looking for.

“I... I thought I knew you!” she said, tears swelling in her warm brown eyes. Wilamena had his biography clutched in her fingers. He’d worked hard to keep it a secret. But upon unpacking Richard’s bags after his trip to New York, and finding the biography stored inside, she’d decided to take a peek. And now she was holding it before him as if he were on a jury stand, about to get the sentence that could change their lives forever. “I just don’t understand!” she cried.

“That guy, that’s not me. I’m right here, same as ever,” he tried to convince her. But even he didn’t believe that. Not anymore. And

certainly not after his trip to New York, where he'd locked himself away in his hotel room and finished the book. He'd felt irreversibly changed, now, and could no longer hide his feelings. "It's just that, maybe God is dead. It looks like it. And maybe we are too. I don't mean our relationship. Maybe I do. But I love you. I know I don't say it enough, but it's the truth. More than ever. But the rest of it and probably our lives and maybe God, probably God especially, are dead. What I'm trying to say is that I don't believe in God, and not so much in myself, but a lot in you."

Richard felt the wide back of his tongue go dry. It sank lower. The paragraphs were becoming too painful to read; he had to breeze through the pages with his index finger guiding the way, like he did with the golf-anecdotal business books he bought at every airport.

After the big reveal, Wilamena told poor Dick she was going to her friend Janine's house, with the kids, to think. Because thoughts couldn't fit in their house, apparently. And eventually, neither could he. Dick moved himself out to a small apartment in Concord, because the church and Wilamena's friends agreed, this was no way for her to be treated. Poorly, perhaps, but secularly, never. So the man found himself in a two bedroom with a courtyard view and camped out for the next four excruciating years, fighting over visitations and divorce incidentals.

And his daughters, of course, they sided with her—she'd felt abandoned, probably felt like she'd been given a false bill of goods. She was right, Richard thought. Dicky'd been living a double life, only he'd never known what the other one was supposed to be, like he'd bought two homes and kept the other one empty. Good for her. And his daughters. He should have spent more time thinking about raising his family and not chasing every little flight of fancy. The brain's a wild horse. You can never let it wander, and never keep it from the tug of your lead.

As grimy as the book had become, he'd begun to relish the piecemeal decline of Dick's life. Wild Cherry had gone under. Dick went back to retail, managed a Foot Locker, ate microwave meals, and went to the odd baseball game with coworkers. But

most of all he called the kids who didn't want to answer, tossed his sheets around over the wife from whom he'd grown so distant. Richard followed the man as he waded for years in the low tide of his new life, looking for whatever the godless equivalent of burning shrubbery was. There was a pornographic comedy to it that Richard couldn't put down.

The sodium buzz of the park lights came on above him—he'd missed his train, probably. He'd have to call Wilamena and let her know he'd be late. He slipped the book in his bag and headed for the station. Maybe he *should* tell her about this. Maybe she'd find it as funny as he did. He paused at the newsstand on Market Street and tried to flip around to that bit where Dick gagged on the churro at the team-building seminar, to maybe show her that section, but instead he found himself ahead.

Dick was living in Seattle. Rachel worked at a hospital—
No. He'd read that wrong.

Rachel was thirty-two when she

Richard snapped the book shut, and let it fall from his fingers back into his bag. This wasn't funny anymore. He should throw it away, right now, call the company, demand an explanation for this, this, it was sick. The biography and the company took over his thoughts on his commute. Lots of angry plans appeared and vaporized along the rails. But still, he couldn't find the courage to let it leave his possession.

By the time he reached home his kids were asleep, and his wife was sitting on the couch watching a reality show about their marriage the way all reality shows nowadays were about their marriage.

"Did you get my messages?" she said.

"I did, I did. No. I didn't. I'm sorry. All this last-minute stuff is coming up because of my trip." Her eyebrow arched, like a metal detector. "What?"

"Nothing," she said. But with the accent of everything. He wanted to tell her NO I'M NOT CHEATING I HAVE NEVER CHEATED ON YOU I'M JUST LYING AND THEY LOOK

VERY SIMILAR. He just wanted to make love and go to sleep. He hated saying make love, but even in his thoughts, he tried to be a gracious man. Instead, he put down his heavy bag and sat down next to her until he woke alone on the couch sometime in the night.

* * *

He found himself on a plane bound for New York; his neck was still tense from the weight of a laptop, charger, two cell phones and the hefty book, which had stowed itself in his carry-on for the journey. He wasn't sure how it got there, only that while he kissed his beautiful daughters goodbye, avoiding their ever-detaching expressions, he thought of asking Wilamena to take Rachel to the doctor. Just for a routine checkup plus MRI. And thought of the page. The image of her neck, her arms gone pale and skinny.

Before they'd left the runway he had his fingers on the biography's spine, splitting it open. And he read across the entire country, and barely ate. He followed Dick to Seattle, six years after the divorce now, Rachel just out of high school and into college. His weight had ballooned and his fingertips had grown number than ever. He was living in his sister Luann's finished basement apartment. Rachel was not yet dead.

Richard took the cab from the airport straight to the hotel. He ignored the blinking on his phone, skipped the meet-and-greet dinners and ordered room service.

The weather of Dick's life was shifting gradually. The Seattle air inspired him. He'd taken to biking, met a friend or two through work (a small shoe store in Capitol Hill), thought about dating and what that might imply for his lonely body.

Then, on a Sunday morning ride past a popular Mexican restaurant on the bay, he noticed an empty, baby-sized pier wedged under its stilts, and had something. Six months after that, the something was a kayak rental service: Dick and a cash register

and a few boats and a sign under the restaurant's that said *Sea Legs Rentals* with an arrow curved around like an elbow pointing to the back. And it was dead empty for six months. Then it wasn't, then it was booked and busy on every sunny weekend of the year, and even some of the lousy ones. One day, when he was trying to dump out a lost earring from a double kayak, the phone rang.

"Did you ever deal with like operating leverage in your job?" said Rachel on the other line. "I have this thing due." Dick had Josh and Carter take the desk so he could talk to his daughter like a real living person for the first time in years.

Richard lay swamped under his down blankets, day or night, whatever was implied behind the pulled curtains. He'd shut off his phone. Put his computer in the closet like he resented the sight of it, and read his eyes out.

Dick was finally getting married to Roxanne, a former manager and muse at *Sea Legs*; Rachel was coming up regularly; and now Margie was arriving for the first time, holding her mom's hand in solidarity during the ceremony. It was so good of Wilamena to be a sport about it. Less than ten years after that, Rachel passed away from cancer. The same year that Margie had her first child, so much wonder and misery compacted in a year that could barely hold it—he'd opened his third rental location on Lopez Island that summer as well. Then Wilamena's death of a heart attack at fifty-nine—what a surprise and a shock to everyone. Roxanne took up running with him after that, until their knees couldn't take it anymore and so they took up swimming, she conned him into aqua-robics, they moved back to the California coast so they could be nearer to their kids and grandchildren, and, and. Richard struggled with the words. If he could make the sentence to describe what was happening to Dick, he could bury this book for good. But Dick had taken him far past his moorings, and now Richard didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to speak. Dick had been lost, like the song and all the other songs that sing it, and then he'd been found.

And then, he died. Complications from a bad cold. He had lived longer than all of his siblings and both his parents, crested just past ninety; old and bald and shriveled when he passed into silence. No church bell melody or weeping speeches, just his children on a fog-washed beach, his ashes mingled with the wind, ocean, and that really bad Kansas song he always half-jokingly demanded they play, no matter what. White pages. Then the back cover.

It was 3:59 a.m. Richard closed the book, and held it on his lap for a long time. He'd missed the entire trade show. And an hour later, for lack of another thought, he reminded himself of that again. Now, he supposed, he was also going to miss his flight.

* * *

Richard was deep in the cornfields by the time his growling stomach reminded him that he'd forgotten to eat since the previous night. But he'd been making good time. He'd arrived at the airport from the hotel with his things shoved like broken bones back in his luggage, and found the first ticket counter that could take him on their first flight to Des Moines. He'd watched the sunrise from the sky.

The GPS directed him past the three- and four-story buildings that passed for a bustling downtown, then some big high-rises that made him feel guilty for assuming Des Moines wouldn't have them. Soon after, he arrived at what had been, at best, a second-tier shopping center back in its heyday. Now, between the "For Lease" signs, it was home to a crafting supply chain, a fitness studio for pregnant women, a Christian thrift shop, and, in the back corner by the dumpsters and the mailboxes, a set of windows blocked out with shiny black tinting, advertised with a sign so small he had to get out of the car in order to read it: Central Shipping and Supply.

There was no one to greet him when he entered, no real reception to speak of. Just a set of a dozen or so desks of various

shapes and sizes, put face-to-face, all manned by retiree women with sunburst hairdos of white or purple-white curls. Each with a small headset, busy dialing numbers on phones. Typing into old beige computer monitors whose screens fluttered when the refrigerator at the other end of the room sputtered to life.

He paced in no one's general direction until the woman nearest noticed his expression, and came over with a denturous smile. She was wearing a baby blue sweater with the words "Can Do!" hand-knitted in white on the front.

"Who wrote this," he said, holding the book up in his hand with the edges curled inwards by his grip.

She seemed flattered. "Oh, well they're all a group effort. Mostly I do school records and extracurricular activities. We all have a specialty."

"No. Who is responsible. Why did they write this. I need that person."

"The staff—that's us here, plus Joan and Elaine who work from home—use a set of standardized questions that are made to..."

She was beginning to feel the heat coming off him and put the smile back behind her lips. "You killed me," he continued. "You. Fucking. You killed my daughter."

Her head gave a conciliatory tilt. "Everybody dies, I'm sad to say. It's a biography. That's just how they end most of the time." She was trying with her wrinkled face to convince him that she shared his concern, and he took that moment of silence to put the heel of his foot to the side of her Formica-topped desk, tipping the entire thing on its side. It was louder than he expected, and there were horrible exhalations, the type that only grandmothers can make. The chatter had stopped. Everyone was staring his way with deer eyes. It was very clear that he was a tall, heavy, fat-browed man in a room full of soft women.

"I stop believing in God," he said.

"While we're primarily Methodist here, we understand everyone has their own beliefs."

“But I am not an athiest,” he insisted.

“Yes, of course,” she replied. “Right now.”

“Is this a test? Are you testing me?” Despite his plans, Richard’s eyes had gone wet.

Another woman stepped in—slightly younger, early fifties and still keeping her hair dyed vaguely black. She put a hand on the other lady’s shoulder, who very thankfully took a step behind her. “We’re going to refund your money, okay, we’ll do that for you,” she said in a principal’s voice, “but you need to know that we’re going to call the police.”

“Are they in on this, too?” he said. Loudly.

A small voice came from the back. “We’re just doing our job,” it said, barely audible. He looked up and saw them for what they were—tiny little people. He felt like a rabid animal. Looking at the shattered screen and bubbly trinkets strewn across the floor, he began to cry, also loudly. “I’m sorry,” he kept repeating as he attempted to pull the desk upright, damaging more in the process. The woman put a manicured hand on his arm as if there were no ill will. “That’s okay, now,” she said.

“Why won’t you just answer me?” he said.

“It’s nothing too special, Mr...” She waited for him to respond with his name, which he did, his full name and city, he wasn’t sure why. “Richard. I remember you now, Richard Dell. We ask a lot of questions, that’s all. And there are just so many kinds of people out there. It’s not as hard as you’d think.” On the floor, near his feet, was a figurine that had fallen from Can Do’s desk. A ceramic teddy bear figurine, in what at first seemed to be a diaper but turned out to be a loincloth, his little cubby arms nailed to a puffy wooden cross. “We just gave you something new. We thought that’s what you’d want.”

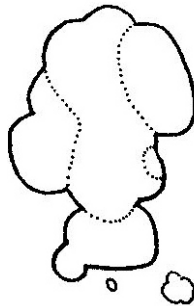
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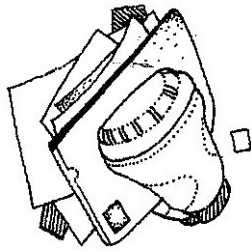
The house was dark, the whole street oil-black and still by the time he arrived back home. His smartphone felt heavy with

messages. It had been vibrating in a mantra on and off all day since he turned it back on. He looked at the emails briefly: *Please call*, said a subject line. He turned it back off before he could read the name.

He set down his suitcase and his briefcase, which was heavy with the story of his life, of Dick's life. Slid off his shoes at the bottom of the stairs and padded up the carpeted steps, past the pictures of his daughters, both still so young. He and his wife in Big Sur on one of their earlier anniversaries where they only had to worry about ticks and clean water and not about diapers and what color of feces was the okay one. He turned the flimsy door handle he kept forgetting to replace, expecting Wilamena to be there with the lights on and her eyes already trained on his, like a hunter. But she was fast asleep.

He slipped off all his clothes, one by one, and let them fall to the floor, even his underwear. She sniffed as he pulled himself under the covers, but did not wake. Her hair wavered around her expression, and her nostrils outpoured an exhalation over him, with the slightest little hum, like a warm cat. And although he knew he might never sleep like this again, he was content in the thought that even now, in the depths of the night, she always had the sweetest breath.





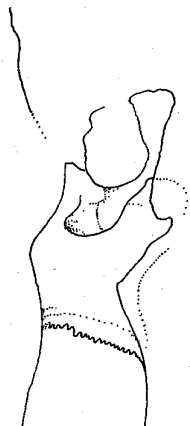
HUNTING
Donald Revell

A cloud, a rabbit and a quail, these
Are the letters of Jesus' name.

Ewer,
Dogs and a ewer:
Vermeer angers your awful roommate,
And still God's mercy rains upon the past.

Put it together.
Donald, only you.
Vermeer—
Dogs and a ewer.

Either everything is music or nothing is.
Either we live in the past or there are more birds
Than can be counted.
Everything is music.



YETI LOVEMAKING

Ling Ma

Making love with a yeti is difficult and painful at first, but easy once you do it more than thirty times. Then it's like riding a bike. The human body learns. It adapts. The skin toughens, capillaries become less prone to breakage. Contusions heal by morning—you don't even see them. Certain fluids stop secreting altogether.

And you don't call it making love, because it's not the same. I could tell you the name of it, but there's no known phonetic transcription. The name of it is a mating call. The yeti calls first, and then you call, and that's the name. That's how the act is initiated. It takes two parties to make the sound of the name of the thing you're going to do. Which is different every time. Which grows stranger and more lonely every time.

You have probably heard the call so many times, walking in the parking garage of your office building, in this lakeside city where women are always holding congress with mythical creatures, unbeknownst to you, under your nose. Maybe you thought it was a foghorn, even though it was a clear night. Maybe you thought it was wounded coyotes wandering, again, downtown. Or someone grieving, the same way every night, boring, almost, in her distress. But I was not grieving.

I met the yeti three months after we had broken up. It was at the wine bar near the ad firm building where I worked, where you occasionally waited for me that summer. A man in a gray suit and glasses came up. He was a businessman, this man, or bore the accoutrements of one.

He bought me a cocktail without asking, and proceeded to explain, casually, that he lived in this neighborhood, just a few blocks away. Actually, what he said was six blocks. No, five and a half blocks. That's what he said, five and a half blocks, as if he

were afraid that at six blocks I would say no. I didn't tell him that actually, I liked him up to eight blocks. In our city, that equals a mile. I liked him up to a mile.

My friend told me not to go, but I went anyway. "You don't know if he's a serial killer," she said.

"Normal people have one-night stands too," I said, tossing back the cocktail that I hoped was spiked with Spanish fly. It was a Manhattan.

It was then, not fifteen minutes after we arrived at his loft, that he revealed himself. I don't mean that he took off his pants, though he did that too. What he did was, he gave me a glass of water. And by the time I finished it, his human suit lay crumpled on the floor, cleaved in two by a zipper seam, to reveal a shiny, sweat-dampened abominable snowman.

A thunderous sound filled the room. I thought it was my heart, but it was him. He was panting furiously, newly emerged from his cramped, human-sized cocoon. His labored breathing gave the impression that I could outrun him.

"You tricked me," I said. I was sitting on his sofa, a Crate & Barrel piece, the Silhouette model upholstered in Scottish Glen leather. I knew, because I had named the model and I had named all the color options. (You asked me once what a marketing copywriter does. "I create narratives for furniture," I said.)

The yeti sat down next to me. "Not making any sudden moves," he said, holding his paws up in mock surrender. He located an ashtray before lighting a cigarette. "Sorry, did you want one?" He smoked American Spirit lights.

"No, it's okay." Making conversation had become a delicate art. "Doesn't it get hot in the summer?"

"Always." His laugh was surprisingly high-pitched. He'd probably been asked that so many times. He handed me a pamphlet and wandered to the bathroom. "I'll give you some time to read." I heard water running, and something that smelled like Old Spice wafted in the air.

The pamphlet, sponsored by the Center for Yeti Well-Being, was entitled, "So You've Met a Yeti..." The first page opened with a quote by ecologist Robert Michael Pyle: "We have this need for some larger-than-life creature." The rest of it explained the history and culture of the yeti. It explained my options.

The yeti came from the Himalayas. With human overpopulation, entire clans had migrated to the farthest reaches of nature, to its highest, least hospitable altitudes. Only since the 1970s had they descended and learned to assimilate into human society. While there had been reported incidents of humans being eaten, those cases were considered anomalies, as the yeti diet was primarily plant-based. The yeti population stood at an estimated 19,300. If I was reading this now, I was lucky enough to behold this mythological creature, whose lineage stretched further back than my own. Fate had found me. The plural of yeti is yetis.

When I looked up, he was leaning against the doorframe, sipping a glass of water. Brigitte Bardot on a bearskin rug. Sophia Loren in an enormous mink coat. The yeti smiled. "This is not a dream," he said. He was one hundred and seventy-four years old. He molted twice a year.

The first time you came over, you brought a handful of scarlet cockscomb. You explained how to dry the flowers, to bind them and to hang them upside down in a cool place for two to three days. "The thing about cockscomb is that it retains its color after being dried," you said. "It should begin to expel a shower of black seeds after the first day," you said. I laughed. I looked at your eyes and thick curly auburn hair, the color of some Middle Eastern grain.

"Are you Jewish?" I asked, beneath you, where all the jagged rocks were.

"No, the opposite," you said. You had descended from a long, exhausting Germanic line. It included butchers, wielders, metalworkers, and, at the tail end, two fragile writers: you, your

father. You taught literature at a community college, and in the summers worked as a bike messenger.

I remember it rained a lot that summer. And you worked a lot too. You were thin from biking around all day; your protruding clavicles collected rainwater.

I closed the pamphlet, pretending to have finished. The yeti made his approach. "Do you want to pet my fur?" he asked, almost shyly. His camel-colored fur, drying by streetlight, looked luxurious.

He crossed the room, slowly, and knelt in front of me. I touched both his shoulders, as if knighting him. It was soft. I hadn't thought it would be this soft. It was like petting a Maine Coon times ten. And when I heard the growl emanate, I wasn't scared because it wasn't predatory—it was pleasure. It was just a purr uttered by someone who wasn't used to purring, so it came out harsh and strangled. This city was not his natural habitat.

Only later would I understand that for a yeti to ask you to pet his fur was the ultimate privilege, that we were already bonding. When I drew my hand back, there was blood on my fingertips. His skin was surprisingly scratchy.

"I didn't know this was going to happen," I said.

"It's in the pamphlet," he said.

The last page of the pamphlet, entitled "Yeti Lovemaking," explained the differences between the human body and the yeti body, differences so significant that strict compromises had to be brokered before a human-yeti coupling could proceed. The yeti epidermis was lined with tiny incisors, and had remained this way for millennia. Meanwhile, the human body had evolved. The human body learned. It adapted. The yeti body survived by the opposing principle: by not evolving. The yeti body did not yield.

"We're like cockroaches," the yeti joked. He was reading over my shoulder things he already knew by heart. "But this doesn't really give the full picture of yeti lovemaking." He explained that once he'd expunged his cloud of pheromones I would go into another mindstate altogether. First would come

blindness, saline crystals forming in my eyes, then the blood thickening that would feel like a headache, but a really good headache. A rash would spread across my skin, the upper torso area mostly, blighting it with red clouds. It was a chemical thing. The effects would last for about four hours.

I looked at my cell phone. It was 9:37 p.m. In four hours it would be 1:37 a.m. Few buses ran that late.

The yeti looked at me as I contemplated this. He said, “But that’s kind of a shitty thing to do to someone without telling them first. I don’t want to start anything unless you want to.” By the way he’d said this, I could tell that he had made mistakes in the past.

“Would I turn into a yeti too?” I asked.

“I’m not a vampire.”

I blushed.

He paused, wanting to broaden the point. “Do you know what it’s like to have to hide your true nature at all times?”

We looked down at the blood on my fingertips. I was sweating. This was because his pheromones had begun to secrete—just a bit, he couldn’t help it—and I was beginning to feel their effects. Cars honked outside. Women sat at sidewalk cafés with their financier boyfriends, eating late-night Niçoise salad. Only their hands looked old. The lake kept rolling. Weatherman Tom Skilling said it was going to storm that night. I wondered if I had closed the windows in my apartment. “I never gave you my heart,” you told me, two days before you got into that bike accident, breaking three ribs and your ancient, Germanic clavicles. If your body had been broken beyond repair, I would have paid them to pluck out those bones for me—me before all others: friends, family. It had been raining that day too. Whatever I felt—whatever this feeling was inside of me—there is no place for it. There is no place for it to go, and I would have to carry it around inside of me for a long time, so long that it would fossilize and become a part of me.

The silence in the yeti's apartment deepened. I wandered over to his record collection, past his mantel displaying mid-century lighters, past his closet filled with trench coats and shoehorns, past his credenza stacked with pamphlets. "You have a great selection," I said.

"Thank you." He crossed his legs and lit another cigarette. (Yetis are the last real men around; everyone else just reads men's magazines.) "What do you want to hear?"

"A sad song with a good beat." I ran my finger across the spines. I put on Janet Jackson, *The Velvet Rope*.

I turned around.

"Okay," I said.

When the yeti initiated the mating call, it was familiar and low, an oceanic bassline that churned up sea beds, that could've impregnated whole orca whales if it'd tried. His call lasted for about a minute, and then it was my turn.

My call was different from the yeti's, but it reflected his; they were two halves of a whole. My call was a shriek down a hall of mirrors, riddled with buckles and clasps and nooses. It pierced through the city, through concrete and glass, obliterating insects, parching the throats of bystanders, before finally hitting a cruise frequency that only yetis, only you and only I, could hear.

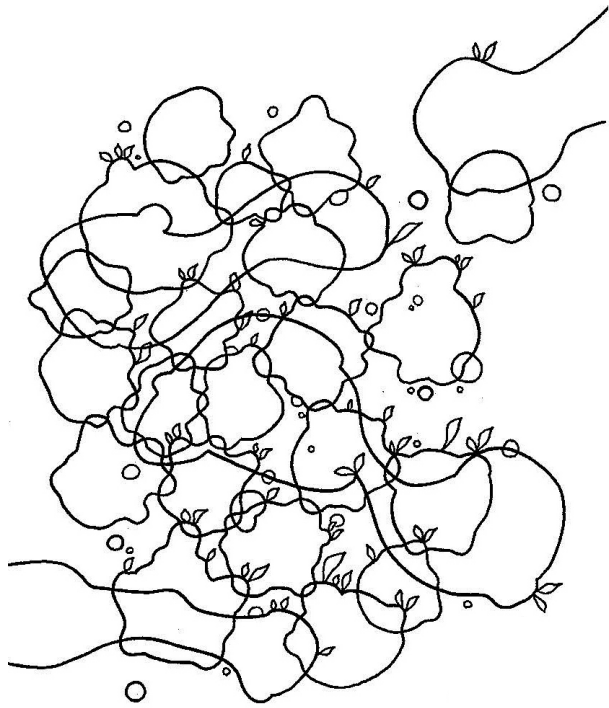
That was the call you heard, the one that made you pick up the phone, not the next morning or the following weekend, but months later. During that time, I had turned another age. Fall had passed to winter. It had been snowing outside, and all I wanted to do was moisturize and drink water next to the radiator.

"I had a dream about you," was the first thing you said. I didn't say anything. So you began to describe it, the dream, and I began to listen. It was nice, modest in scale but not in feeling. I was in it, you were in it, other girls were in it. Rife with Hitchcockian motifs. Against a Western backdrop. It contained things that maybe at one point I'd waited to hear, but in the waiting had grown distant and oblique. And when you were finished, you waited.

On the other end of the line, I tried to speak. Broken vocal chords tried to strike, but it was like wet flint against steel. What came out was a raptor rasp, what came out were shiny metal clicks.

“Hello,” you said. “Hello.”

I waited for you to hang up, but you remained on the line. Your voice got soft. It sprouted nightshade. “Listen,” you said. “Don’t hang up. Just listen.”



SNAKE PLANT

Paul Lisicky

The man put him near the hot fins of the radiator. He left him in the cold stream of the open jalousies, whenever he thought the house needed airing out. Every couple of days the man dumped a half-glass of tepid water in his container, as if trying to find out whether root rot was something real, not some illusion dreamt up by some anxious gardener. The snake plant always emerged from these trials reasonably intact: a severed tip, a split spear, nothing more. There was pride, definitely, in finding out that he was more resilient than he'd known. He felt a vague exhilaration about it, a sense of calm inside the rightness. Yes, I survived one more thing. But that kind of thrill can only feed you for so long.

The snake plant didn't know why the man did these things, and why he simply didn't give the plant to Meg across the street, who lived in a waterfront ranch with a Florida room filled with spider plants, jade plants, bromeliads, orchids, and prickly pear. There were so many plants, it smelled halfway between a botanical garden and a humid motel room off the old Tamiami Trail—at least that's what the plant had overheard. It sounded good enough to him, but he was stuck with the man. Why was the man so hard on him? The snake plant did not take up too much space or water. He stayed reasonably crisp and green. He had a vaguely modernist aspect about his carriage. In certain moments he saw himself as the plant version of someone who might have leapt across the stage of a Martha Graham production, or even as a representation of the tongues over the heads of the apostles. Perhaps the snake plant should not have been so free with the self-regarding thoughts. He certainly had his doubts and insecurities (he thought his third leaf rather stunted and a bit gangly) but over time he'd grown to accept his own failings.

He suspected the man had no clue as to why he was doing horrible things. The man wrote checks to save the manatees. He left food out for the lost cats who roamed away from their colony at the ferry terminal. It was important for the plant to remind himself that the man was no villain. Whenever the snake plant's hurt felt especially fresh and raw, he tried to picture the man as a six-year-old standing out in the snow, outside the elementary school, in smudged-up glasses, with no mittens. Where had he left those mittens? On the radiator? The toilet seat? Not again. His mother would kill him. And now, as usual, she was two hours late in picking him up, no sign of her car coming up the drive, though the school doors had been locked a while ago. And so on. The snake plant knew that this was the truth of the man's history, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt afresh each time the plant was left out beside the back door on a winter's night.

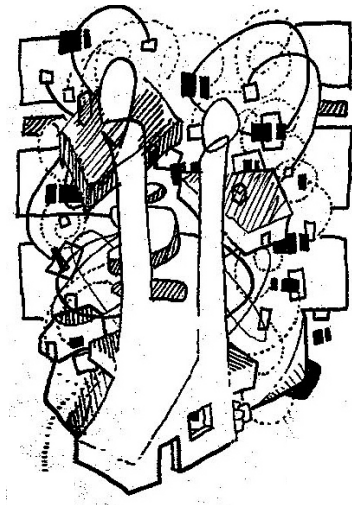
One day when the man was away in Austin for the week, the doorknob shook. The door fell open, and Meg walked into the living room. She scanned the room with misted eyes and chin canted up, in the manner of someone who had lots of thoughts. Or maybe she'd forgotten her glasses. The snake plant could feel her eyes moving from wooden bird to womb chair to hot-orange throw to acoustic guitar. Clearly she'd been asked to check up on things. She walked into the bedroom and bathroom—she spent real time in her looking. And when she'd decided everything was right and good, she left the house, without once looking in the snake plant's direction.

In the wake of her visit, the snake plant felt a burning. The burning came from back in his throat. It had a taste that was alarming to him, like too much fertilizer, or the taste of human blood from a cut. He could see in Meg's face the belief that the man was a good man. He was not a good man—the snake plant was able to say that now. He had some good in him, but inside that was a lake no one should have to be near. It was cold and deep. It was fouled with tritium. The snake plant could feel himself shake as he said that to himself, for he liked to think he was a good snake plant, worthy of no more attention than any of

the snake plants of the world that had been shoved into the dark corners of nonprofits, or used for the disposal of candy wrappers or cigarette butts. And yet he vowed to let Meg know the truth about the man the next time she walked through the door. He wouldn't hold back. He'd use the strongest words, clear, incisive words that stung like surgical blades. He wouldn't heighten his account of things. But he'd let Meg know the world was not the sweet orderly place she wanted it to be. The snake plant could see this in Meg, the wish to brush all surfaces with light. To look over and look past. She was a decent woman, Meg was. She loved her plants. She kept her needs in check, as hard as it was, even though she often had a craving for gin before dinner. But how many things did Meg destroy during the day, as she walked around with her chunky blue beads and bronze skirt? The snake plant knew all about the St. Bernard she'd left behind when she split up with her girlfriend and moved here. He knew how devastating that had been for Meg. She'd lost thirty-three pounds in six months; her hands and arms speckled with liver spots, but that gave her no excuse to write some fantasy about real lives.

The snake plant was thinking about Kierkegaard one day, and what it meant to be a spy for God, when the door shook open with its familiar awkwardness. A cold draft came in before it was enveloped by the heat of the room. The snake plant readied himself for the announcement. He stood tall, firm, all seven blades of him. It would not be easy for Meg to hear, especially on a day when the skin beneath her eyes looked darker than usual. The snake plant knew that he could speak it—not for nothing was he associated with the mother-in-law tongue. Meg canted her chin up. She looked from hot-orange throw to candlestick to pine cone collection. The snake plant felt the pain in his roots. He heard himself think all the words he'd perfected in the night: *The world isn't what you think it is. He's a bad man. He hurts me.*

Instead, he heard himself say *I love you*, with a plainness that shattered, that cracked him apart. And instantly he was reborn as a clump of twenty snake plants, in the ground, beside a blue stream in Africa.



STATIC, AND SOMETIMES MUSIC

David J. Schwartz

Beside the river, which is still speckled with an archipelago of ice, the employees of the APIS Corporation are quartered inside their forty-four-story tower behind concrete barriers and cordons of private security forces. Leo Erdelyi shares his cube on the sixth floor with his mother and sister. APIS allowed its employees to bring two family members into the building before the siege of the creditor-mobs began, on the condition that at least one of them works. Leo has never married and his father is long dead; for this he feels lucky.

His mother works in the executive cafeteria and eats better than her children. Leo's sister Marcella is thirteen, and during the day she attends a training course for minors. At night she sits cross-legged on the desk of Leo's cube, hunched towards his computer. Leo is not sure how much Marcella weighs, but he is pretty sure that this is against both corporate regulations and the indications of the cube manufacturer. He hasn't said anything about this.

APIS restricts Internet use, and certain websites are blocked. This includes everything classified as "social networking." Marcella wonders if this means that socializing is detrimental to work performance. Maybe it is. Maybe, instead of one big building where all the employees go, APIS should build thousands of one-person office cubes with opaque windows and scatter them throughout the countryside, no less than half a mile apart. Marcella imagines a job for herself, delivering mail to the little cubes, or maybe lunches. The cube dwellers would open their little doors and blink out at her, and she would smile and hand them a carton of fettucine alfredo or a pastrami sandwich. Maybe she would tell a joke, if there was time, before she locked them in again.

Since coming to the APIS building Marcella has eaten nothing but instant soup. On her brother's computer she read nothing but news for the first two days, floods and failing currencies and food shortages, until she couldn't bear any more. Now she clicks on every link just to see if it will be blocked. She loops through a trivia site, a right-wing blog, someone's page of dog pictures, an archive of lyrics from songs that have never been recorded.

Her favorite site right now is a blank white screen with an image of the six strings of a guitar. It's for tuning, but she likes to try to play songs with those six notes, EADGBE. All night she sits on the desk with the monitor turned towards her, wearing her brother's headphones, composing songs that will never be recorded.

* * *

The APIS building faces 14th Street on the west, and the Long Street Bridge passes it on the north. To the south there is a small park intended to boost employee morale and satisfy local green regulations. It is here that the bulk of the creditor-mob is camped.

Julia Burns is among the creditors. She is just herself, not a representative of a major manufacturer or a bank. She sold five hundred handmade Christmas cards to an APIS executive in August; now it is March and she hasn't been paid. It was the largest order she had ever received, and she had hoped to use the money to pay off her mortgage.

Julia is fifty-five, a widow and a mother of three. Her children are grown, and seemed unaffected by the economy up until the day they each moved back in with her, along with their spouses and children and dogs and widescreen televisions. She is laying siege as much to get out of the house as anything.

On an elevated concrete planter nearby, a squad of representatives from an international shipping company are

mounting a siege engine made out of poster tubes and size-64 rubber bands. They wear trousers and skirts with razor creases, and blazers with the company logo on the lapels. One of them speaks into an earpiece and swats at a bee with one hand. "Is this Accounts Payable? Is this Kathy? Kathy, it's Troy from FedTrans, how have you been?"

One of the reps loads a brick into the launcher and steps back. Two others crank plastic levers, producing a rush of clicks from the construction.

"It is lovely out here," says Troy from FedTrans. "What floor did you say you were on? The fifth?"

The reps adjust for trajectory. One holds up a finger to test the wind, cocks her head and pulls the trigger. A dull crack sounds from inside the warren of cardboard tubes, but the brick does not emerge.

Julia is tired. This is a Class Action Creditor Mob, and she can still opt out. Maybe she can get her job back at the DMV, but the thought makes her angry. She loves her children, but her home is small, the way she likes it. Small, with a garden, and a studio for her paper-making. Calligraphy on the porch, and a joint in the evenings. Now she walks around most days with a shout at the back of her throat. Part of the reason she came here was that she thought there would be shouting, but mostly there are stern phone calls and toothless chants written by the marketing firms, and Julia is not the sort of person to shout first.

She picks up a rock the size of her fist. The rock is clammy, and dirt clings to its underside. She clenches her fingers around it, wishing she could crush it like Superman. Make a diamond, or whatever it is dull gray stones become when you compress them. Pay off the mortgage. Buy another, bigger house and move the kids into it.

"Screw this," Julia whispers. She hurls the rock towards the APIS Building, at its grid of hexagonal glass and steel like a high-rise beehive. The missile rockets up out of sight, and Julia turns to walk away.

* * *

Leo had been thinking of quitting smoking before the siege; now it's the only thing getting him through the days. The smoking terrace is on the eighth floor, the east side of the building, overlooking the river. A sign on the door indemnifies APIS against responsibility for employees injured while using it. Before the siege employees were expected to use the park for smoke breaks, but now the roof of the lab section has become an improvised park, complete with hardy, stunted trees from the executive offices. There is a rotating crowd of employees here at any given time, drifting in and out on their staggered breaks.

Leo ignores the sign and psyches himself up to haggle for a cigarette. Fortunes are being made and lost in the tobacco trade. Looking around at his sleep-deprived, unwashed co-workers, Leo notices that the nicotine kingpins are the ones not smoking. They have each staked out territory near a different tree planter, looking relaxed.

Normally Leo only smokes when he is stressed or drinking, and he did not think to stock up for a siege. Now he is running out of things to trade. One of the kingpins has a crush on his mother, and he is about to offer to set him up on a date with her when a rock zooms from the park below and strikes him at the base of his skull.

Leo stumbles through the yellow tape that encircles the terrace and falls towards the river below. His last thoughts are of the garage where his father used to do woodwork. The smell of sawdust is in his ears, the whine of a jigsaw fills his mouth. He sees his father's rough hands guiding a cedar block through the blade. He feels nothing when he strikes the water. The impact drives his knees into his chest and snaps his head forward, and he drowns with the secret taste of warm Old Milwaukee in his nose.

* * *

Unaware of the consequences of her miracle throw, Julia walks south along the river path and immediately meets the barbarian. He is walking ahead of her, dark hair braided behind him, a shield strapped to his back. The shield is round and many-colored, yellow hexagons and blue triangles on a red circle embellished with vines. On the outside edge a yellow-green ring surrounds the design, and after a hundred yards or so Julia realizes it is a snake with its own tail in its mouth.

The barbarian—she cannot think of him as anything else—slows and turns his head. His beard is also dark and also braided, and he wears a buckskin shirt that extends below his knees.

Julia stops when she realizes that he is carrying a spear. She takes in the hatchet-like axe tucked into the thin belt at his waist, and the tiny fur cloak—almost a shawl—draped across his shoulders. It looks like it was once a raccoon.

“I wasn’t following you,” she says, and is immediately annoyed with herself. This is a public path, and she has nothing to apologize for. She crosses her arms and walks around him. Not close enough for him to grab at her or anything, but hopefully close enough for him to get the message that she is not frightened. She is, though. She’s ready to run if he so much as sneezes.

He lets her pass without a word. She had only planned to walk a short ways along the river, but now she feels like she has to keep going in order to prove her point. The barbarian is following her; she sees his reflection in the sheet glass of the skyscraper lobbies. He isn’t looking at her but out at the swollen river, which is crowded with small vessels. Some are there to prevent an aquatic retreat from the APIS building, and some are there just to watch. Some are selling snacks or small arms. Beyond them, on the opposite shore, something is burning.

She cannot think where she has parked her car. She pictures herself inside it, driving back to the little house where her children sprawl across the living room and the bedrooms.

The breakfast table that was once for slow mornings of tea and newspaper is now crowded with laptops and books on bankruptcy. She keeps on walking.

* * *

A gang of keelboat rats are the first to reach Leo's body. The crew's two strongest swimmers dive into the chill water and slip hooks into his belt; then the hands on deck hoist him out of the water just minutes after he entered it.

The rats have been hired by a landscaping firm with a construction lien against APIS. Their job is to pick up salvage when the fighting starts. The rats do a lot of this sort of work, because they are cheap and ruthless. They have recently incorporated, and were quickly bought up by a holding company which, if the chain of ownership were to be traced, is in fact owned by APIS. The rats, their employers, and their corporate overlords are as yet unaware of this conflict of interest.

Corpses are not in fact part of the salvage contract, but the rats are always hungry and need something to gnaw on even when they are not. To preserve space on deck they strap Leo's body to the prow. Occupants of nearby vessels are enraged by this, and shout at the rats to hand over the body. The rats answer with screeches and machine gun fire.

The rats have named the keelboat the *Invasive Species*; it bears a crew of sixty. It is eighteen meters long and five wide, pole-driven but with an outboard motor concealed before the rudder. It was commissioned by the Historical Society to show schoolchildren how life was once lived on the river; after the museum was sacked, the rats liberated the boat. They have not stopped congratulating themselves on their initiative since.

The rats have no captain or other form of leader. For rats the sole term of respect is "grandparent," which is applied without regard to actual relation. These are deep rats, rats which have lived well beyond their expected lifespan, growing to the

size of terriers, waiting for the opportunity to move up out of hiding and preside over the crumbling of man's cities. Even their employers are afraid of them.

Sadly for them, the men on the river are in denial about the decline of their species. They return fire on the rats, which prompts the APIS security forces to begin firing from shore. The river is pocked with bullet-drops, and the rats are caught in a crossfire. They man the mounted guns and rear up to take hold of their poles, but their instinct is to scatter, and not all are able to resist. A dozen hit the water after half a dozen fall. One bounds to the stern of the boat and seizes the engine starter in his teeth; the recoil flings him into the water, and the engine kicks into life, leaving him behind. A trio of rats wrestle with the rudder, and the *Invasive Species* lumbers upriver, plowing through smaller boats on its way north.

The firefight ends in stalemate, and it begins to rain. The creditor-mobs discuss sandbagging the riverbank, but eventually decide to move their camp up to the 14th Street side of the building. The police confer, set up barricades, then are called away to deal with another bank riot.

* * *

Leo's boss's secretary breaks the news to Marcella and her mother. Marcella's mother cries and squeezes Marcella while the woman talks. She doesn't say "We're sorry," she says, "The corporation regrets." She talks very rapidly, and blinks a lot, and says "Hm" when she pauses for breath. Marcella thinks she may be on something.

They hold a memorial during a designated break period. The lights flicker dramatically; most of the building is running on emergency power. The floor supervisor reads prepared remarks about Leo's love for basketball and Texas Hold'em. Marcella did not know these things about her brother. For all she knows the corporation has mistaken him for someone else.

By Thursday she has been hired to fill her brother's position. Since she is not certain what his job was, and no one comes to train her, she spends her days composing open-note symphonies that sound to her like nearby places where she has never been.

Leo was too much older to be a playmate and not older enough to be a role model. Lately Marcella was annoyed by him when he was around and resented him when he wasn't. He had looked at her as if he couldn't quite figure her out, like he was going to ask her who she was. She wishes he had asked, because she would have liked to hear how she would answer.

These are some of the things that go into her slow, airy songs. Also things like the way she is embarrassed by and sorry for her mother; the smell of burnt popcorn which pervades not just the floor but the entire building; and the calls that come in to her brother's desk, where people jabber at her in strange tongues until she says "You have reached this extension in error, please hold" and hangs up. She isn't inserting any of this consciously, but they are the things at the back of her mind while she sits cross-legged in her brother's wheeled chair, six browser windows open at a time, clicking at intervals to sustain the humming in her headset.

Her mother asks to see what she is working on. Marcella shows her the screen but leaves the headset plugged in. Her mother smuggles brioches and fresh apples out of the executive dining room and tries to bribe her with them. Marcella eats the food but will not play for her mother until she cries, and then Marcella feels badly. What does it matter? It's just that she doesn't want her mother to tell her that she's been wasting her time, doesn't want her to say, "That's nice" and then lose interest. And her mother doesn't do either of those things. When Marcella finally turns on the tinny speakers and plays, her mother is asleep before the first note has died.

* * *

It is either the evening of the second day or the morning of the third day of Julia's walk with the barbarian when he slays the Jeep. The imprecision of the timing bothers her; she has always prided herself on her clear-headedness. What she remembers is the Jeep's growl and the bright yellow of its plumage as it bounds towards them along the riverside path. The barbarian is fast—he pushes her out of the way, his spear already in his hands, and pierces the beast's nasal grid with the first blow. It strikes him and veers off the path, carrying him on its snout until it groans to a stop amid the winter-bare shrubbery.

The barbarian is bruised, but he does not complain. He cuts long strips from the Jeep's flanks, humming tunelessly as he works. He dries the strips over a fire at the same time as he spit-roasts the undercarriage. The meat is gamey but tender, and the bones are not metallic.

Julia is less concerned with this than with her muddy sense of time—is the meal a lunch, or a late supper? She cannot tell the sun from the moon in her memory. She has begun to experience something like highway hypnosis, where she walks for long periods with no awareness or memory of doing so. After one of these spells she realizes her keys are gone: after another, her purse. She recalls the sounds they made, falling into the swollen river, but she does not recall throwing them in. She remembers sitting beside a fire the barbarian built, staring at the steel ring that imprisoned her keys. By the flickering light she saw the head of the snake there, grasping for its tail.

* * *

Grandparent, the compass does not work. North keeps on circling, like a hawk.

Use the GPS, then.

The GPS is dead. The batteries must have run out.

Those batteries were guaranteed for two years!

Everything is under warranty, grandparent. If we can locate a Ron's Marine franchise we will have it replaced.

At the keelboat's prow Leo's body hangs, devoid of soft tissue, left to the *Troglyplid* mites and the *Acarina*. Where his legbones lie beneath the water, they have corroded through and fallen away.

It grows warm, grandparent.

I don't know this part of the river. Have you raised headquarters on the radio yet?

There is only static, and sometimes music.

Perhaps we should turn the boat around.

Bone binds to rope melts into wood. Fugitive souls crowd into Leo's empty skull, building hexagonal berths; their voices buzz beneath the chirps of the rats.

What about the job?

We are a hundred miles from the city now. A thousand, perhaps. I wish the clock were working.

Where are we going?

We aren't going anywhere, we are being taken. The river has taken us.

* * *

Marcella is curled up in a nest of network cables and power cords, sleepy but not sleeping, when her mother comes down from work. A phone tech from the flooded second floor has moved in with them, and Marcella is trying to avoid conversation. Brenda, the phone tech, has nothing to do but talk, because the phones have stopped working entirely. She and Marcella take turns surfing the Internet, which is still there somehow.

"How was work?" Brenda asks Marcella's mother, who ignores her.

"I know you're awake," Marcella's mother says.

Marcella groans. It might be ten or it might be three in the morning; Marcella's mother won't talk about what goes on in

the executive dining room, but she has never worked a shift less than twelve hours long.

Marcella groans.

“They want you to play tomorrow night. Do you have anything to wear?”

“Play?”

“Your computer music. Where’s that blue sweater of yours?”

“Are you in a band?” asks Brenda. “I used to play the autoharp. Mostly at Renaissance Faires. They still made us pay to get in, though. Can—”

“We’re having a conversation,” says Marcella’s mother. “Do you mind?”

“Go somewhere else, then,” says Brenda. “I live here too.”

Marcella follows her mother to the printer bank. “I can’t believe you told them!” she says. “I can’t do this!”

“Honey, we work for them now.”

“So I get no say?”

“Trust your mother, Marcella. It’s just the two of us now. Your talent could be a way out of here.”

Marcella’s mother picks out a beige pencil skirt and a white blouse with ruffles that are flat from being packed. She whips the blouse through the air as if this should cause it to magically acquire a shape. She tells Marcella to buff up her shoes and tie her hair back. Then the two of them curl up under Leo’s desk and fall asleep to the sound of Brenda’s clicking.

Marcella wakes the next afternoon with a security guard shaking her; her mother and Brenda are gone.

“Ma’am,” he says, although he is four times her age, “you’re expected upstairs.” He’s very nice about it, but Marcella is in full panic again. It doesn’t help that the noise outside is worse.

“Nothing to be concerned about,” says the security guard. He whispers because it is evening and the man in the next cube goes to sleep early. “The mob is trying to get in before 14th Street floods, is all.”

He turns his back while she changes clothes. The pencil skirt used to be too big at the waist—now it's too short, and her knees poke out when she walks. The blouse hangs limp, emphasizing Marcella's own shapelessness. She looks like the mast of a sailing ship at dead calm.

"You look real nice," says the security guard.

"Thanks," Marcella says. "Um, there's a computer up there, right?"

"We're all set. Follow me."

He takes her to the elevators, which have been off limits since the siege began. She hasn't been inside one since they came in, sleeping bags, suitcases, and all. This time it's just her and the security guard. No canned music, and no smell of popcorn.

The doors open on the 44th floor and a blast of summer heat hits her, carrying a heady scent of flowering plants. The 44th floor is a greenhouse, glassed in on all sides, including the roof. But it is an early spring evening; the sun no longer shows through the clouds, and it is dark. Footlights line a tiled path, casting a faint glow up through a bed of tulips. Above the tulips purple lilacs droop, heavy with perfume. Marcella feels a headache coming on.

The security guard steers her onto the stage and leaves her there. The wings are cluttered with amplifiers and microphones, and a drum kit lurks upstage, shrouded in black cloth.

There is a small stool, and a stand with a computer like the one in her brother's—her—cubicle. Leafy trees lean over the top and around the sides of the stage. She feels drunk with the green and the heat and the pollen.

There is an open space in front of the stage, with armless chairs in careful rows. The executives sit expectantly—some women, but mostly men. There is not enough light for her to see their faces; they are like an audience of shadows.

She opens the browser and tiles the windows the way she likes them. She takes a breath and feels the building breathe with her, bulging then folding like a shiny accordion. At its base,

the creditor-mob launches Molotovs and pipe bombs through the shattered windows of the lower floors. When the first of the explosions shakes the building she takes that as her cue.

* * *

At first the barbarian thought Julia was a man, because of her blue trousers and her scuffed black boots; in his tribe the women wear draping skirts and go barefoot. But he cannot believe that a man could live in the City of Drowning Fire where she joined him. She must be a god-spirit of some sort, sent to aid him or thwart him, though so far she has been more hindrance than help. Tradition advises him to offer food but not speak; in any case, Julia's language is not something he understands. Instead he hums the wards against possession and seduction as they walk.

Now the god-spirit has developed a limp. The barbarian is trying to recall a story of a limping god—it seems like the sort of thing storytellers would love—but he's not sure there really is such a thing. He isn't concerned by the fact that the god-spirit snores or goes far from camp to piss and shit. But the limping bothers him. It wasn't there before, and now it is. The barbarian doesn't expect anything from god-spirits except consistency. The world changes enough as it is.

He hums the wards again. Not two weeks ago he was with his family, in a small camp with its back to a sacred mountain. He took a turn watching the herds overnight in the hills above the camp. There he fell asleep and had a nightmare that he lived in a small box in a meadow. He sat in front of an even smaller, glowing box, and waited for a boy to bring him a box of oily food. When the boy came to the door the barbarian looked out at the green and the flowering plants of the meadow and was afraid to leave. The thought of walking on the open ground under the open sky terrified him, for some reason. He woke in a cold sweat.

The worm had come in the night. A muddy furrow traced its emergence from the riverbed and its deadly progress through

the camp—not just all the bodies, but some entire tents, were missing. He plucked a glittering scale from the compacted dirt of the banks. The glare of the sun's reflection was so strong that he was surprised to find it cold to the touch.

By nightfall he was on his way south. That the worm had continued on to the north was of no importance; it came from the south when it came. The barbarian's cosmology does not make fine distinctions between the directions—it is composed of spheres rotating inside of rotating spheres; the world, the river, the worm, none of them ending, just coming around to the same place again.

The barbarian believes that life is a story. This is not to say that he expects his own life to be told after he is gone, but rather that he believes that all of life, all the universe in fact, is contained within stories, that they delineate all possibilities. He knows that his own story is nearly finished. Soon—in a day, a week, a month—he will meet the worm, and he will either kill it or be killed. He expects the latter result. He is afraid of death, but he cannot conceive of another course of action. His actions are dictated by the stories he knows.

The god-spirit might be a good omen for him, but he cannot read it. The flight of birds, the consistency of sheep shit, these he can interpret. Limp and blue trousers, he has no skill for.

* * *

Julia is determined not to let her limp slow her down. It's her own fault; she should have been stretching out at the end of the day. The charley horse woke her out of a dead sleep, and all her writhing and massaging and whimpering did not attract the barbarian's attention. Now it only hurts when she walks, which is unfortunate given that this is all they do. They walk through a lavender swamp where the thread of the river is all but lost; they walk through canyons which recall wilder, more powerful waters. They walk over hills and the misted shoulders of a chalky mountain, and the river climbs with them. They walk from first

light until well after sunset, and if the moon is visible they walk longer. She doesn't mind the walking. She is sore, every day, but she doesn't mind.

She would like to ask the barbarian about his family, his wife. That's what she always does with men she doesn't know. She asks them about their wives or their girlfriends, and if they have neither she talks about her husband. Her husband is of course dead, but they don't need to know that.

She was afraid of the barbarian at first, but it's clear that he is a man on a mission, and she finds that comforting. Not only does he not speak to her, he doesn't look at her, and aside from passing out the dried Jeep meat at meals he doesn't touch her. He hasn't slept in all these nights. When she falls asleep he is watching the river, and when she wakes up he is watching the river. This is what she imagines men are like when they travel together: silent, contemplative, purposeful.

She wonders what she will do after he finds what he is looking for. Find someone else to ignore her? What she wants, at the end of this long (endless) walk, is to be back at her little house, her children a long-distance call away, and a nice fat check from the APIS Corporation in the mailbox.

She is thinking of her home on the night that they come down from the mountain and the barbarian stops. The moon is not out, and she wonders if it is time to camp. But he is looking at the river—he is always looking at the river—and when Julia follows his gaze she wets her pants.

A snake... that word is so inadequate. A monster, a limbless dragon with a head the size of a bus, looks down at them from atop a coiled pile of itself. Water rolls in sheets off its scales, which glitter like oil.

Something buzzes in Julia's ears; she is backing away, she realizes, and all the insects of the banks are in the air around her, agitated by the sudden shift in the water level. Her limp is worse now that the legs of her jeans are stained with pee.

The barbarian's shoulders rise and fall like a shrug, and he unstraps his shield.

* * *

The question of the soul is not a simple binary, yes-no, one-or-none. There is also the question of “How many?” The ancestral cult of the Chinese believed there were two; Siberian shamanic traditions recognize three; some Hmong go as high as twelve or even thirty. Some souls wander in and out, causing illness if they become stranded outside the body. Some stay with the body even after death.

Then there is the question of animals, plants, prominent stones, bodies of water, et cetera. Animists would say that they all have souls. Pet owners advocate heaven for their dogs or cats. If we grant that New Orleans has a soul, then we are forced to include Detroit, Chernobyl, and Gary, Indiana.

Consider, then, the corporation. Most nations recognize corporations as having rights similar to those of natural persons, even including human rights. This implies that corporations have a capacity for suffering, which implies a soul. But would this be a collective or an individual soul? Do the souls of corporate employees remain their own, or become merged into a hive soul that rules the fates of all? And does it matter whether the employee in question is the VP working seventy-five hours a week, or the temp doing data entry for twelve bucks an hour?

If there is a curve to grade on, Leo Erdelyi ought to be on the low end of it. As a Customer Service Rep supporting a product line that was gradually being phased out, he was hired for a twenty-four-hour-a-week position and paid overtime for the remainder of his work week so the company wouldn't have to provide him health care. It was a legal loophole that a team of lawyers were paid a thousand times his salary to discover. Leo processed his feelings about this exploitation by stealing office supplies and doing his work as badly and as rarely as possible without actually getting fired.

Technically, though, he has given his life to the company, and maybe that's why his skull is full of bees and his corpse is crewed by rats. If one of Leo's souls is still hanging around this mess of wood and tails and honeycombs, it's trying hard to look busy and wondering if five o'clock will ever come.

The bees have hijacked the craft; they sting the rats into motion between trips out to the night-blossoming water lilies that dot the river. The boat is undermanned, so they work the rats in shifts, giving them staggered fifteen-minute breaks every four hours to gnaw on the bones of Leo's arms. The arms, spread wide along the bow, have become saturated with minerals and are as strong as titanium. The hive swells from the eye sockets and the lower mandible of Leo's skull, and honey oozes from a tiny crack and drips into the river.

The bees set a course into the streets of a long-drowned city. Wind whistles through the shuttered high-rises, along with the yowl of a glider-cat hunting night birds. The rats plot to retrieve their guns, which the bees have forced them to stash in a locker.

Grandparent... I hear music.

* * *

D for a down comforter, bad grades, Andy Breslow and his lame-but-cute mustache—things she has left behind. G, then, for the growl in Marcella's stomach, the lights that give everyone in the audience a ghost-story face, the steel skeleton holding this garden far off the ground. B for transformation, a new beginning, with all the anticipation and dread she feels. She lets those three hang for a while, then hits the D again. She tweaks the volume, lets it expand, then drops in the low E—the bottoms of boats, fish that hide from the light. Her brother's bones.

High E is a gasp for breath, quickly stilled. G again, and then she lets the music be for a while. She takes her hand from the mouse and looks out at the audience. They are sitting very

straight in their uncomfortable chairs, not moving, not making a sound. She looks past them to their tamed forest, past that to the windows, at the fireglow that fogs over the stars. For a moment she has the feeling of looking through her brother's eyes at a silver beehive standing over the burnished blackness of a river at night.

Dark shapes move through the audience, glittering discs floating down the aisles. Waitresses in black, bearing cocktails. Marcella doesn't know which one is her mother, but she sees the posture of defeat in all of them, the same posture she had seen in her brother. It makes her angry.

She strikes the notes and kills them quickly. They almost sound like mistakes—but she is teasing the executives of APIS, trying to make them uncomfortable. The tones are not precisely discordant, but expectant, waiting for the note that will bind them together, make sense of it all.

The windows shake again—APIS's security forces are exchanging fire with the creditor-mob. Marcella brings the low E back and turns up the volume. There's a faint buzz from the speakers, but she ignores it. The audience still has not moved.

Her brother died for these people. Maybe he wasn't a very good brother, but as far as she can tell this is not a very good company. What are all those people out there for, if not because the people in this audience couldn't pay their bills? It's no different from how the bank took her family's house and their car and left them with no choice but to move into this ugly building with its stained carpets and bad ventilation.

She hates the audience. This has been her life since she has lived here, being watched. By her mother, by security cameras, by Brenda, by the floor supervisor who patrols the cubes. Even in the bathroom she can't be alone. This music is an attempt to express how trapped and scared she is feeling. She turns it up again, and the buzz gets louder along with it. Only it's not coming from the speakers, she realizes. It's coming from the audience.

* * *

The barbarian says a quick prayer to the worm. He always prays to the beasts he hunts. He prays to thank them for their sacrifice, to appease their ancestors, and to encourage their souls not to bedevil him after death. Despite his need for retribution, he does not hate the worm. They are each of them only acting according to their natures.

The spirit-god has fled up the banks, towards the backwater swamp. The barbarian tries not to be distracted by this. He will probably never understand the significance of the spirit-god in his story—in fact, that is the wrong way to think of it. It is the spirit-god's story, and he will never understand his part in it.

He holds the shield high on his left arm and brandishes the spear with an underhand grip. The worm is trying to strike at him without impaling itself, but he backs out of reach upstream, forcing it to uncoil in order to follow. It hisses out of its open mouth; the hot vapor of its breath envelops him. The buzz of the river insects drowns out the sound of his own breath. Sweat drains out of his pores, dripping down the back of his neck, off his forehead and into his eyes.

He blinks to clear his vision, and something bounces off his back. Another missile strikes the worm on its side, where its scales are thick and caked with river mud. The barbarian looks back and sees the spirit-god standing on a ridge, throwing rocks. And then the purpose of the spirit-god becomes clear; it is there to get him killed. He knows this before the head of the worm blocks out the moon and stars, before its jaws enclose his head and torso, before its fangs pierce his belly.

The pain is terrible, but brief. Perhaps his spine is severed; the fangs have not bitten through him entirely, but they are hooked into him, the better to drag him down the worm's gullet. He is not sure whether he still has his spear or not. Numbness spreads through him like sleep, and then a sensation like floating...

...and he is in a nightmare of a place with square glass islands stretching into the sky...

...and he looks down at the spirit-god, still throwing stones, and understands that it is a woman...

...and he is in a dream of the camp with its back to the sacred mountain. He wakes on the mist-covered hills, and below he sees the tents, still asleep. The boy comes to relieve him, and he walks back down to the valley, where he is greeted by his sleepy wife and children. The wars end, and the camp becomes a village. Their hunters become known and feared, and none dare to raid their lands, and nothing moves upriver save fat delicious fish which leap into their nets.

* * *

Marcella stills the notes, but silence is part of the song. And it is not truly silent; the audience still buzzes, and a breeze whistles through the flowers, and somewhere water is flowing. The sounds of the creditor-mobs have scattered and faded, like a thunderstorm just passed. The lights have gone out—someone's idea of dramatic staging—and Marcella cannot see the audience any longer. Small shapes whir past her in the dark, tiny wings fanning her. She hears frogs and crickets and knows that the glass walls are gone.

"Mom?" she calls out. There are things that might hear her, she supposes—crocodiles and creditor-mobs—but she needs to hear her mother's voice.

It is not her mother that responds. Screeching birds, and small chattering things, and something large that lumbers through the brush. Her song, reflected back in notes of terror. She reaches for the computer, but it's not there.

"Mom!" She lets go any pretense of dignity with the scream; she's just a kid who's already lost her brother, and the thought of losing her mother makes her jump from the stage and

flail out with her fists and her feet at the executives who are not there, even though their voices sting the air around her.

You could be a queen, they buzz at her.

She doesn't believe them, but for a moment she is tempted. She has never been special, except for her music, and they have stolen that.

"Mom!"

You'll never survive alone, they buzz. *We do not have claws, or speed, only numbers. Only the hive.*

Marcella knows they may be right, but she has had enough of the hive. She wants her own bed, even if it is the needled hollow under a pine tree. "Mom!"

It's safer this way, her mother buzzes in her ear. *We work for them now, Marcella.*

Marcella runs, and immediately falls. Gets up, runs, and falls again. The plants around her have doubled, tripled in size; they block out the moonlight, and she can see nothing of what is at her feet. The buzz of voices follows her to the edge of the 44th floor, and she dives towards the river below.

* * *

The music echoes through the sunken streets, dull glass islands climbing into the night, windows like scales. As a counterpoint, the bees recite the deed to the riverfront property owned by the APIS Corporation.

Together with all riparian and other rights, title and interest in and to the waters, bed and shore of that part of said river bordering upon and appurtenant to the above described tract and lying within the boundaries of said tract...

The rats have gnawed their way into the locker and retrieved their guns; they fire upon the bees, sending a cloud of bullets out from the boat. The bees scatter, trying to reach the safety of the skull-hive. But something of Leo is stirred by the

rats' uprising, and the boat pitches back, and begins to change shape.

The rats dive into the water and swim for the shells of skyscrapers all around. Over time they will build a fleet of keelboats and conquer all the flooded properties in the city, driving the hawks and the glider-cats to the higher floors and coming into conflict with the humans who still inhabit the neighborhoods on the bluff.

From the marrow out, Leo's bones seep into the dead cellulose of the keelboat, infect it, reshape it. A canopy of ribs juts up from the gunwales, and a cocoon of scales rises from the keel, black glass by moonlight. The worm rears up out of the water, stretching its new jaws wide to catch its sister, gently, on its forked tongue and swallow her whole.

The bees are berserk with indignation; they swarm over the worm, trying to smother it with sheer numbers. Expendables—CSRs, part-timers, those near retirement age—make kamikaze stinger dives at the gaps between scales.

But the worm rolls over, carrying entire departments of bees under the water with its coils. It thrashes against the great tower, toppling it with one great blow, suffering the rain of glass and steel until the river overflows the land where the APIS building stood, *force majeure* revoking all claim and title to the corporate hive.

* * *

"Then what happened?" Julia asks. She sits on the ridge above the flood plain, the stars looking down astonished. "What happened to the girl?"

She rested a while, says the worm. It speaks with its eyes, swaying as it does so. Julia thinks it must have hypnotized her; that's the only way she can explain the fact that she has stopped throwing rocks and is not running away. It holds its head up atop its coils and it sways and it doesn't blink. This bothers Julia so much that she is blinking twice as often to compensate.

“She rested?”

While we traveled. Julia is trying to remember more myths about snakes, things that weren’t supposed to be true. Snakes hypnotize their prey; snakes bite their tails and roll around like wheels. She remembers the barbarian’s shield, her empty keyring.

She was invited to join us, the wurm continues, *but she disliked that idea. So we spat her out.*

“Have you seen her since then?”

She doesn’t come to the river, says the wurm. *And that was so long ago that it may not have happened yet.*

Julia thinks about her children, and how surprised they will be that she has disappeared. Just because she wants them to get out of her house doesn’t mean she wants to hurt them, or that she never wants to see them again. She’s not sure when she crossed over the border into Somewhere Else, but somehow she knows there is no going back.

“Why did you eat the barbarian?”

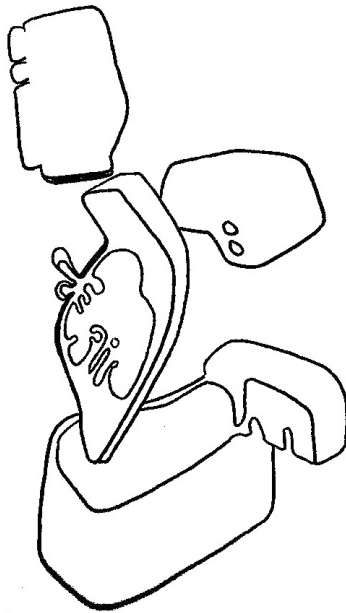
It’s what he wanted. There is something petulant about the way the wurm says this. The things Julia feels like saying are equally petulant: *But he was my friend!* or, *I just want to go home.* And neither is entirely true. Maybe the wurm is telling the truth. Maybe, like the wurm, the barbarian lived his life in circles. Julia tries to find the circularity in her own life, but fails. Maybe she was part of the barbarian’s story, and now that that’s over she will never understand her part in it.

“Are you going to eat me now?”

The wurm just turns its head, as if bored, and then sinks towards the river again, making its way upstream.

The spell broken, Julia stands up and, once it is well out of range, picks up a rock and throws it after the wurm. “That’s it?” she calls after it. “What am I supposed to do now?” The wurm disappears into the distance and dark, but Julia isn’t finished. She tilts her head back and opens her throat and releases something wordless and guttural. It feels so good that she keeps on shouting until the air is saturated with her voice.

She laughs—it feels so good to let it all go—and then she coughs, and lies back on the grass to stare at the silent stars. It's a long way back to civilization—discover fire, build a shelter, make a spear, plant something—and she wants to get an early start.



Unlike many print literary journals, *Unstuck* isn't affiliated with a college or university, and it isn't supported by any public or private grants. It's a completely volunteer-driven, independent non-profit. Every member of the staff is a working writer or artist.

We love independent bookstores, and are pleased that *Unstuck* is carried in a number of our favorite indies like Elliott Bay, Powell's, Tattered Cover, Book People, DOMY, Prairie Lights, Shakespeare & Co., and McNally Jackson. Most bookstores, however, are able to pay literary journals only a fraction of the cover price for copies sold, and nothing at all for copies that remain unsold. Bookstore sales, in spite of their importance to us for other reasons, are therefore not a major source of revenue for *Unstuck*.

Increasingly, literary journals are offsetting some of their print and web expenses by charging the authors who submit their stories and poems for consideration. This is done by holding fee-based contests or by imposing three-dollar convenience fees that all electronic submitters must pay. For various ethical and practical reasons, we've made a commitment never to fund *Unstuck*, even in part, in either of these ways.

How, then, did we pay for this issue? A small portion of the money came from commissions from bookstore sales of *Unstuck* #1. A larger part came from subscription fees. The lion's share, however, came from the hundreds of donors to our summer fundraising campaign on Kickstarter.com.

That we were able to raise so much from so many people in this terrible economy seems cause not just for gratitude, but also for optimism. Even in difficult times, there are a lot of people out there who care about new literature—and who are eager to support the people who spend their lives creating it (disproving every day the famous Samuel Johnson “blockhead” aphorism).

In August 2013, we'll hold a Kickstarter fund drive for the third issue of *Unstuck*. If the stories in this issue moved or entertained you, we hope you'll consider becoming a part of the community of small donors that makes this project possible. In the meantime, we've set aside the next two pages to acknowledge some of the backers who made the book you're holding a reality.

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King // Kate Klein // Stephen Knezovich // Yoshio Kobayashi // Anna*

Kornbluh // Brian Kornell // Zach Korthals // Kristine // Dustin Kurtz // Kylock // King Lapham // Tom Laverty // Edan Lepucki // Dan Lidral-Porter // Grace Liew // Lilbit // Chris Lintott // Shira Lipkin // Lisa // Steve Loiaconi // Geoffrey Long // April Love // Stephen Lovely // Tej Ludher // Adri M. // Alejandra Martinez // Ryan MacMahon // Katie Mayfield // Craig McCullough // Marilyn McCurdy // Barbara McIver // Betsy McIver // Lila McIver // Robin McIver // Cindy McKay // Mike McSorley // Ainsley McWaters // Karen Meisner // Daniel Mejia // Judson Merrill // Ally Metz // Mike // Joe Milazzo // Adam Mills // Elayna Mitchell // Molly Moore // Rhett Morgan // Simo Muinonen // Elaine Murphy // Dan Muzyka // Jill Myers // Rachel Myre // Naza // Janet Neary // Joanna K. Neilson // Leo Nusman // Nathan Olmstead // Chris Olson // Omar // Jason Oren // Julia Patt // Armen Perian // Cameron Phillips // Joey Pillow // Amanda Power // Matthew Printz // Eric R. // Adam R. Rakunas // Melissa Reid // Matt Richardson // Patrick Riffe // Eric Roach // Shannon Roberts // James Root the First // Ruth & Earl // SQPAT // Sarah Saltwick // Sofia Samatar // Kit Santa Ana // Benjamin Schaefer // Eric Schaller // Schild // Tom Schmitendorf // Aylin Selcukoglu // Shaleiah // Lisa Shaw // Patrick Shea // Sharma Shields // Kim Smith // Olna Jenn Smith // Scott Bradley Smith // Somair // Margaret St. John // April Steenburgh // Stephen // Mark Strayer // Kayleigh Stevenson // Robert E. Stutts // Philip Suggars // Cedric Synnestvedt // Charles

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Tan // Richard Thomas // Julie Brown Thoreson // Tim // Jeremiah Tolbert // A. K. Tosh // Tournevis // Andrew Tressler // Brent Trojan // Cody Trojan // Debbie Trojan // Brian Tucker // Douglas Turley // M. Twitty // Unmanned Press // Amy Vaughan // Mauricio Velasquez // Alex Vincent // Rachael Volk // Matthew Vollmer // Thao Votang // John Waclawski // Jim Watts // Elissa Weinstein // Bear Weiter // Jacqueline R. Werner // Rhea and Ken Werner // Dave Whaley // Leslie What // Tim White // Dan Wickett // Vinnie Wilhelm // Richard Williamson // David Winchester // Jenny Wong // Ivan Yagolnikov // Alex Yalen

ADETOKUNBO ABIOLA is a Nigerian journalist and fiction writer. He is the author of the novel *Labulabu Mask* and the forthcoming story collection *American 419*. // **STEVE ALMOND** is the author of ten books, including, most recently, the story collection *God Bless America*. // **ERIK ANDERSON** is the author of *The Poetics of Trespass*. // **CHARLES ANTIN**'s fiction has been published in numerous publications, including the first issue of *Unstuck*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Fugue*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Rosebud*, and *Glimmer Train*, where he won the award for very short fiction.

MARCEL BÉALU (1908–1993) was best known for the delicacy with which he explored dreams and the unreal in poetry, prose, and painting. A retiring figure, he ran a Paris bookstore by the Jardin du Luxembourg named Le Pont Traversé after a novel by his friend, critic and editor Jean Paulhan. There he held readings for a small circle of surrealist and fantastical writers; it is said Lacan, among his first customers, purchased Shakespeare's complete works and forgot to pay for them. His 1945 novel *L'Expérience de la nuit* was translated by Christine Donougher as *The Experience of Night* (Dedalus, 1997). "The Water Spider," much praised by André Pieyre de Mandiargues, was his most famous story. *Unstuck* is pleased to present it in this new translation.

KATE BERNHEIMER is the author of the story collection *Horse, Flower, Bird* (with illustrations by Rikki Ducornet) and a trilogy based on fairy tales that concluded recently with *The Complete Tales of Lucy Gold*. *How a Mother Weaned a Girl from Fairy Tales*, a new story collection, is forthcoming. She has edited three anthologies, including the World Fantasy Award-winning *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales*. // **JEDEDIAH BERRY** is the author of a novel, *The Manual of Detection*, winner of the Crawford Award and the Dashiell Hammett Prize. His short stories have appeared in journals including *Conjunctions*, *Chicago Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and *Fairy Tale Review*. // **GABRIEL BLACKWELL** is the author of *Shadow Man: A Biography of Lewis Miles Archer* and *Critique of Pure Reason*, a collection of fiction and essays. // **ELIZABETH BROWNE**'s fiction and essays have recently appeared in the *Minnetonka Review* and *Clare*. // **EDWARD CAREY** is a playwright and the author of the novels *Observatory Mansions* and *Alva & Irva: The Twins Who Saved a City*. // **MATTHEW CHENEY**'s work has appeared in *One Story*, *Strange Horizons*, *Failbetter*, *Ideomancer*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Rain Taxi*, and *Locus*, among other venues. He is the former series editor for *Best American Fantasy*. // **PETE COCO**'s writing has appeared in *Barrelhouse*,

Other Voices, and elsewhere. His web ventures have included *Babies are Fireproof*, *please-dont.com*, and *thecurrenteachmomentamountain.org*. // **BRIAN CONN** is the author of *The Fixed Stars* and the recipient of the 2013 Bard Fiction Prize. His short fiction can be found in *Conjunctions*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, and elsewhere. With Joanna Ruocco, he is a founding editor of *Birkensnake*, a fiction annual. // **GENEVIEVE DUBOIS** has published fiction in *Pear Noir!*, *The Tusculum Review*, and other journals. // **RIKKI DUCORNET** is a visual artist and the author of more than twenty books, including, most recently, the novel *Netsuke*. // **CATHERINE DUFOUR** is the author of several books in French, including *Blanche-neige et les lance-missiles*, which won the Prix Merlin 2002; *Le goût de l'immortalité*, which received the Prix Bob Morane 2006, the Prix Rosny 2006, and the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire 2007; and the collection *L'accroissement mathématique du plaisir*, of which one story received the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire 2008. // **BERIT ELLINGSEN** is a Korean-Norwegian writer whose work has appeared in *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Bluestem*, *Metazen*, *elima*, *decomp magazinE*, and other publications. She is the author of *The Empty City*, a novel, and *Beneath the Liquid Skin*, a collection of stories. // **WALTER FLASCHKA**'s work has previously appeared in the web journals *Hobo Pancakes* and *Midnight Screaming*. This is his first print publication. // **SHAMALA GALLAGHER**'s poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *VOLT*, *The Offending Adam*, and *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, among other journals. // **V. V. GANESHANANTHAN**'s debut novel, *Love Marriage*, was long-listed for the Orange Prize and was named one of Washington Post Book World's Best of 2008. // **JULIETA GARCÍA GONZÁLEZ** is the author of the novel *Vapor* and the story collection *Las malas costumbres*. English translations of her stories have appeared in *Anobium*, *Hobart*, and *Verbicide*. // **EDWARD GAUVIN** was the winner of the 2010 John Dryden Translation Prize, and has received fellowships and residencies from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Fulbright program, the Centre National du Livre, and the American Literary Translators' Association. His volume of Georges-Olivier Châteaureynaud's selected stories, *A Life on Paper* (Small Beer, 2010) won the Science Fiction & Fantasy Translation Award and was a finalist for the Best Translated Book Award. // **COLLIN BLAIR GRABAREK** received his MFA from George Mason University, where he was the fiction editor of *Phoebe: A Journal of Literature and Art*. // **JOHN HILGART** is a blogger and critic whose writing can be found at *4cp.posterous.com* and *comicbookcartography.posterous.com*. // **DANIEL HORNSBY** is an MFA candidate at the University of Michigan. He is working on a novel. // **CAITLIN HORROCKS** is author

of the story collection *This Is Not Your City*. Her stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Best American Short Stories*, *The PEN/O. Henry Prize Stories*, *The Pushcart Prize Stories*, and elsewhere. She is currently the fiction editor of *The Kenyon Review*. // **AD JAMESON** is the author of the prose collection *Amazing Adult Fantasy* and the novel *Giant Slugs*, an absurdist retelling of the Epic of Gilgamesh. His third book, *100 Things To Do When You Have The Time*, is forthcoming in 2013. // **TOSHIYA KAMEI** is the translator of a number of stories and books, including *The Curse of Eve and Other Stories*, by Liliana Blum, and *The Fox's Window and Other Stories*, by Naoko Awa. // **MILES KLEE** is the author of the novel *Ivyland*. He has contributed short fiction, satire and essays to *Vanity Fair*, *Lapham's Quarterly*, *The Awl*, *The Collagist*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* and *Contrary*, among other publications. // **J. ROBERT LENNON** is the author of seven novels, including the recent *Familiar*, and a collection of short stories, *Pieces for the Left Hand*. // **JONATHAN LETHEM** has written eight novels and several other books of fiction, memoir, and criticism. His ninth novel, *Dissident Gardens*, will be published in 2013. // **PAUL LISICKY** is the author of several books, including *Lawnboy*, *Famous Builder*, and the recent story collection *Unbuilt Projects*. // **VINNY LOPEZ** is currently employed as a writer/director of promos at VH1. He also writes, directs and appears in the surreal web series *Two Jasperjohns*. // **LING MA**'s nonfiction features have appeared in *Playboy* and *The Chicago Reader*, among other publications. Her fiction has been published in *Ninth Letter*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, and *The 2nd Hand*, and as a mini-book from featherproof. // **MARIA ROMASCO MOORE**'s stories have appeared in *Diagram*, *Pindeldyboz*, and *Hobart*. She is a 2011 graduate of the Clarion West Writers' Workshop. // **CARMEN MARIA MACHADO** is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the Clarion Writers' Workshop. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Strange Horizons*, *Indiana Review*, *Five Chapters*, and *Best Women's Erotica 2012*. She has contributed nonfiction to *The Paris Review Daily*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Hairpin*, and *The Rumpus*. // **ELIZABETH MCCracken** is the author of several books, including *The Giant's House: A Romance*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award for fiction, and *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination*, a memoir. // **LEILA MANSOURI**'s fiction has previously appeared in the *Santa Monica Review*. // **ROBBY NADLER** is a pastry chef from Missoula, Montana. He recently took a bread sabbatical in Israel. // **KALIN NENOV** is a translator, editor, publisher, agent, and, at times, writer. Currently, he lives in Sofia, Bulgaria, where he serves as Creative Director of the Human Library Foundation. // **LYUBOMIR P. NIKOLOV** lives

and writes in Sofia, Bulgaria. His publications include a non-fiction book on psychology, three collections of short stories in Bulgarian, one in English, and various appearances in Bulgarian anthologies and magazines. // **IHEOMA NWACHUKWU** has won fellowships from the Michener Center for Writers and the Chinua Achebe Center for African Writers and Artists. His fiction has appeared in *Internazionale* and is forthcoming in *Black Renaissance Noire*. // **ED PARK** is the author of the novel *Personal Days* and a founding editor of *The Believer*. // **JEFFREY PETHYBRIDGE**'s poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Gulf Coast*, *PANK*, *New Orleans Review*, *LIT*, *Washington Square*, *Notre Dame Review* and *Chicago Review*, among other publications. // **LEANNA PETRONELLA**'s poetry has appeared in *CutBank*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *La Petite Zine*, and other publications. // **DANI RADO** has published stories in *Bloom*, *5th Wednesday*, *Clackamas Review*, *SNReview*, *Mochila Review*, and *Harpur Palate*, among other journals. // **DONALD REVELL** is the author of several books of poetry, including, most recently, *The Bitter Worthy*. His work has been honored with the Pushcart Prize, the Shestack Prize, the Gertrude Stein Award, and the PEN Center USA Award for poetry, as well as fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and from the Ingram Merrill and John Simon Guggenheim Memorial foundations. // **MARY RUEFLE** has published several books of poetry and prose, including, most recently, *Selected Poems*. She has received the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, and a Whiting Award. // **TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN** lives in Ljubljana, Slovenia. His recent books translated into English are *Woods and Chalices*, *Poker*, *There's the Hand and There's the Arid Chair*, *The Blue Tower* and *On the Tracks of Wild Game*.

CARL SANDBURG (1878–1967) was a poet, storyteller, biographer, songwriter and editor. Over the course of his career, he won three Pulitzer Prizes—two for poetry and one for his biography of Abraham Lincoln. His *Rootabaga Stories* (1922) and *Rootabaga Pigeons* (1923), which tell the interrelated tales of the denizens of a magical, mythical version of the American Midwest, are among the most beautiful, daring and imaginative books of stories ever written for young readers.

MICHAEL SHREVE has published dozens of translations, including the works of Jacques Barbéri, Pierre Pelot and John Antoine Nau among others. // **DAVID J. SCHWARTZ**'s short fiction has appeared in such venues as *The Best of Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet*, *Fantasy: The*

Best of the Year 2007, and the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology *Paper Cities*. His first novel, *Superpowers*, was nominated for the Nebula and Crawford awards. // **MATHIAS SVALINA** is the author of three books, most recently *The Explosions*. With Alisa Heinzman and Zachary Schomburg, he co-edits Octopus Books. // **MICHAEL THOMAS TAREN**'s poems have been published in HTMLGIANT, *The Claudius App*, and *Fence*, and are forthcoming in *Bestoned*. His manuscripts *Puberty* and *Where is Michael* were finalists for the Fence Modern Poets Series in 2009 and 2010, respectively. // **CATHY VANDEWATER**'s writing has appeared in *Time Out New York*, *New York Press*, and *POZ*, among other places. // **DANIEL WALLACE** is the author of four novels. His fifth, *The Kings and Queens of Roam*, will be published in May 2013. His stories, essays and drawings have appeared in many magazines and journals, and his novels translated into over two dozen languages. His first novel, *Big Fish*, became a movie in 2003, directed by Tim Burton, and has now been adapted as a musical, which will open on Broadway in 2013. // **DEAN YOUNG** is the author of several books of poetry, including *Elegy on Toy Piano*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; and *Primitive Mentor*, shortlisted for the International Griffin Poetry Prize. His most recent book is *Bender*. // **MATTHEW ZAPRUDER** is the author of *Come On All You Ghosts*, *The Pajamaist*, and *American Linden*. With historian Radu Ioanid, he translated Eugen Jebeleanu's last collection, *Secret Weapon: Selected Late Poems*.

AIMEE BENDER ("The Coat," *Unstuck #1*) recently published new stories in *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* and *Tablet*. // **ARTHUR BRADFORD** ("The Carrot," *Unstuck #1*) published new stories in *Port Magazine* and *Dazed and Confused*. McSweeney's published his children's book *Benny's Brigade*. He directed the official music video for the Dandy Warhols' new single "Sad Vacation." His documentary *6 Days to Air: The Making of South Park* was nominated for an Emmy. His newest film, *Election 2012*, is available to download or stream at howsyournews.com. // **MATTHEW DERBY** ("Dokken," *Unstuck #1*) is an author of *The Silent History*, a serialized, exploratory novel for iPad and iPhone, now available in the iTunes store. // **AMELIA GRAY** ("Monument," *Unstuck #1*) published *THREATS*, a new novel. // **PATRICK HAAS** ("the horses," *Unstuck #1*) published several poems in *Petri Press*. His work was also featured in the *Best New Poets* anthology. // **LINDSAY HUNTER** ("You and Your Cats," *Unstuck #1*) has a second story collection, *Don't Kiss Me*, due out in the summer of 2013. // **JOHN MARADIK & RACHEL B GLASER** ("Peer Confession," *Unstuck #1*) have a second collaborative story forthcoming in *Milan Review*. Glaser's poetry book *Moods* is forthcoming from Factory Hollow

Press. // **JOE MENO** (“Apes,” *Unstuck #1*) published a new novel, *Office Girl*. // **SHARONA MUIR** (“Air Liners,” *Unstuck #1*) published a new story, “The Naturalist Reads a Love Letter, with Plato and a Dog,” in *Michigan Quarterly Review*. Another, “The Wild Rubber Jack,” is forthcoming in the *Jewish Women’s Literary Annual*. // **KIKI PETROSINO** (“Ancestors,” *Unstuck #1*) will publish a new book, *Hymn for the Black Terrific*, with *Sarabande* in 2013. // **HELEN PHILLIPS** (“R,” *Unstuck #1*) published a children’s adventure novel, *Here Where the Sunbeams are Green*. Her story “Flesh & Blood” appears in the Winter 2012 issue of *Tin House*. Her story “The Messy Joy of the Final Throes of the Dinner Party” was featured on the NPR/Symphony Space radio program Selected Shorts. // **DAN ROSENBERG** published poems in *Gulf Coast*, *Redux*, *Jellyfish*, *Verse Daily*, *jdbrecords*, and the cassette anthology *21 Love Poems*. // **ZACH SAVICH** (“My Ideas Have Set Nothing On Fire—Yet,” *Unstuck #1*) has published poems in *Iowa Review*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, and *Jubilat*. // **KAETHE SCHWEHN** (“Sea Air Breezy; Nothing Dreadful,” *Unstuck #1*) had new work in *Minnesota Review*, *Pleiades*, and *Transom*, and was the recipient of a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board. // **RENNIE SPARKS** (“The Eel,” *Unstuck #1*) looks forward to the May 2013 release of The Handsome Family’s new CD, *Wilderness*, as well as its companion book of essays and art about wildebeest, octopi, woodpeckers, and, of course, eels. // **RACHEL SWIRSKY** (“Death and the All-Night Donut Shop,” *Unstuck #1*) published a novelette, “Fields of Gold,” that was nominated for both the Hugo and Nebula awards. // **KARIN TIDBECK** (“Cloudberry Jam,” *Unstuck #1*) published a novel in Swedish entitled *Amatka*, and a collection of stories in English, *Jagannath*. She has stories forthcoming in the anthologies *Steampunk Revolution* and *Starry Wisdom Library*. She is currently in the process of translating *Amatka* into English and putting together a new story collection in Swedish. // **MATTHEW VOLLMER** (“The Ones You Want to Keep,” *Unstuck #1*) published work in *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, *Ecotone*, *The Sun*, *Willow Springs*, *New England Review*, and *The Normal School*. Outpost19 published his book *inscriptions for headstones*—thirty autobiographical essays, each formatted as an epitaph and each unfolding as a single sentence. W. W. Norton published *FAKES: An Anthology of Pseudo-Interviews, Faux Lectures, Quasi-Letters, “Found” Texts, and Other Fraudulent Artifacts*, which Vollmer co-edited with David Shields. // **LESLIE WHAT** (“Big Feet,” *Unstuck #1*) edited the fiction in *Phantom Drift #2: Valuable Estrangements* and co-edited the anthology *Winter Tales: Women on the Art of Aging*. // **JULIA WHICKER** (“Wonderblood,” *Unstuck #1*) published new poems in *Word Riot* and *Iowa Review*. She is currently working on a novel.

