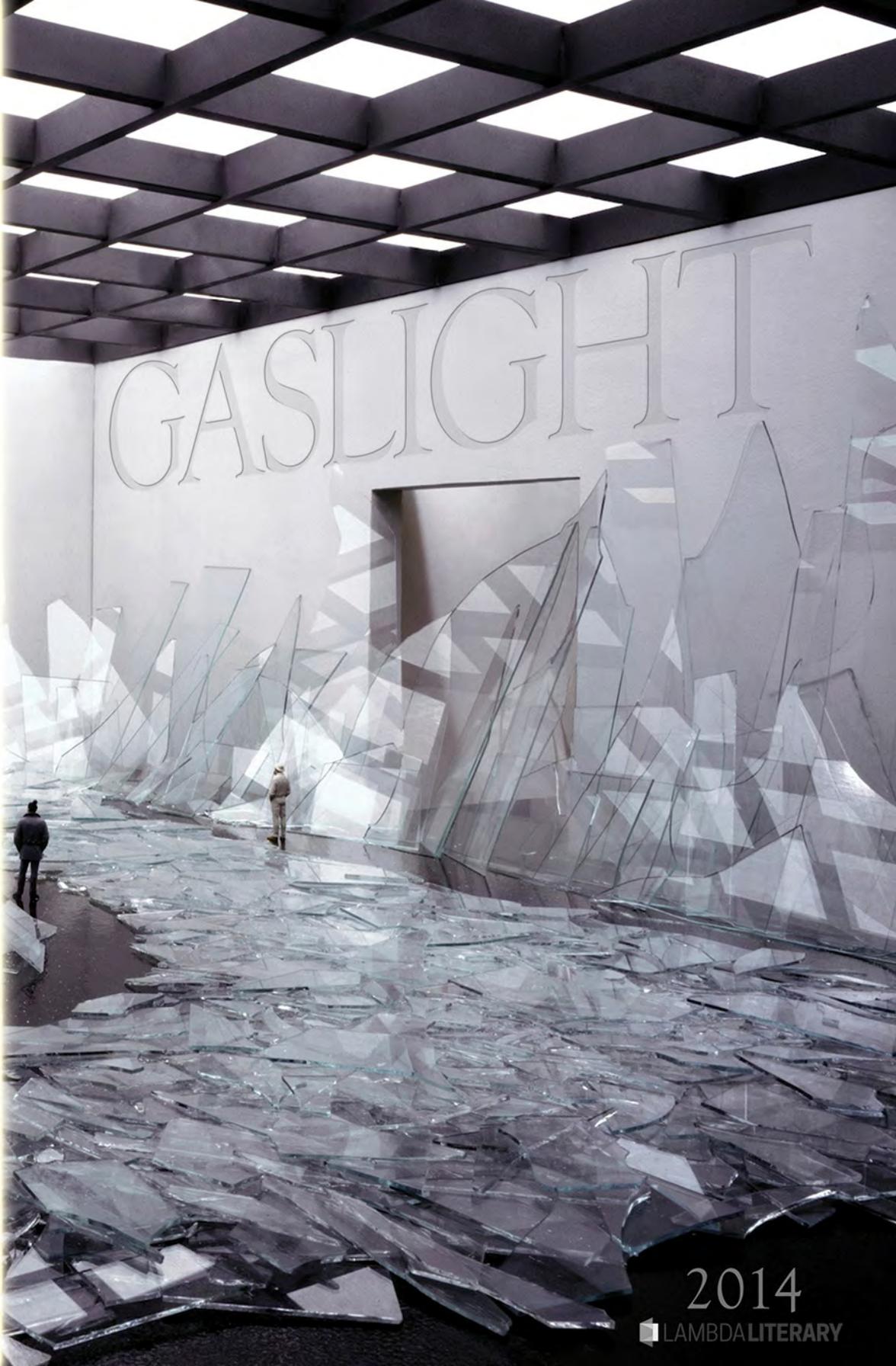


GASLIGHT



2014

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Gaslight

Note from the Director

Tony Valenzuela

Every summer during Lambda Literary's Writers Retreat for Emerging LGBTQ Voices I'm humbled by the extraordinary talent and generous spirit of the incoming students. I'm also reminded how powerful and necessary it is to host an LGBTQ literary residency. To spend a week among queer writers talking about books and the writing process, listening to each other's work, deepening our understanding of craft, building community and making new, lifelong friends is a privilege and a rare gift still vital in 2015.

Lambda Literary founded its Retreat in 2007 to give promising authors a leg up in a publishing industry constantly in flux where it is still challenging to get books about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer lives published. Selected through a highly competitive application process, the Retreat draws talented writers from every region of the U.S., Canada and around the globe.

Lambda Fellows (Retreat students) spend the week working on their manuscripts in fiction, nonfiction, genre fiction and poetry (with a playwriting class being added this summer) in small, individualized workshops led by our community's leading authors. They also attend guest lectures throughout the week covering the gamut of issues pertinent to getting published.

Recently at a national writers conference I ran into the poet, Ellen Bass, who taught the poetry workshop at Lambda's Retreat in 2010. She made a point of telling me that she's taught at writers residencies all over the country but never has she taught a workshop in which her students went on to publish their books as frequently and win other fellowships and prizes as her Lambda students.

There's so much that I'm proud of when it comes to Lambda's Writers Retreat but above all else, I'm proud that Lambda Fellows enrich the

fabric of our literature by their own literary contributions. As if that's not enough, many also go on to start or finish graduate programs, to win other fellowships and major prizes, to start their own literary journals or find meaningful work in the publishing industry. Lambda Fellows are engaged, productive members of literary communities around the world. They are not only the future of LGBTQ literature but also what's most exciting about the present.

I invite you to enjoy *Gaslight*, a superb collection of work by Lambda Fellows in our first annual anthology of writings from our summer residency. I'd like to especially thank Miah Jeffra, the brilliant editor of this volume for doing such a beautiful job with this inaugural issue.

Tony Valenzuela
Executive Director, Lambda Literary

Editor's Note

Miah Jeffra

I met my 2014 Lambda Literary Emerging Voices cohort at the top of Los Angeles, in the middle of summer, at the bottom of news: Israel had just begun its retaliatory assault on Gaza. My heart was heavy as I settled into my Berber carpeted dorm room, dropped my necessities, and sat on my bed, wondering who would be bunking alongside me for this string of mysterious days: all I knew was that it would be a stranger. An LGBTQ stranger. A LGBTQ stranger who likes to write. What a collusion of stuff: disaggregated violence and a queer with a pen. I hoped that I would meet some dedicated and inspiring writers to settle the disruption in my gut; I hoped that I would write, perhaps about something I cared about. My expectations did not extend beyond this utility, and I unpacked my bag with rocks in my hands, and the weight of the world pressed against my chest.

And then, Seth appeared. Or rather, I returned to my room from a stroll, and there he was, my Fellow roomie. Upon sight, his whole face lit up with welcome and opportunity. Yes, a light in the face. A lightness. And that was the beginning. From then on, during the seven days of this retreat, his face became one of forty. A surprise--I was lifted, by them all.

We fell in love. Writing is love. Writing is justice.

A little context: I did not want to become a gay man until well into my twenties. The reason? Literature. In all the queer-matter stories I read--by Winterson, Rechy, Cunningham, Hall, Baldwin, Crowley--everything seemed anxious, either a circumstance of repression that led to death and alienation, or a rather lascivious abandon that, well, also led to death and alienation. I felt the truth in these works, even a little tingle in the most necessary parts of my body, but I wasn't looking forward to living the narrative pronounced by these tales, especially if it resembled the dark tones of a life not quite on the horizon. It was all so anxious, so self-conscious to me, then. Hopeless.

I realize that an editor of something like this is supposed to sit with the collection of texts, wade through their poetics, their choices (and such terrific choices!) and declare the emergent theme. [imagine *theme* being sounded out with the slow sumptuousness of still-hot taffy, or Savannah humidity]. Not the case, here. The only emergent theme in this collection, besides our identities as queer folks all across the spectrum, is just how much of a rounded horizon that spectrum has become.

There is plot play, political jabs, social polemic, meditations on nature, domestic scoping and, of course, love. And, of course, music. And, of course, perspective: that sliver of the truth, that light of a blade, or that to light the way.

We fell in love. Writing is love. Writing is justice.

I finish editing this journal as people, including myself, walk across freeways and stop traffic to disrupt routine, the routine of forgetting that all lives matter. Again, my heart is heavy, as I settle in to write this note. But I do walk, and I do write, and so do many others, including the people in this book. And I write this for them, and they write for me, and for you. And that is how hope feels. That which is *for*. I am grateful.

Indeed, there is anguish in these writers, too. There is aching politicization. There even is loathing. And, also, there is peace found. Peace understood. There is meditation. There is adjustment, and breath, at moments a relative absence of the whole anxiety that affects so much literature, and so much of human experience. Does that mean we queer scribes are getting closer to some kind of resolve?

Well, let's not get away from ourselves. But what reading this work does say? The people who spent that week with me last summer are extraordinary. They are beautiful, and complicated, and brilliant. Yes, full of light. And the work in this anthology reflects this love, so much love. It is our sliver. Enjoy.

Epitaph

Lisa Galloway

November 14th

Home, the week before. I overheard, “*She* could keep her from heaven.”

Eyes now so sunken from morphine, half open,
her pupils are little lichen covered headstones.

I didn't read *Loving Mother of Lisa Renee*,
I saw sky,
cloudwork reconfiguring death as
cumulous beasts of parent and child, a sun
glaring as an interrogation bulb, a lawn of
tiny faceless children, their murmur
either “hope” or “help.” My mind
humming, fumbling to find
an answer approximating tenderness. Dad tracing
his fingers across her
face, illuminating grave memory.

November 18th

I imagine he tired of taking
out the trash, of the bloody
chuck pads, of asking
my cousin to buy more sheets, of
sleepless nights listening
to her labored breath,
of the phone, of updating,
of leaving me voicemails,
of having family, friends in and out
all hours, instead he tells me, “you know she loved you the best that she could.”

This bridge is not constructed well for the crossing.

You are freed to float
for days. Waiting for the rasp
to release into light.

Bessie Ann Galloway

12/8/1951- 11/21/2007

Now, we know when
there are white candles burning
next to white candles in
churches, at ceremonies, lined up
on cakes, they are memory flickers,
the burning, the unanswered leave,
call out to when
reduced to a marker, just
a sign, tiny flames are silent cries of light.

November 23rd

Dad tells me he remembers
a weak smile he hopes
was for him, but can accept
it was for her maker.

I am just the daughter, a too-late-fat-lie-flying in from Portland with the only request
I'll ever fulfill, a "poem" that doesn't make her look like a bad mom.

Mother

We saw your heart

██████████

held open

██████████

felt our earth stop

██████████

in the grip of your hand,

the seconds mapped a way home ██████████


You were less yourself


everything

bound


like


waning


shadows


caught

To make up for all the rest,

I answer as Vera Wang, a platinum cross, 2 inch heels, MAC makeup, and silence in
absence of a ring on my left hand.

Standing next to her casket looking out on
the white reflection-washed faces,
a congregation, all eyes full,
offering to acknowledge
a life I couldn't,
even in drag.

Death and life both crave
clarity, light. Obituary
and poetry spark and carry
until we run out
of wax and wick.

Hives
—
Lisa Galloway

Boarding the plane to fly home,
you file in like drones
you hope it doesn't go down.
You find your window seat,
stuff your stuffed bag in the overhead,
wait for the middle seat woman to let you in.
She looks you up and down.
She's a nice southern drawl.
Some would call her a belle.
You think of summer days,
a pitcher of sweet tea and then
being stung by a bee.

At five, in anaphylactic seconds, I became that kid.
The one who got stung and swelled.
We remember things when we are forced to stop.
The stewardess is demonstrating how to put on the oxygen mask
I haven't been breathing since I sucked it in to shimmy to my seat thinking of being
stung.

Kids are like bees, dreaming they can fly,
positing the pariah, the weird one—the outlier. A defense, protection against...
but once stung everyone falls, stops.

I'm flying back home.
Preparing myself for the gaze
from my conservative midwestern town.

Bee stings release pheromones that prompt other bees to attack.

Think back, there was always a paste eater, a girl who peed herself, the stinky kid. I was the dyke. I couldn't fly.

Did you stop? Did you join?

Like life, there's a hierarchy and a rotating queen.

You compulsively check the complimentary soda can to see if there is lurking calamity.

It's a myth that they lose their stinger and die.

Some can sting more than once.

They evolved for inter-bee combat.

High School, too, is like this—

not only barbed and full of pheromones

and abuzz with rumors.

Hovering swarms and honey-sweet assailants.

Bees seem predatory. Or crazy, kamikaze little buggers.

But of course it is just defense

“If you leave it alone, it won't bother you.”

We all know that this isn't true.

I've seen suicide.

I've seen people fly across rooms.

Defenses are subjective.

But I want to know.

With all eyes on you—do you stop?

Feel winged?

Catch a buzz?

Or sting, sting, sting?

Snapdragon

Jane V. Blunski

Elise convinced Jody that they wanted two dollar martinis more than they wanted dinner, so they walked five blocks to a bar one evening after figure drawing class, leaving their cars in the parking lot of the university art department. Jody was the reason Elise had started thinking she was a lesbian. Jody was the most talented student in the class, and Elise modeled nude for twelve dollars cash an hour. People assumed they were involved when Jody's sketches began to focus solely on the plane of Elise's inner thigh and the crease where her collarbone joined her neck. The other students, bashful at working with their first live model, stuck to penciling out her form with rote, literal fidelity to her anatomy with the exception of one young woman who concentrated her efforts on rendering the cellulite that coated Elise's buttocks and upper thighs with detached precision; the instructor declared her expression of the Keratosis Pilaris on her haunches "masterful." This burned Jody up. She seduced Elise after class that evening. Elise slept at her apartment that night and never went home.

The bar they stopped at was called the Sidecar and the Sidecar was packed: a handful of women in pencil skirts and heels, and a swarm of collegiate types. Elise had gone out looking like hell, her dirty hair scraped into a bun, no makeup and a cheap flowered sundress with rubber flip flops. "Hey Nineteen" was playing on the jukebox, and Elise and Jody downed their first drinks fast and kissed a few times, standing up between occupied stools. Jody ordered two more over Elise's shoulder and went to the ladies' room. At the other end of the bar, Kevin Baudoin was letting a woman whose hair he'd just cut into a deliberately messy shag buy him drinks. He reached over and separated her bangs into even messier pieces, or stuck his clawed hand in at the nape of her neck and shook her ashy layers into chaos. Elise watched the lady arch her back and giggle. She liked Kevin's attention.

Kevin looked okay. Elise recognized him from the time she'd dropped her mother off at his salon after she'd had lipo and couldn't drive. He had called her mother "dollface," which had embarrassed Elise. He was

dressed the way she remembered that night, in tight, straight-leg Levi's and a faded black v-neck. Black Chucks. "He thinks he's Mick Jagger," her mother had said. Kevin was skinny and tan, with long arms and legs. Elise imagined he was something like fifty five years old. She stared at him working his client, pouring some of whatever was in his rocks glass over into hers. Jody came back and put her arms around Elise's waist from behind, "I need to leave for work soon," she whispered. Jody paid for school by working the night shift at a drive through daiquiri shop near the north gate of LSU.

Elise wanted to stay and keep drinking. She had enough to buy three more martinis and still pitch in for half of the groceries that week. "Why don't you call me on your break?" she said to Jody. "I can walk back to my car, no problem." Jody left and two drinks later the lady Kevin was flattering left and the bar started to empty out a little bit. "Tusk" came on. Elise walked outside to smoke a cigarette and Kevin followed. "Drop that hair, I want to see what you've got," he teased, offering her a light.

"It's filthy, I need a color," she pointed her lighted cigarette in the direction of her crown, exhaling.

Kevin reached over and removed the number two pencil Elise had stabbed into her bun to hold it in place. "You're right," he said, wincing in a fake way that bugged Elise, "it's bad. Let me fix you up." He pulled a business card out of his back pocket and handed it over. Elise patted the place where her sundress flared over her hips.

"No pockets, brah. Sorry," she laughed. She wanted him to realize she wasn't sorry. Elise and Kevin went back inside the bar and kept drinking martinis and talking. When Elise ran out of money, Kevin ordered them a couple of draft beers and told the bartender to put them on his tab. He told Elise that he had seen her walk in with Jody.

"So, she's the boy and you're the girl?" Jody wore her blue black hair in a quiff, and she dressed like Kevin; androgynous, in tight, dark clothes.

Ordinarily, a question like this activated a tape in Elise's head of the theoretical noise she had learned in her women's studies classes, but Elise was drunk and feeling generous. "Is that where your mind wants

to go right now?" she tapped her temple. "Is that your big fantasy about me and my girl?"

Kevin put his hand on her thigh, "I like it well enough for now. Guys and girls. Works for me."

"We just got together, anyway. She thinks I drink too much to fall in love with."

"She said that?"

"I can just tell."

"You don't need that," he was rubbing her leg, squeezing her kneecap, "you're so pretty, honey. You look so good." Kevin dove at her neck and she let him. He paid the tab and pretended he wanted to walk Elise to her car. "Why don't I drive you home instead?" Kevin said he wanted to go by his shop first and pick up some cash to deposit the next day. He said he didn't like to leave it in the register overnight. "Let me show you where my place is. Come in on Saturday and I'll make you perfect again," he said, freeing her hair again and twisting the length of it like a jump rope.

By the time they got to the narrow storefront that Kevin rented in downtown Baton Rouge, Elise needed to go inside and pee. "That draft put me over," she laughed. "I usually stick to clear liquor."

The place was meant to look like an Asian fantasy, with big garnet colored cushions piled on black laquer futon frames and rice paper screens partitioning off the area between the shampoo bowl and the chair where Kevin cut hair. The salon smelled like sulfur and expensive shampoo, kind of like rotten eggs mixed with tea rose and jasmine. Kevin smelled like sandalwood, Elise discovered when he leaned her back in the shampoo bowl and began kissing her neck. "Are you going to cut my hair?" she asked, and closed her eyes. Kevin's kisses felt good, and she thought he was probably right; she didn't need Jody's criticism. She liked drinking. She was having fun.

"Maybe later," he answered, and reached under her skirt.

The sex was a disaster. Elise couldn't focus the way you need to in a one night stand, that mixture of "holy shit, this is happening," and "is the rubber still on? Wait...okay, yeah: do that. No, that." She was too wasted to really get wet, so Kevin's half-hard dick sort of bounced out a few

times before she finally pushed him back and gave up an unenthusiastic blow-job. He offered her some cocaine, snorting a fat rail off a hand mirror balanced on the shampoo shelf, but she was done. There were a bunch of cans of Sprite in a little fridge next to the bathroom, and she downed half a cold soda before making a bed out of a pile of black nylon smocks she found hanging on the back of the door. The last thing she remembered was seeing Kevin sitting on the toilet lid above her, rolling a joint. "I just need to close my eyes for a minute," she said.

"Okay, dollface, let's get you moving," Kevin set a styrofoam cup of coffee in front of Elise's face and hauled her up to sitting by her upper arm, and then he was squatting next to her with his arms wrapped around her ribcage, patting her back. This annoyed her. She downed what was left in the soda can on the floor next to her and lunged for the toilet. Kevin rubbed her back while she retched. "I called you a cab, baby. My first client will be here in twenty minutes."

"Get away from me, man." As she pushed him off, Elise could see that Kevin's hair was damp and he was wearing a different t-shirt, a white one. His sandalwood smell was stronger, with cigarette smoke underneath. He had on a pair of frameless half-glasses, which made him look older. He looked his age to Elise just then, her mother and father's age, pushing sixty. "Did you leave me here last night?"

"You were out. All the way out."

"Where's my stuff?" She was naked except for her bra and the smock that lay bunched over her legs.

"Where you left it. Come on, I'll help you."

"Give me that." Elise nodded at Kevin's coffee.

Her dress was wedged in the hinge of the chair in front of the shampoo bowl; as she jerked it free, she noticed a pack of cigarettes lying on Kevin's station next to a Barbicide jar full of black plastic combs. A twenty was folded between the cellophane and the paper of the pack. Elise stuck the pack in her bra.

Kevin gave her a fresh coffee and money for the cab and he kissed her forehead at the door. She asked the driver to take her to her parents' house. She didn't want to explain where she'd been to Jody, and she

had left her keys and cigarettes at the Sidecar anyway. Her parents kept a spare front door key under a ceramic turtle next their garage. Elise stripped off her sundress and panties in the kitchen, and then removed the cigarette pack from her bra. The clock on the microwave read nine thirty. She took a carton of orange juice into the backyard and launched herself into the middle of her parents' swimming pool on a plastic raft. In the hot light, Elise inspected her body. The chlorinated water burned at something on her hip: a raw archipelago of purpling ovals with a crust of drying blood where an incisor had broken the skin.

Jody surprised Elise by acting really pissed off when Elise finally turned up at their apartment.

"I thought something fucking horrible had happened to you. You can't just not come home."

"I did go home, though. I went to my parents' house last night. I wanted to sleep alone. We are not girlfriends, remember? I mean, my stuff is here," Elise swept her arm in the direction of an overstuffed laundry basket filled with folded clean clothes, "but this is *your* place. You don't even know what you're *doing* with me."

"You could have called."

"My phone is dead."

"Your parents don't have a phone."

"I was tired, lay off! Christ!"

Elise took a bath and then she and Jody had makeup sex. Afterward, Jody told Elise that she would make space for her in the closet and on the shelves in the bathroom, and that she wanted her to feel like the apartment was her place, too, and that they could take things slowly.

"Let's just see where this goes," she said, pulling Elise closer, kissing the top of her head.

Elise wanted Jody to want her. She had been living with Jody, but in a half-hearted way, using the shampoo she found in the shower instead of getting a bottle of the kind she liked, and asking Jody for permission to open a cabinet or take a book off a shelf. She liked the way Jody looked: skinny, all sinew and bone, covered in tattoos; the knuckles of her right hand read: *blase*; her left: *blase*. She liked sleeping with Jody.

She liked that Jody was a good artist. She had a lot of ideas about Jody, and she liked almost all of them.

“Okay,” she said. “We’ll see.”

The next morning, Jody found the bruises on Elise’s hip, along with a couple of livid hickeys that had surfaced on Elise’s ribcage. “Are you going to keep seeing him?” Jody asked. She had listened to Elise explain the night with Kevin with a look of complete equanimity.

Elise squeezed her brows together. “Of course not. I never want to see him again. We are together,” she pointed a forefinger at Jody’s chest and back at her own, “remember?”

Jody shrugged her off and got dressed for class. “Do you want coffee?” she called from the kitchen. “We have green tea-”

Elise threw the covers off and went to the bathroom to pee. She eased open the medicine cabinet. Clear nail polish. Eyeliner pencils. Floss. Eye drops. Bingo: Elise palmed the bottle of Xanax and flushed the toilet. “Diet Coke,” she answered, and slipped a powdery pill onto her tongue. She chased it with a scoop of water from the tap, and then met Jody in their tiny kitchen. “I need cigs. See you at school.”

She drove to the Circle K near campus and bought smokes and a pint of Crown. She twisted through the bottle’s plastic seal as she started the car; she figured she had about twenty seven minutes to drink, drive, park, change and get in place for class. She pulled hard on the bottle twice and sipped on the Diet Coke as she navigated afternoon traffic. In the art department parking lot, she added a healthy slug of whiskey to the rest of the soda and took two more Xanax, then hurried into the bathroom and out of her cutoffs. Naked, she wobbled a little on one foot getting into the old button-down of her father’s she wore instead of a robe. Just get on the platform and go to sleep, she told herself.

The students wanted gestures, though. Forty-five minutes of natural poses, three minutes per pose. The instructor handed Elise a broom handle and set a wooden box on the riser where she usually curled herself into approximations of yoga twists or laid across an aged, peeling beanbag that belonged to the department. She decided to begin with the handle, staking it on the plywood and leaning away and to the right with her arms outstretched. Then she leaned left. This made

her spin, so she rested a foot on the box and held the handle aloft like a sword. She connected it to an invisible baseball at the level of her chest. She abandoned it and kneeled on the box, her fingers gripping the sides. A warped, *wah-wah* sound filled her ears and she passed out. She fell off the step and hit the ground face first.

The ambulance the instructor called took her to a charity hospital that kept her in detox for exactly seventy-two hours. The nurse who started her IV asked if she thought she might be pregnant.

“Lady, I’m gay,” she mumbled.

Jody yelled at her for embarrassing herself in front of the class and making Jody look like an ass. “They all think I’m on whatever you’re on, probably.”

“I’m not on anything. I was just a little drunk. I had a drink before class.”

“When? I saw you less than an hour before class started and you were fine.”

Elise learned from the instructor of the drawing class that Jody had tried to convince him to let her take Elise home, that she was just exhausted and probably had low blood sugar. “You were in bad shape,” he told Elise. “I can’t take a chance like that with a studio full of students. Come and see me when you get well.”

“I’m well now,” she begged. “Please just let me finish the semester.”

No dice. Jody told Elise not to worry about working, to focus on taking care of herself. She wanted Elise to start going to meetings. “I’ll go with you.” The recovery groups met at about a million places in Baton Rouge, but Elise and Jody mostly went to the ones behind a Domino’s Pizza near their apartment in an aluminum sided building the size of a two-car garage. It had a large, awkward front porch that someone had hammered on for what looked like the sole purpose of accommodating the many smokers at each meeting, including Elise and Jody.

“I used to wonder what this place was all the time,” Elise said. “I would drive by and see people out here smoking and talking at all hours of the day and night and think, *who are you all? Why aren’t you at work?* Know what I mean?”

“That’s like, your tenth cigarette today. I thought you were going to slow down,” Jody answered.

The interior of the meeting place was jammed with the remnants of peoples’ sad living rooms, sprung recliners and smoke saturated couches whose crumbly foam cushions depicted scenes of the old West: orange and brown covered wagons, muscular ponies. A lacquered wagon wheel coffee table in the center of the room held a stack of books that outlined the rules everyone had to follow to stop getting loaded.

Hearing the other people in the meetings talk about the mistakes they made while they were wasted got on Elise’s nerves, which still felt electrified and raw from not drinking. She’d never stopped for more than three days in a row before. Elise stayed quiet. Jody did not.

Elise learned that Jody had some pretty good stories to tell. She did not know that Jody had three older sisters, or that she had started going out to bars and partying with them when she was fourteen. She didn’t know that Jody’s parents had kicked her out a few years later when she came out to them. She learned for the first time that Jody had spent a few years dancing in Shreveport, doing speed and gaming on the rich guys who drove in for the weekend to gamble, and that she had spent a night in jail in a teddy and a pair of clear plastic heels when she got arrested for smashing another stripper in the face with a bottle of Victoria’s Secret body spray.

“I thought you might freak out about some of that stuff,” Jody confessed.

Elise laughed. “Do you know me at *all*? I like danger. It turns me on,” she said, and raised an eyebrow. She was not joking. The version of Jody that lived in the stories was more closely aligned with the person she met on the first day of drawing class. Wild. She still dressed like a bum crossed with a rock star, but fictional Jody was a not the woman Elise had been living with. The real Jody was fussy about the way Elise folded towels and liked to read the recovery group’s daily affirmations out loud while she ate high-fiber cereal every morning. Even Jody’s artwork began to reflect the influence of what she heard in the group. She made a new painting or collage for every action the book suggested they take to keep from drinking.

One of the first actions was all about believing in God, written in a really non-specific way so as not to chase off the sensitive ones who blamed Him for their hard times. The book laid off using the G-word, and the name they used sounded too controlling to Elise, so she called it Greater Energy instead. She didn't have any hard feelings for the God in the name-brand religion she had been served since childhood, and she liked the plaster statues and pictures of dramatically exposed flaming hearts and pregnant teenage queens. She kept some good-luck holy cards jammed into her car's dash, which made Jody nervous.

"How can you even see the gas gauge?"

"The Virgin Mary has my back."

Jody told Elise that she didn't believe in God. "I just have a conscience," she said one night as they made dinner together.

"That's your Greater Energy, then. It doesn't have to be a specific *person*, like a man with a white beard pointing at you with a bony finger."

"It's not one person. It's two people. Two men."

This got Elise's attention

"When I need to make a decision, I go in my head first. I have had this image of two men there for as long as I can remember. I ask them if I am doing the right thing, and they give me the answer."

"How's that?" Elise looked away and kept her voice even so that Jody would keep talking.

"Well, my yes man is on the right side, and my no man is on the left."

"Left and right side of what? Your hands?"

"My mind. The picture in my mind." Jody's face and neck began to flush. "Look, never mind, I can't -"

"No, keep going. I won't say anything else."

"Okay. So, say I ask something and the answer is yes. The man on the right will lift his face to the sky and blaze light at me. Like, he is surrounded by rays of light, and when he looks up, it's a blaze of that light. If the answer is no, the left hand guy will show up and bow his head, and the lights around him all go out. It sounds like a door slamming."

“What do they look like?”

“Yes man is wrapped in this white and gold robe and he’s barefoot. He has long brown hair and white, white teeth. He’s always standing in the wind, too, like his hair and his robe are always blowing back. No man is like a mummy, almost. He’s covered in these raggedy bluish gray bandages, even his head. I’ve never seen his eyes.”

“Okay, so that’s Jesus, babe. Thanks for playing.”

“It’s not, though.”

“I want that. I want people to help me make decisions.”

“You need to look at the pictures in your head, then.”

After that, every time she needed to make a decision, Elise tried to find an image of her Greater Energy in her head. She began with minutia: *Should I smoke this cigarette now or after I take a shower?* Darkness. *Skirt or shorts?* Nothing. Elise started telling Jody that she wanted to go to some different meetings alone, and then going over to her parents’ house to swim and lay out instead. She was sick of listening to people swallow coffee and complain about their grown children who refused to speak to them. She pretended to Jody that she was still reading the book and following the actions it recommended. One night, she decided to go out to a bar downtown to watch a Cajun band and dance. Jody didn’t want to go.

“Why would you put yourself in a situation to be tempted? You’re doing so much better, I can really tell a difference.” It was true. Elise did feel livelier, and she had gotten used to not drinking. She liked the feeling of waking up after sleeping all night long, hard.

“Nothing’s going to happen. I don’t even feel like drinking anymore. I’m way more into eating my feelings now, anyway,” she said.

The band hadn’t started when she arrived, and the first person she saw when she walked in was Kevin Baudoin, talking to the bartender. She turned around and walked back to her car. She unlocked the door. She smoked a cigarette. She flipped down the visor and reapplied her lipstick. She closed her eyes. *Should I go back inside?* In her mind she saw a waxy green flower with teeth. The teeth parted and the flower hinged open. It’s deep pink interior spit out a single, fat black fly. She went back inside.

Avoiding Kevin was no problem at first since the dance floor in front of the stage was crammed with people. She kept him in her peripheral vision, though, making sure to move when he got too close to where she was dancing. She went to the bar and ordered a Coke, but the bartender set a glass of draft in front of her. He lifted his chin at the crowd behind Elise and she turned around. Kevin.

“I don’t want this.” She did want the beer, though. She could imagine how it tasted and how much better it would make the music sound. The flower with teeth recaptured the fly and hinged closed.

“He already paid for it.”

“Who cares? I don’t want this.” As she pushed the glass at him, some of the draft sloshed onto her hand, and she slurped at it without thinking. “Give me a Coke.” She laid a five dollar bill on the bar and left with her plastic cup of soda.

“My Greater Energy is a snapdragon.” Jody was asleep when Elise came home and told her about the bar and Kevin. Jody sat up in bed in the dark while Elise took off her dress and boots and her makeup in the bathroom attached to their room,

“It sounds like a Venus fly trap, not a snapdragon.”

“Whatever. I say snapdragon.”

“You didn’t drink.”

“No.”

“You never spoke to him.”

“No.”

“Umkay. I mean, you’ll have to face him sooner or later-”

“Why? I told you I never want to see him again.”

“You have to make it right with him, Elise. You took his money and his cigarettes, remember? You have to make an apology.” Jody was big on apologies now. Elise had forgotten that she told Jody about the smokes and the twenty she lifted from Kevin.

“We’ll see.”

Jody got out of bed and put her arms around Elise’s waist, and then hooked her chin over Elise’s shoulder and addressed her reflection in the bathroom mirror, “Please don’t start fucking up, love. We’re doing so

good. Isn't this what you wanted?"

Elise leaned back into Jody. "I think so. Yes. This is what I wanted."

Jody helped her rehearse the speech she would give Kevin when she went to make the apology, and even offered to drive Elise to the salon and wait in the car while she did it.

"Say it all one more time so you'll be ready," she urged on the morning Elise was supposed to go to Kevin's shop. She didn't know that Elise had made an appointment to have her bangs cut using her initials. "E.J. Briggs," she had said when she called. "Just a trim."

She wore the same flowered sundress from the night they'd fucked, or tried to, and twisted her hair into a bun again. She stopped for a fresh pack of cigarettes to make up for the ones she stole, and attached a folded twenty with a ponytail holder. Kevin looked surprised when she walked in at ten sharp.

"Hey, honey. What you know good?" He was sitting at his desk, examining a computer screen through his old man half glasses.

"I'm here for a haircut," she said.

"Well, let's see," he searched the screen, clicking up and down with the mouse. "I'm booked right now, but—"

"I have an appointment. E.J. Briggs. Bangs," she smoothed her fringe down over her eyebrows, "they're still a disaster."

Kevin took his time washing her hair and combing the length of Elise's hair and offered to trim the ends, too. "No charge."

Elise checked. Open. The fly circled the pink maw. "Okay. Just a half inch or so."

He snipped her bangs precisely, his face inches from her crown. "I need to tell you something, Kevin," she said, careful not to move. "I was wrong and I need to make something right." Still open.

"Sure, baby. What's that?"

"I brought you those cigarettes. The money is for you, too. I took your cigarettes and your money the last time I was here."

"You don't have to pay me just yet. You don't have to pay me at all. I wanted to see you again." He lowered his shears and kissed her, "I told you I would make you perfect, remember?"

The fly darted between the snapdragon's teeth as it began to close.

She pulled him closer by the buckle of his belt. “When is your next appointment?”

Jody wanted details when she got home from school that afternoon, “Was it okay? Did he accept your apology?”

The jaws had flown open. The fly swooped in from the left, then the right, grazing the dark interior with abandon. “Definitely,” Elise said. “He was very kind about the whole thing. I told him that I was doing it as much for myself as I was for him. It was perfect.”

Coffee Spilled

Miah Jeffra

The café is a worn, warm storefront on a stretch of street in the deep pocket of change, that used to be deemed unseemly with its dissonance, with its whiff of raw fish heads and burnt pinto beans, with its car horns yelling across corners, with its hand-painted signs above doors, with its paint cracking in the same pattern as the bed of Death Valley, that used to be bedroom quiet in the darkest part of night, that used to be a haven for whispered drug deals. But now the drug deals are done inside, and the whispers are of lovers making deals, and the street has been narrowed, and our eyes widened.

The story goes like this: coffee has been spilled. The woman who ordered the coffee is, by all accounts, lovely. She wears a sundress that drapes on her body modestly, but with terrific suggestion that her body is under this cotton floral print, and has the potential to do things. And now, the coffee that has spilled seeps into that cotton right on her breasts, where you now can see the outline of them, the bottom curve where they bulb on her chest, the nipples. The coffee is very hot. Everyone in the café knows this because the woman, incongruous with her pixie haircut, her soft, round cheeks, her glossy pink lips, her linen lace-up Espadrilles, screeches out a nasty, nasally “Fuck!” She bends forward, pulls on the top of her dress. She says it again. “Fuck!” She looks wildly at the barista, a young man with a trimmed beard and a very thin, low-cut v-neck that flaunts his chest hair, this man who has stumbled against the counter and lost control of the freshly poured coffee that has spilled onto the pixie woman’s sundress, and says, “Fuck. You!”

There is another woman in the café. She is, to most, still considered young. Her daughter, with thin mousy brown hair identical to her mother’s, sits across from her, and sees her mother’s light blue eyes widen, watches her mother swing her head towards the pixie woman, who is still pulling the dress away from her chest in an awkward bend of her body. “Excuse me. There is a *child* present.” The daughter watches her mother’s lips involuntarily tug towards her nose, and she might even

call it a snarl, like that of a dog. Her mother was not a dog. She was usually calculated and muted, as if the animal instinct were rubbed out of her with sandpaper, and all that was left was a bone-smooth polish, her buffed fingernails reflecting little boxes of the window-light. The girl was too young to know of her mother's disappointments, all the lovers who had left, including her father, a schoolteacher who thought he wanted a child of his own—to practice his years of accrued insight—but who then realized he taught in a classroom because it was window-parenting, and that he more enjoyed a life that was outside looking in. The mother often daydreams that the men leave because of the daughter, but shakes her head violently to pretend the thought away. Yet it sits inside her, quietly breathing into the corners of whatever is left of her dreams. The mother packs up, rips out her keys, mumbling words like 'crass' and 'young' and 'bitch', and leaps out of the chair, "Come on, Sabrina," then glares at the pixie woman—whom she notices has awkwardly knelt down in front of her daughter—and storms out of the shop. Sabrina grabs her mother's half-drunk coffee and follows out the door. "Mom, you forgot your coffee."

The mother swings around, and pulls hard on Sabrina's arm, "Come on!" The coffee spills onto the sidewalk. The force of the anger, the energy that brews in the mother's body and releases in the seethe of the command, and the grip of the fingers on flesh, is so pointed, so specific, that it travels into the girl, red finger-wide bruises bloom under her skin. The shock of the energy, the pain of its force, goes through Sabrina, the look of her mother's fury superimposed onto her memory like the atomic bomb silhouettes blasted onto concrete walls. That memory will eclipse so many others, even of more profound events, and will reveal itself several times in her adulthood, most often as she makes love to men she has grown fond of, and worries they will leave. It is in the heaviness of sex that the memory will emerge, as if from deep water—the image of her mother's small tight face, the grit of her mouth, the grip of her hand—and with that Sabrina will transmit the force of the memory onto her lover—his face flushed, damp with sweat—through her fingernails, pressing deeper into his chest, and pulling down, until a small line of blood blooms from his skin, and his eyes open and widen with the instinct of terror. *Stay with me*, she thinks.

How painful this story is, but it is one that we know, that we have read many times, and perhaps when we've read that story it transmits its force into us, and maybe we then carry it, and transmit it to something—or someone—else.

But there is another story here, the one that is less often written. It is where the young hairy-chested barista, once he has realized his mistake, that the bottom of the coffee cup has nicked the edge of the counter and the coffee sails into the air, once he sees the pixie woman clutching the stained cotton of her sundress, before her shock coalesces into the ball of fury that releases into the very audible “fuck”, that he looks at her with so much sorrow, a blue cold that spreads out from his heart, across his chest, that wants to wrap itself around the pixie woman, to shroud her in the apology that could cool the red hot of the spilled liquid, and the white hot of her anger.

There is the moment where the pixie woman, after she has screamed her anger in the form of “fuck,” after she turns to the angry mutterings of the mother and notices the 10 year-old girl staring out, eyes widened, sees the innocence of the girl and recognizes her painful desire to preserve it, something identical to shame, that she lowers herself down, level to Sabrina and says, “I’m so sorry, honey,” but this is only after the mother has already grabbed her and rushed out the door.

And that instant the mother sees how her fingers have violated her daughter’s flesh, much the way her once rigid and now broken hopes have violated the precious little love that she still allows herself to feel, she becomes frightened for her daughter, the fear she will live in a world of little kindness, a world full of injury, and suddenly wraps her arms around Sabrina, picks her up with a strength that can only be summoned with the emotions of survival: either fear or love, but one can never see the difference in such small apertures, and Sabrina feels an instant of weightlessness, the burn of her mother’s fingers forgotten in the cooling of her embrace.

And, finally, the tears of Sabrina, already falling as she punctures the lover’s chest with her fingernails, the simultaneity of the anger and love raking his body, the urge to hurt and to hold, collapsed. And what of

her lover? Which intent does he understand first? Her fury, or her love? When his eyes widen in the violence, does he spread outward, or does he tighten into a hot white ball? And maybe, in this moment, Sabrina thinks *if only stories of love wrote themselves as urgently as stories of anger*. What would that mean for us all?

Keiki

Victor Vazquez

We bought milk and an orchid—
came back home to eat cereal.

You lost it on the porch.
Kissing my cheek you said,

You smell like a baby.

I took your grocery bag, so you could mourn.
I waited, held the door.

With my teeth I tore the keiki
from the mother plant and handed it to you.

I said, *Bury it, we can watch this grow.*

A Slip of Moon (*excerpt*)

Christina Quintana

ONE: THE MATINEE

We are in production at Zia, and so, we have our usual Saturday matinee. At the moment, we are (surprise, surprise) in between box office managers, and someone needs to run the desk. That person is me, of course—the master catch-all at our little nonprofit theater at the corner of the Plaza. I have known Zia the longest, which has its rewards and its pains. The current production is Stephen Adley Giurgus's *Our Lady of 121st Street*, a hilarious twelve person play that leaves audience laughter spilling into the front of house. The show opened this week, and we hoped to fill the box office position by now, but as a part time position, the turnover is disastrous. So much so that Cheryl, the theater's artistic director, jokes that we should enlist my future child, who will probably be a more reliable box office manager than we have seen in years.

I feel particularly nostalgic today, wrapped up in the pinkish-red of the walls lined with old show posters, the lopsided bar decked in its usual display of dusty beers and wines, the cozy box office window itself with a slow, humming desktop computer in desperate need of an update. Maybe it is the reassurance that despite the big changes about to hit my life—our lives—this theater, my theater, is a stubborn, albeit crumbling, fixture.

I am three months pregnant and can already imagine Ellie causing mischief in the theater lobby. She will grow up here—she'll attend all of our camps, color pages on this floor, busy herself with homework in our office, walk curiously through the rehearsal room, and someday, attend our openings. Zia is where I fully fell in love with theatre; where I volunteered and interned, where I had my first kiss with Ricky Vega, and acted my first lines—here is home, and it will be Ellie's, too.

Despite the fact that I would have preferred a Saturday off, I adore the solitude of the box office and the front-of-house during a performance. Beyond the theater doors an audience buzzes, a stage full of performers live in another world, but in this spot, I find delicious quiet. As I print and organize the will call tickets in the booth's half-

light, I have enchiladas on the brain. A rush of laughter sweeps into the lobby and I imagined our kitchen full of the hot breath of my favorite recipe. Lately I have been unnaturally exhausted from a day's work and standing for long periods has become treacherous, so I barely cook. Kat works wonders in the kitchen, but I love the task of making a meal—the order of it. That night I plan to return to the kitchen with mighty triumph. The thought of those chicken enchiladas puts such a smile on my face. There is no greater gift to a pregnant woman than the satisfaction of a hunger craving.

Yes, I think to myself. Tonight, we will feast.

But I am wrong.

There will be no meal.

I am too late.

The most horrible part? I go straight to the front bathroom. During pregnancy, my bladder has no stamina. It's the awful truth. I fly inside. Coat still on, scarf, too. I call to Kat—into the house—as I wash my hands with foamy soap. She loves that damn foamy soap. It never ceases to amaze her, the way the liquid instantly turns to foam with one swift pump. Like some kind of everyday magic. Hands clean, I slip off my coat and I step into the kitchen.

There she is.

I remember so many small, insignificant details from my life. I can tell you the outfit I wore on my last day of high school (jeans and a fantastic pastel yellow v-neck short-sleeve top), what I ordered (braised chicken with Oaxacan mole negro) the night Kat and I celebrated our five year anniversary, but I can't, for the life of me, piece together all the moments of this evening. I see it like a painting on a sheet of watercolor paper accidentally dropped in a pool of water. The page is torn and separated, and the image is little more than orbs of soaked color.

I call the ambulance. That's all I know.

They find me on the kitchen floor holding her tight, spooning her close to me. They find my cell phone open, catty corner from us. I imagine I wait there, next to her, for the brief minutes it takes the ambulance to arrive. Minutes that are the last I have of her. I imagine it is all too quiet. Cubes of ice fall into their bucket in the freezer.

The female EMT has to pry my hands from Kat's sweater. She says I look like a balloon that might fly away if they don't tether me down. She is right. That's the strange part. It isn't heaviness I feel— it is emptiness. Grief is an intolerable helium. For months afterward, I will walk with my toes barely brushing the ground.

SLIP #1

[A copy of the EMT patient care report from the day of Kar's death]

AMBULANCE EMT-B Patient Care Report		Technician 1 Name: <u>Pargallo, Isabel</u> Technician 2 Name: <u>Chavez, Jack</u>		ID # <u>A20034097</u> ID # <u>A21096951</u>		Shift Date: Service Name: <u>PTEMS</u> TIME IN: <u>1600</u> TIME Out: <u>0200</u>																																													
DISPATCH Non-Emergent <input type="checkbox"/> Semi-Emergent <input type="checkbox"/> Transfer <input type="checkbox"/> Emergent <input type="checkbox"/> Ambulance <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/>	RACE/SEX African American <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian <input type="checkbox"/> Asian <input type="checkbox"/> Caucasian <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic <input type="checkbox"/> Other <input type="checkbox"/>	M F M <input type="checkbox"/> F <input type="checkbox"/>	INTAKE/AGE Pt. Initials <input type="checkbox"/> Age <u>34</u> Age Unknown <input type="checkbox"/>	DISPOSITION/CALL OUTCOME <input type="checkbox"/> Transported <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Transport Emergency <input type="checkbox"/> Refusal - Treatment <input type="checkbox"/> Treated - Released <input type="checkbox"/> Transfer to Another Unit <input type="checkbox"/> Treated - Refused Transport				<input type="checkbox"/> D.O.A. <input type="checkbox"/> Field Care <input type="checkbox"/> Cancelled <input type="checkbox"/> Secondary																																											
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Medical History MEDICATION: <u>NONE</u> PAST HISTORY: <u>NONE</u> ALLERGIES: <u>NONE</u>																																																			
VITAL SIGNS <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>HR</th> <th>SP</th> <th>RR</th> <th>BP</th> <th>LOC - AVPL</th> <th>GLAUCOMA/CONJUGATE</th> <th>ETES OPEN</th> <th>HEENT VERBAL</th> <th>HEENT MOOR</th> <th>SpO2</th> <th>1st Aid Score</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>174</td> <td>-</td> <td>-</td> <td>-</td> <td>Alert</td> <td>None</td> <td>Open</td> <td>Oriented-3</td> <td>Grey-3</td> <td>97%</td> <td>4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>175</td> <td>-</td> <td>-</td> <td>-</td> <td>Alert</td> <td>None</td> <td>Open</td> <td>Confused-4</td> <td>Pupils-3</td> <td>97%</td> <td>4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>175</td> <td>-</td> <td>-</td> <td>-</td> <td>Alert</td> <td>None</td> <td>Open</td> <td>Confused-2</td> <td>Pupils-3</td> <td>97%</td> <td>4</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>								HR	SP	RR	BP	LOC - AVPL	GLAUCOMA/CONJUGATE	ETES OPEN	HEENT VERBAL	HEENT MOOR	SpO2	1st Aid Score	174	-	-	-	Alert	None	Open	Oriented-3	Grey-3	97%	4	175	-	-	-	Alert	None	Open	Confused-4	Pupils-3	97%	4	175	-	-	-	Alert	None	Open	Confused-2	Pupils-3	97%	4
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ALS PROCEDURES *Please designate all procedures observed. AED: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1750 Glucometer: <input type="checkbox"/> Medications: <u>N/A</u>																																																			
ASSESSMENT-BASED MANAGEMENT PLAN/TREATMENT NARRATIVE <u>34 y/o ♀ c/o pulse, resp, skin pale, cool to touch, CPR begun by</u> <u>inset at 1750, King LT inserted at 1750, AED use began at 1751,</u> <u>shocks delivered at 1753, 1757, & 1802, transport to hospital at 1757</u> <u>Pt. treatment to be given in ER @ 1806.</u> <u>Chavez, Jack Jack Chavez A21096951 NREMT</u> <u>Nothing else to note</u>																																																			

SLIP #2

[This letter was written from me to you on one of many yellow legal pads shamelessly stolen from Zia's office supply closet. The letter is undated, but it was written the week of Kat's death. My handwriting is surprisingly neat.]

Mi linda, Ellie,

I want you to know where you come from. I gathered these pages because you deserve to know, because Kat deserves for you to know, and because the childhood we imagined for you will undoubtedly be very different from the one you'll have.

This is the story of you, and her, and us.

Santa Fe took hold of Kat, and unlike many who wind up here, she was perfectly content to let it wrap her in its arms and claim her. She descended on the town as a wiry 18-year-old, studied the classics at St. John's, and never left. It was hard for me to imagine her there—a Johnny. She seemed so anti-that-kind-of-place, so anti-elitist; the kind of person who would have wound up at state college to support the local economy, or because she knew it could provide just as good an education as anywhere else. But Mississippi was not the place for Kat, and despite her highest hopes, never could be.

We were our own sort of orphans. My childhood defined by the loss of my mother, my twenties in turn by my father's death, and Kat's adulthood equally scarred by the distance between she and the people meant to love her most. We longed to break free of our personal graveyards, to create a family to bury the sadness of what was both lost and never fully realized. And so, on a quiet summer night, we agreed to take the luck of the draw. A stranger would be the father of our child.

We sat on the carpet, our backs against our sunken living room couch. Kat always preferred the floor to any other seating option. We were on our second bottle of red wine, her tattered copy of the I-Ching open in front of us. Before I met Kat, I had no idea what an I-Ching was, let alone how to "throw" one. She swore by it—any major life decision meant a consultation with the I-Ching, the Chinese Book of Changes, a divination system akin to Tarot. Though she claimed the I-Ching was more sophisticated than Tarot, it left more to the imagination.

Every time she removed the book from the shelf, she would uncover the slip of paper with my name on it, dated the day after we met. I could spot that book in a crowded library, its grey cover like a flag. It still stands proudly on our bookshelf. By now I've memorized the assorted post-it-notes and other sheets of paper that crowd its pages and gather along its edges, marking so many of Kat's questions. Sometimes I was convinced she believed so hard in things because she secretly thought that, in doing so, she could will them into being.

I used to tease her, “If you already knew, then why’d you have to ask?”

“To know I wasn’t crazy. To know the universe was on my side.” She shoveled the hair from her forehead and ripped a sheet of paper from a notebook on the coffee table. I watched as she scrawled “Ellie” onto the lined page. I loved the way her words slanted to the right, almost drunk with the passion that stirred them into existence.

“Ellie? Wasn’t that your grandmother’s name?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t you hate your grandmother?”

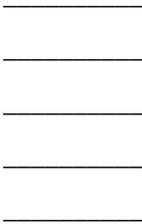
“Hate’s a strong word. Why not give the name another chance?”

It’s a great name; this is its chance to prove itself.” With that, she dug out the three aging pennies from an envelope tucked inside the book’s cover flap and poured them into my cupped hands, lining them with her own like a fortress.

“You’re drunk,” I told her.

“Uh huh.”

We let the pennies fly six times for the six lines of the hexagram. By now I knew that “heads” meant three and “tails” meant two, that the even lines were broken and the odd lines were solid. With each throw, she drew the according line carefully until she had produced the following. When she had our results, Kat looked simultaneously perplexed and amazed. All the lines were solid and there were no changing lines—which meant no reading of the future, she explained.



“So is that good thing? What does it mean?”

“It’s a good thing. A really good thing. I’ve never gotten this one outright before.” She kissed me hard, wine all over her breath, but I didn’t mind. She placed the book on my lap proudly and pointed to the top of the page:

THE CREATIVE works sublime success,
Furthering through perseverance.

“I guess we’re screwed if it’s a boy, huh?”

“It won’t be a boy.” Her eyes sparkled with conviction, and I had to admit, I really liked the name. (I still do.)

Love,
Mom

SLIP #3

[The last page of Kat's dream journal, a simple dark leather midsize notebook. The handwriting is messier than her usual and difficult to read. The entry is undated and incomplete.]

Ellie,
My best friend Lolly was adopted.
Once I asked if she wanted to know
who her real parents are,
and she said pretty plainly,
"I know who my real parents are—they're the ones that raised me."

I hope that's how you see me.

I know you don't hold my DNA,
but you are my daughter.

Mari and I—
your moms
are gonna love you so hard.
Hell, we already do,
and you've barely been incubating a month.

I'm not sure you'll ever see this.
Mostly because I'm not sure if it'll see the light of day.
But,
it feels nice to talk to you already.

We'll have to tell you the story of your name.
Maybe by now you know it.
Your mom thinks I'm superstitious,
but she believes in it all as much as I do.
The universe works in mysterious ways.

I wish I had some
great piece
of life advice
to give you.
Take chances, read as much as you can.
...Are you sick of my advice by now?

To be honest, Ellie.
I'm really scared.
It's a weird moment,
when you recognize your parents as human beings.
Are you ready for that?

I want you to have family and friends
that surround you
on all sides

like a football huddle.
If I can help it, you'll never feel alone.

You're on your way, Ellie!
I can't wait to meet you,
and know you,
and love you.

You are gonna

TWO: OUR WHOLE LIVES

It's the day of her funeral and there isn't a cloud in the sky. I want at least one. Just one to hold onto.

It is a bitterly cold day, this day. Regardless, I stubbornly demand that we gather a group at the top of the Chamisa trail to scatter her ashes. To be honest, I can't stand looking at the ceramic urn any longer. The urn itself is a plain sandy color; Kat wouldn't want anything ornate, and I have no plans to keep it on display. It is cruel that a life so full can fit into one, small jar.

I believed we had our whole lives. We would become wrinkled old ladies in our little adobe nest, we'd see our baby Ellie crawl across the floor and sneak out the back door, we'd be together the day we could legally marry in New Mexico, we would walk hand-in-hand to the Roundhouse and declare our love all over again—Ellie there, a bundle of wildflowers in her sweet, little hands.

I look around at the group, wrapped in scarves and heavy winter coats, and half expect to see Kat among them. She would smile at me, tug at my earlobe, and run her hand along the small of my back. She would tell me everything is going to be okay and I would yell back that I know it isn't. Or, maybe I would, as I had so many times before, bury myself into her old ski jacket—the smell of sandalwood oil and ash hugging me back along with her.

I wrap my arms into myself, around my round pregnant belly—I can feel Ellie, growing inside of me, restless, and I wonder what I will say. How will I find the words?

I go to the theater office because I can't think where else to go. I can't face our house. Zia Theatre is run by a team of five people; our desks themselves are set up in close quarters. Privacy is a luxury above our pay grade; but today, this god-awful Tuesday in February, the office is eerily silent. Cheryl is at a conference in D.C., the rehearsal room below devoid of actors until late afternoon. I sit at my desk, buried in budget proposals and the latest grant assessment, and stare into the black of the computer screen. After several heavy minutes, I move listlessly to the old communal stereo, stacked beside binders upon binders of old programs. I pull a familiar CD case from the top of the leaning stack. A crack runs

along Celine Dion's sepia-toned cheek. "Because You Loved Me" begins to emanate from the tired machine, and all at once, I round the knob to its highest volume. Anyone who pretends they don't blast Celine Dion any chance they get—they're liars. They all know every word; I'm certain of it.

There's a faint knock at the office door. I hear it, but I don't hear it. Every bit of this day feels like it's in my imagination, and I'm certain the sound is, too. My long, brown hair is loose and wild, hanging desperately around my head as I breathe in the chorus.

"Hello?" A neat crew cut pokes its way into the office. I turn my head; my movement slow, but certain as a bear guarding its young. The door opens a few inches, blockaded by an overflowing white file box. He steps over the box gingerly. I think about asking a sing-song, "May I help you?" but my days as an after-school supermarket clerk entrenched a deep hatred in me for those words. And I am tired, so tired.

The slightly befuddled stranger speaks again above Celine's sultry hums. He addresses his sleek, black, handheld camera like a scene in a silent movie. I wait for the card that twill indicate his dialogue. When I say nothing in response, he repeats himself. "I guess I'm not in Kansas anymore, huh Toto?" He laughs self-consciously to himself, clearly disappointed that the joke is lost on me.

At last, I begrudgingly turn down the music. A moment or two of uncomfortable silence passes; he surveys the office politely, picks up a fallen spreadsheet from the floor and lays it lovingly on a pile at the edge of my desk. "Ah hah! So you're the number cruncher around here."

"Guilty."

"So I bet you were one of those people who majored in nuclear physics and minored in fine art, right?"

"Theatre/Finance, actually." Another silence. This is practically turning into a Pinter play. "I'm sorry, who are you again?"

"Oh wow. I'm sorry, I thought you knew!" He reaches his hand over the desk to shake mine. "Armando. Armando Sandoval." Armando was a little enthusiastic with the cologne this morning, but he seems nice enough. He wears a pair of dark jeans, very European-looking shoes and a crisp black dress shirt. I look down at my Target-brand maternity wear and feel a little cheap. "I'm doing the documentary on the ESL

Children's Theatre Festival."

I nod slowly. "Cheryl and Sarah aren't in. Do you need something from the office?"

He adjusts his collar, which is in no need of adjusting. "I just got a little lost." I doubt this, unless he's blind, which I suppose wouldn't make him the best filmmaker. After all, the rehearsal room is downstairs, just past the main entrance, labeled with a large adobe-brown sign that says, "Rehearsal Room." He knows I know. "Okay, so I was actually just exploring a bit. I really love the space."

"Well, I've got to get some work done, but it was nice to meet you, Armando."

"Right! Yeah. Totally. Nice meeting you. I'm sorry—I didn't catch your name."

I look him square in the eyes. "Do you like 'My Heart Will Go On?'"

"Excuse me?"

"The song."

"The *Titanic* one? Celine Dion?"

"Yeah."

"It's a little embarrassing to admit it, but yeah, I guess I do."

"Mari. It's Mariana. Good luck with the film."

"Thanks," he says quizzically, as if I stole his wallet when he is sure he had it in his hand all along.

SLIP #4

[A page from the Santa Fe New Mexican. The small photo is her staff photo from work. She's wearing a maroon collared shirt and a wide grin.]

KATHERINE MARIE GUIDRY Educator, musician, jokester, beloved partner and friend—was born in Biloxi, Mississippi on November 9, 1976, and died last Tuesday due to complications from a sudden brain aneurysm. Katherine, “Kat,” attended St. John’s University, graduating summa cum laude, and remained in Santa Fe following graduation, dedicating over ten years to community engagement through two New Mexican non-profit organizations. She spent some of her happiest moments hiking the trails of the Sangre de Cristo mountains. She loved her chile green, had a compellingly spare sense of aesthetic, and a disarming sense of humor. Described as a “loveable firecracker” by colleagues, her beautiful voice, guitar-playing, and laughter often carried on open-mic nights at Cowgirl, where she will be sorely missed. She is survived by her partner, Mariana Ortiz- Guidry, her brother, John Paul Guidry, and her parents, Joseph and Camille Guidry. All who knew and love Kat are invited to help us celebrate and remember her at the tip of the Chamisa Trail on February 11th at 2pm.

SLIP #5

[Written on loose leaf pages, folded in four, thinly pressed into a greeting card with hand- stitched pink flowers on the cover. The inside of the card is entirely blank.]

Dear Mariana,

Thank you for your call.

I realize you were a very good friend to Katherine. I'm comforted to know that she had people like you in her life. No, I never agreed with the lifestyle she chose, but I regret that it has been years since we last spoke. It is baffling to recognize your own child as a stranger. I suppose I always thought there would be more time. Or, maybe, in my deepest heart of hearts I believed she could change, that she would change.

I can only hope that in her last moments, she repented and made peace with God. I would like to believe there is a place in Heaven for all of us, despite our transgressions. As a child, Katherine was a devout Christian. It was only as she grew older that she took a different path. Though, I believe her faith never wavered. As you know, Katherine was a stubborn woman. The only voice she listened to was her own. My voice got lost a long, long time ago. But maybe I gave up too easily...

I must seem like a terrible mother to you. John Paul and Aimée said the funeral service was beautiful. Really, it was Aimée. In refusing to speak to Katherine, I almost lost both of my children. John Paul was always Katherine's biggest champion, and he has chastised me on numerous occasions for our estrangement. Perhaps, I never truly understood her. In any case, I felt I had no place at her funeral, and should mourn her loss quietly, in my own way. I hope you'll forgive me for that.

John Paul tells me you are pregnant, and that I am to be a grandmother. I'm sincerely trying to accept what this means, but I must confess I'm not sure what to do with the news. And so, I wish you my congratulations, and an invitation. Should you ever find yourself in Mississippi, please visit. You and your daughter or son will always be welcome here.

Perhaps when you come you can tell me about her life. I'd love to know more about this woman with the short brown hair who grew to look so alarmingly like her mother.

I want you to know that despite everything, I loved my daughter. I really did.

Sincerely,

Camille

SLIP #6

[A page from Kat's dream journal. She made a New Year's resolution the year before she died to log what she remembered of her wild dreams in a journal she kept on her bedside table. She wasn't very regular with the entries, but flipping through the pages there are several mornings she managed to jot down a few sentences. The journal itself is a simple dark leather midsize notebook.]

10/10/08

M.O. is giving birth in a Glinda-the-Good-Witch sort of bubble
that's rising & rising into the sky,
And I'm on the ground jumping up and down,
willing myself to propel into the sky toward the bubble.

The dream's in my POV, but I look like a G.I. Joe sort of plastic
action figure.
I'm pretty sure I'm a male G.I. Joe, though. Is there another kind?

Suddenly it gets crazy-bright,
a gigantic helicopter circles overhead
and cuts into the rising bubble.
And that's when I wake up.

THREE: ELLIE IN THE WORLD WITH FLOWERS

“6 pounds, 7 ounces.” The nurse announces as she cradles Ellie in her arms. She is a gorgeous little prune with a head of dark, wild hair. From the moment she emerges, the world’s fifth ocean is underway. “It’s entirely normal to get emotional.” The nurse mats my sweaty curls back, like I invite it. I wish she wouldn’t touch me, but I’m too exhausted to protest.

There are whispers among the ward about postnatal depression, but no one has any idea. It isn’t the future I fear so much as the past. Part of me wants to scream, to run to the front desk, I.V. dangling fiercely from my arm, and announce what would make them all feel like shit for jumping to conclusions. Kat used to say doctors are always jumping to conclusions. But sometimes— many times, unfortunately—*they are* the right conclusions.

As I hang on the edge of this thought, I notice a bouquet of flowers at the corner of the room: a theatrical assortment of lilies, multi-colored roses, succulents and baby’s breath in a large vase. I take hold of my buzzer like an anxious game show contestant. God forbid any sort of accident occur; I would bleed out and coat the floor by the time the nurse arrived. Nurse Delores is her name, but she likes to be referred to as “Nurse D.” She is the epitome of New Mexico, her internal clock a half hour behind the rest of the world. She wears her hair in a tight bun and her scrubs shout in a loud shade of pink accompanied by a nauseating floral cartoon print. Though she is clearly a veteran, and I know she means well, nothing about her do I find particularly comforting.

“Do you need anything, Ms. Ortiz?” She speaks to me as though I’ve lost a puppy, even though I’ve just gained one.

“Who are the flowers from?”

She takes her time as she carefully tears the seal of the envelope. I want her to rip it open, but I keep my mouth shut. I am fascinated by how a nurse can be so devoid of urgency. At last, she reads aloud, emphasizing each word of the note like it is the final round of a spelling bee. “Dear. Mariana. Congratulations. On. Your. Baby. Girl. Armando.”

“Armando?”

Cruelty (*excerpt*)

Morgan M Page

There will be a poorly attended candlelight vigil. And into the night, party kids, nearly more glitter and hairspray than flesh, will disperse into smaller groups to gossip and to remember her. They will find themselves in bars, the same bars where they met her, and these bars that last night were magical, liminal spaces will now seem suddenly drab and mundane. Some will go back to dirty apartments accessible only through alleys that stink of garbage, pouring out a last shot for her in front of their doors before locking out the rest of the world. A few will take a walk over to her apartment, where they'll linger outside smoking and trading war stories, staring up at what used to be her window until finally they get tired and leave. And just two will drive, as they have been all day, and the day before that, and they won't quit until Toronto is just a bad dream.

A single article will come out in Daily Xtra decrying her death and valourizing her contributions, real or imagined, to Toronto's queer and trans communities. And this will inspire a short-lived flurry of blog posts in both Canadian and American blogs, even one in the UK, using the few facts that are known about her end to make larger political points—points alternately about the need for sex work decriminalization, about the need for federal human rights protections under the grounds of gender identity and gender expression, about the need for harsher sentencing on hate crimes, and even some by self-described radical feminists about how trans women most emphatically are not and will never be women.

The local LGBT Centre will issue a statement lamenting her death, linking to relevant statistics from the provincial research project on trans lives. The statement will end with a reminder of their — recently paired down — schedule of trans programming and links encouraging people to make donations. The bottom of the letterhead will be printed with the words “Your stories make our community.”

And just like that, everything she ever was will disappear. Parties will start up again the next week returning the magic and glamour to all the party kids, who will drown and snort and swallow what's left of their sorrows. New stories will grab the attention of the blogs and activists, because there is never a shortage of tragedy to be leveraged to make their points. And organizations meant to help people will continue to line their pockets so they can build sports centres no one asked for.

This is just what death is for girls like her.

Where Your Children Are (1980)

Wayne Johns

That summer a woman's voice interrupted TV shows every hour to announce the time and ask, *Do you know where your children are?*

A city-wide curfew was in effect: no one under eighteen allowed out after sundown. But that didn't stop us from sliding out my bedroom window and easing into the backyard, as into dark water. I had stashed, in my back pocket, the allowance I'd been saving since I found out my best friend Trace was coming to stay with us for a week. An orange-tinted moon was snared in the pines. The crickets' pulsing stopped as we approached. Fireflies still signaled through the branches of the water oak—its leaves dog-eared and riddled with holes from the profusion of tent caterpillars. Earlier that summer Mother had given me and Trace some of those long fireplace matches and told us to burn as many webs as we could reach. We climbed up and torched their nests spun in the forks of branches. I recoiled as they sizzled and melted, then we watched as the caterpillars dropped to the ground, still writhing. The smell of singed hair made me choke.

Whenever the woman's voice asked its perfunctory and vaguely threatening question, Mother would answer, "Good Lord, I just hope it doesn't turn out to be a white man murdering all those black children." I guess she figured if the killer was white, someone would start killing white kids for revenge.

"Must be a Homo doing it," my father would add, peering over *The Atlanta Constitution*. "Why else would only boys' bodies keep turning up in the river?" He looked at me over the top of his black-rimmed reading glasses, "Tell me that."

I shrugged and cringed, getting up to go to my room.

He was talking about the Chattahoochee river, which cuts the northwest section of the city, not far from where we lived. Trace's mother was leaving town and he was going to stay with us the week before school started. He had slept over before, but never stayed a whole week.

I could hardly sleep at night, thinking of him lying beside me. Before he got there, Mother said, “Lord knows, with all this craziness, his mother feels better with him staying in *this* neighborhood.” By that, of course, she meant a white neighborhood. When she spoke like this, I bit down on my tongue and the back of my neck tingled, as if a caterpillar was crawling up it. I prayed she wouldn’t say anything like that in front of Trace.

His real name was Tracy, but he hated it because he said that was a girl’s name. Since it was August, the Allegheny Chinkapins were in bloom. I didn’t know them by name then, only by the bleachy scent of their flowers.

“You smell the cum trees?” I asked, because I’d heard my cousin say that.

“What do you know about it? I bet you don’t even skeet yet, huh?”

“What?”

“Maybe I’ll show you later,” Trace laughed. “How far’s Michelle’s house from here?”

“Pretty far.”

“How far?”

“A mile... maybe two.”

“I bet no black families live around here, do they?” He spit.

“I don’t know,” I lied, “I think so.”

“Yeah right, Kevin. You would know.” Then after a moment, “Come on, let’s walk to Michelle’s house.”

“We shouldn’t go far. There’s still a curfew,” I protested.

“Don’t be such a wussy. Besides, what’re you worried about? They haven’t found any dead white boys floating down the Hooch,” he pushed me.

I didn’t care for peeping through windows, but liked any excuse to be that close, wedged against him, feeling a surge when our arms brushed. Crouched beneath a lit window, peering over the sill through a slit in the curtains, we were lucky enough to see her undressing. Trace adjusted himself, even slipped a hand inside his sweat pants. I watched out of the corner of my eye, pretending to be excited by the small pink buds on her chest, the triangle of new hair between her legs, when I was really only thrilled by this secret between us.

The porch light came on. We dropped flat on the grass and I couldn't stop trembling, my heart stuttering against the ground. Clutched in the same position we fell in, arms tangled, his fingernails digging into my arm and shoulder, faces so close I could feel his breath on my cheek. It smelled like warmed milk. The front door opened.

"Who's there?" Michelle's mother rasped. We stayed still, gripping each other tighter.

The porch light went off. I didn't have facial hair yet and Trace only had a few wisps of fine hairs above his lip, so there was no grating when our cheeks touched. Only softness and heat.

Trace pulled away, leaving my cheek tingling as if I'd just been slapped. He looked around, but didn't get up. I couldn't see Michelle's mother, but knew she was still there since the door hadn't closed.

A strip of light sliced across the yard from the window of Michelle's bathroom. In my head I kept repeating, *Just pretend I'm Michelle, Just pretend I'm Michelle*, as if casting a spell. I couldn't see his face. I had never kissed anyone before. Well, not counting the time I had pecked Michelle at school behind the backstop. I didn't really want to, had only done it to make Trace jealous. His face suddenly closer. I convinced myself some force was pulling us together, like magnets.

I was about to ask if Michelle's mother was still there when I grazed the velvet of his lips. So we were practically kissing. I was afraid to move, afraid of undoing the moment we were wrapped up in like strangers. Then the screen door slammed, the front door closed, and the lock clicked. Trace got up and ran, leaving me in the dark yard. I hesitated, rubbing the sickles his fingernails had dug into my shoulder, before running after him.

Down the road, he was throwing rocks at a street lamp, alive with insects, while bats dove into the light. In Biology we had learned they don't really see the light; the movement of the insects draws them to it. I walked slowly toward Trace. Neither of us spoke. We took turns trying to burst the bulb. When we noticed the bats going for the rocks, we threw a little lower each time to see the quick flicker of them come tumbling down like pieces of the night sky thrown back at us.

Once the bats got bored and stopped diving, Trace said, "Race you

to the end of the block.”

He won, as usual. Then we started walking to the Quickie Mart, which was open all night. Trace kept running a palm over his close cut hair as if brushing it. He had been trying to get waves because the guy Michelle was going steady with, Dexter, had them—perfectly spaced ripples running through his hair. Trace used to say he hoped D. lost his waves. I guess he figured that would also mean he’d lose Michelle. At the beginning of that summer my hair was still in wings but I had gotten a fade before Trace came to stay with us. I felt like someone else because he said it was ‘dope’.

“How much you want to bet Michelle drops D. as soon as school starts,” Trace slid his palm over his scalp.

“Keep wishing,” I said, trying to discourage him.

“Please, he’s not *even* light-skinned enough to be going with a white girl once we start high school.”

“Says who?”

“My cousin said...”

“Your big-mouth cousin already graduated.”

The high school we were about to start was called Crossed Keys—supposedly because the area was once an Indian trading post—the point where four trails converged. There was a neighborhood behind the school known as “Indian Village” because all the streets had names like Coosawatee and Okachobee; of course no Native Americans, that I knew of, had ever lived in those rows of what Mother called ‘shotgun’ houses. This was still years before the Brookhaven MARTA station opened, before the little houses started to get bought up and torn down and replaced by those towering monstrosities, that seem to spring up in weeks, with three or four floors and no yard because the house itself takes up the whole lot. But some of the people refused to sell. To this day, you can drive through what was known as Indian Village and see one shotgun, with a rusted truck parked in front of the overgrown yard, flanked on either side by two of the new models, one of which seems to be made almost entirely of glass. The man who owns the dilapidated shotgun, known as Gus, swears he’ll die in the house he was born in.

Because my father also grew up in this neighborhood, he had hired Gus one time to put new shingles on our house. I remember my father going out to talk to him and coming back inside to get his wallet.

When my mother asked what was the matter he said, "I've got to run to the store."

"Um-um-um..." shaking her head, "What did I tell you? A leopard can't change its spots."

"Don't start, Mother."

"It *is* a little early in the day to get started drinking isn't it?"

After he slammed the front door, I went to sit beside her on the bed while she sniffed and peered through the blinds. I wanted to know where Dad had gone and when he was coming back. When she said he went to get the men something to drink, I must've said I wanted to go make them Lemonade, or something, because she said: "They're not really thirsty, honey. Now go on and get out from up under me."

She went into the bathroom to splash water on her face and look in the mirror. "I told your daddy not to get tangled back up with that bunch of rednecks." I wanted to ask what that meant, but I peered through the blinds to try and see them.

"Their necks don't look red," I said, forever the literalist.

"Buster, and I'm telling you this for your own good, you'd better not mess with me right now."

"I'll be quiet... I promise."

"Get out from up under me so I can breathe," she said coming towards me. I ran for the door then. "And close that door so I can pull myself together," she yelled.

I tried to imagine her in pieces, like a jigsaw, but could only picture her face on the cartoon man in that game called Operation; the nose lighting red and buzzing if the mini tweezers touched the sides as you tried to be the first to remove all the bad or broken parts. I equated the sound of the buzzer with pain, and the man's face on the game perpetually grimaced. My hand never steady enough.

Mother drove me down one of the dead-end streets in Indian Village once to show me the house my father had grown up in. I was in the

backseat on top of the stacks of *The Atlanta Journal* she delivered each morning. It was that silvery hour of dawn before the sun actually rises, so I was still half asleep as I looked out the window, and I didn't know how I was supposed to feel about the house. No matter how many times I tried, I was never able to find it again. All the houses on the street looked alike then anyway; and I'm sure it's long gone by now. I mainly recall that green vines had claimed the shed on the side of the house, and the door to the shed was missing. I wouldn't have known to call the vine kudzu or that it was a parasite which, given enough time, could strip the bark and branches from, even kill, a full-grown pine.

"There were twelve of them in that little piss-ant house." She shook her head and seemed upset. "I'll never understand people that can treat a child any such as that, much less their own."

"Who lives here Mommy?"

"White Trash. What else can you call it?"

"What's that?"

"Take a good look, son." I stared at the black space inside the shed. I knew something terrible must be hiding inside; I figured it was the white trash. "That right there is the reason me and your daddy drove to Tennessee and got married and moved out when we were sixteen years old. Yes sir, take a long hard look Buster and be thankful you have a mama and daddy that bust their asses seven days a week, so you can have better, and don't just lay around drunk and have babies they don't want and can't feed. Lord God, as long as I live I'll never understand why you would let innocent children..."

Then she was more just talking to herself, or praying to keep from crying, and I knew not to ask anymore questions. As we were driving away, I turned to look back at the matchbox house. I felt something new then—a cross between shame and fear—though I didn't know exactly what I had to be ashamed or afraid of. I laid down on the stacks of newspapers. When I felt the bumps of the car going over the railroad tracks, Mother said aloud "That right there is what you call the *wrong* side of the tracks, son." I pretended to be asleep and she reached one hand back to touch my face, which was pressed against columns of words I couldn't read though I knew that, somehow, our lives depended on them. The moldy smell of the papers clung to the seats, my clothes,

even after they'd all been delivered.

Trace and I had hopped a freight train once and rode it all the way to his grandmother's house in Lynwood Park. The first time we drove to pick him up, my heart raced. I stared out the window. Sides of buildings and walls had been tagged with names in bright colors. I imagined tagging our names, KEV 'N' TRACE, on the side of an overpass, in huge block letters.

As we passed the basketball court I pressed my nose to the passenger-side glass, gazing at the game of shirts versus skins. When we got to Trace's house, there was a touch football game going on in the street. I started to get out, but Trace came running up to the truck, waving either to the other kids or to his grandmother silhouetted in a window, keeping watch. Trace said because of all the missing children he hadn't been able to leave the street in front of his house all summer.

Dad's truck had a camper and we both rode in back. When we passed under streetlights, I stood out like a negative. I wanted to stay in Trace's neighborhood which looked so alive, unlike our neighborhood—locked in its perpetual silence except for the occasional yelping dog, or the moan of trains in the distant night.

There was no train coming as we walked along the tracks to the Quickie Mart. You could always hear the ding of the crossing signal before you ever heard the whistle. The only sound was the crunch of our sneakers on the gravel between the crossties and, of course, frogs calling from the creek.

Back in fifth grade, everyone would ride their bikes along the tracks, until this kid, Jerry Elmire, got caught between the ties. I heard the train dragged him a hundred yards before grinding to a halt. After that, the railroad was off limits. The county fenced off the section that ran through our neighborhood, even topped the fence with coils of razor wire. But that didn't keep us out. There were places where the fence had been lifted or cut just enough to scoot under.

The tracks ran parallel to Peachtree Industrial, and both extended from the suburbs through the heart of downtown. At night the faint

outlines of the buildings in the distance lit up like rockets. Like everything else that summer, they seemed filled with promise and threat.

The bell tower at Oglethorpe sounded the hour.

“It’s eleven o’clock, do you know where your children are?” I said.

“Shut up! That shit’s not funny,” Trace pushed me. We cut through a thin strip of woods to get to the Quickie Mart. Trace stopped and I bumped into him.

“What?”

“I heard something,” he said. We stood still. The leaves rustled. We ran the rest of the way, sticks and briars carving red tracteries down our arms and legs.

The store was too bright. The bearded man behind the counter, AC/DC tee-shirt almost, but not quite, meeting the top of his jeans, eyed us as we got Doritos and sodas. Next to the register, I picked up a tin of Skoal Bandits and set it on the counter. The man rang up the candy and sodas, but paused when he got to the dip.

“How old you boys?”

“Sixteen,” I lied. I was twelve and Trace had just turned thirteen.

“A little late to be out and about, ain’t it?”

“My dad sent us to get him some dip,” I tried to lower my voice.

“Your Daddie dips Skoal Bandits?”

“He said he wanted to try it.”

The man lifted a red plastic cup, spit into it, then tossed the dip in the bag. As the change funneled out of the register and into the circular tray, he said, “You boys better get on home. Specially you,” he said, pointing at Trace. “If the cops catch you, they’ll lock you up for breaking curfew.” And then, under his breath, “And that ain’t all you got to worry ‘bout.”

The bell that was tied to the door jangled. We walked fast to the edge of the parking lot, then broke into a sprint. We ran until we were out of sight of the store, then stopped, laughing and gasping.

I put the dip in my back pocket like I’d seen my older cousin do—a faded circle worn into his cut-off jeans. We didn’t even think about cutting through the woods to walk back along the tracks, we just walked along Peachtree, eating Doritos and washing them down with soda.

After we left the store that night, the man behind the counter might have called the police, or maybe an undercover officer was driving the beat-up white truck that slowed as it passed us. But we kept walking and the white truck went a little farther before we saw brake lights. No other cars were on the road. The buildings in the distance seemed a hundred miles away.

“It’s backing up,” Trace said and we ran behind the Animal Hospital. I could hear the motor growling. We waited until we couldn’t hear it, then ran to the corner behind the abandoned gas station.

“Let’s hide,” I whispered. We crawled under a rusted tractor. Gravel dug into my back and my heart hammered harder than it had earlier in Michelle’s front yard.

“Oh God,” Trace whispered. In my head, convinced we were being punished, I asked forgiveness for kissing Trace: *If you let us get away...* I prayed silently. Then I thought, *Save Trace*. I pictured myself rolling out from under the tractor, and then my pale body floating in the muddy river, the killer’s handprints bruised around my throat. Then my parents would just think someone was seeking revenge, but Trace would be safe and know how much I loved him.

The truck rolled by. I could hear my breathing and covered my mouth. The truck roared up to the railroad crossing and stopped, then backed up real slow. Headlights passed over the tractor as it pulled around to the front of the gas station. The truck door opened and slammed. Footsteps on concrete, then gravel. Trace grabbed my hand, which was on his shoulder. I held my breath. The footsteps stopped. In my head I kept pleading. I inhaled through my nose, afraid he’d hear me if I breathed through my mouth. Trace’s fingernails were digging into my hand. That small pain seemed the only thing that kept me from moving or screaming. Cigarette smoke burned my nostrils. I saw the glowing cherry hit the ground and roll, suspended in the darkness. It stopped at eye level and seemed close enough to touch. Footsteps again—this time the gravel crunched, pause, then a louder crunch—that sounded like he was limping. One of my hands went numb. I squeezed my eyes shut and when I opened them again the red eye of the cigarette was still there, staring. I heard the truck door open and close, then the ignition,

then gravel crunching, then screeching tires as the truck peeled back onto Peachtree.

We slid out and ran. That was the only time I was able to keep up with Trace. We passed the cemetery and Brookhaven Baptist church, then dove behind a row of shrubs at the corner of someone's yard. We waited to make sure the truck wasn't coming.

The moon had lost the mock orange it held when we first left my house—it had turned white and almost full, like an eyeball rolled into the socket. The sky was starless. Maybe the stars were just obscured by clouds, or invisible because of the glow of the city. As we lay there, panting, a few stars gradually became visible, and the outlines of pines, blacker than the sky.

After several minutes, I whispered "Do you think it's safe?"

We avoided the street, cutting through back yards the rest of the way to my house. When we snuck back in my bedroom window and sat against the headboard looking at the small black and white television that had belonged to my grandmother, I still didn't feel safe. Before long, the soothing and disturbing woman's voice announced it was one o'clock in the morning, then asked: "Do you know where your children are?"

I fell asleep and woke up with Trace's leg thrown over me. I had a hard-on, but it hurt because it was pinned downward by his leg. I tried to lie perfectly still so the new feeling would last. I wanted to adjust myself, but that would have meant working my hand under his leg and possibly waking him. So I wavered between pain and ecstasy until I finally dozed off. When I woke, Trace had gotten up and gone to sleep on the sofa.

I was too tired to go outside the next day, and it was raining anyway. Neither of us mentioned what had happened. We spent the day watching Kung-Fu Theatre. Trace convinced me to call Michelle. I kept her on the phone as long as possible because he laid down beside me and pressed his ear to the receiver to hear her voice.

By evening the rain had stopped. My parents were in the living room watching Wheel of Fortune. As we walked through the kitchen, I put a finger to my lips to warn Trace to be quiet. I could hear the wheel

ticking, slowing down. A man's voice asked, "Can I buy an "I"?" Mother said "How dumb can you be?" There was a buzzer and then another man's voice said "Oh, I'm sorry, there's no "I."

As soon I opened the back door, Mother yelled "Kev-innn!"

"What?" I yelled.

"Don't "what" me young man. Don't leave this yard, it's getting dark."

Everything was still damp, and the trees were dripping. The sun burned through the last clouds like the lit tip of a cigarette. I remembered the can of Skoal Bandits still in the back pocket of my jeans. I tucked one of the packets inside my bottom lip the way I'd seen my cousin do it, and Trace did the same. We jumped the back fence, then climbed the forked tree beside the creek. My grandmother told me once that Indians would split the tree when it was a sapling to make it grow forked like that, so this place marked a crossroads and was special; she told me I was special since her mother was Cherokee. I found out later that trees naturally grow forked along creek banks, that I didn't have enough Cherokee blood to be a tribal member, and that I was special—just not in the way that Nana meant.

Trace sat in the crook with his back against the trunk and I straddled the offshoot. "This mess tastes like dirt," he said.

"You're not supposed to swallow it." We took turns spitting the brown juice into the creek. The back of my throat started burning and my head was spinning. I lay against the tree, looking up. The last light shifted through the leaves like a kaleidoscope.

"I feel sick," Trace retched, and I reached out to put my hand on his shoulder.

"It's my fault..." He shrugged me away, leaned back against the trunk, and closed his eyes. "You want to go back inside?"

He shook his head. "In a minute."

I watched him. Mother always said Trace had eyelashes that girls would kill for. And his thick eyebrows were like two wooly caterpillars. His skin had a reddish tint underneath the brown. My arms had fine blonde hairs, but his were smooth.

"You alright?" I asked. His eyes were closed. He didn't answer. I

moved closer, studying the remnants of a scab on one of his knuckles; the exposed new flesh was pale. I wanted to peel away the rest of the scab. I held my hand up beside his, amazed that the skin under the scab was lighter than my own. Then I noticed that the freckles on my hand were the same color of his skin. “Hey, Trace,” I whispered, tapping his arm. I wanted him to see.

He didn’t budge, only groaned. His lips were slightly parted. I was jealous of the thin line of fine hairs above his top lip. I leaned-in to see them up close.

“What the fuck?” His eyes fluttered open.

“What? I was looking...”

“You trying to kiss me or something?”

“Hell no!” I laughed. “Hey, check this out...” I said, wanting to share my revelation.

“Um-hmmm. I saw you. You tried to kiss me, you faggot.” He pushed so hard I almost fell out of the tree.

I caught up with him as he was climbing the fence.

“Wait,” I cried, as he jumped down on the other side, and turned. He looked me in the eyes and, for a split second, I thought he might say “sorry.” Instead he said “You make me sick.” Then hocked and spat in my face.

I reached across the fence and gripped his arm as tight as I could. When he couldn’t wrench free, he punched me in the mouth with his other hand.

My hands went to my face, my mouth filling with blood, as he ran away.

I thought of us, earlier that summer, in the musty camper of my father’s pickup, how we had broken into the skin of our thumbs with a screwdriver from the toolbox. It wasn’t easy, drawing blood with the blunt tip of a Phillips head. I dug at my thumb, twisting the handle until I bled, then handed the screwdriver to Trace. We were both sweating in the camper’s smothering heat. I squeezed my thumb to keep the blood flowing until he was ready, then we pressed our thumbs together, grinning. After that, I had stuck my thumb in my mouth to stop the bleeding. It had the

same metallic taste of lust and shame.

I climbed the chain link and ran after him. When I reached the street, I wasn't sure which way to run at first, but then I saw him rounding the corner of the block; and though I knew I'd never catch up with him, I still ran until my side cramped, until he'd disappeared altogether. I pictured him running all the way downtown where the stalker in the white truck, in my mind, perpetually cruised the city streets. Through a busted lip I screamed his name three times (which must've sounded, in my unchanged voice, like a girl screaming "Rape") before collapsing on the sidewalk in tears. Between heaves, I sobbed *I'm sorry* and *please come back* as if he could hear me. After I finally quit gasping, I cried in silence till the street lights snapped on, which is right about the time my lip started to throb. Rather, I sensed the ache that had been there all along and reached to touch it—either to assess the damage or lessen the pain. I winced of course, since touching it only made it hurt worse. But I persisted, gently probing the wound from the inside, with my tongue while thinking Trace would never speak to me again.

Time passed this way, so slow I barely noticed how the sound that crickets make replaced the rushing of my heartbeat, how they gave the night a pulse. In the distance, the bell tower struck ten hollow notes. And then a new thought tinged the calm with dread: even worse than never speaking to me again, he'd tell everyone at school what I had done. I felt a tingling, like something crawling, along my hairline as I got up and started towards the Quickie Mart, towards Trace's neighborhood, praying that the man in the white pick-up would come back. Above me, a single bat mobbed the street lamp where the moths swarmed.

Our Majesties at Michael's Craft Shop,
Barracks Road Shopping Center
—
Wo Chan

Six fifteen PM and only got ten
minutes before my eyebrow waxing
appointment stumbling to for & between
the aisles looking for glitter spray asking
where the fuck is the bathroom girl needs
to shit with her five bags filled of high heel
shoes kabuki brush Spanx & turquoise beads,
faux flowers—brilliant around me—why here,

are you, acned teen man, face tattooed too,
head ascending the escalator across
from me descending, me staring rude,
pierced chin, metal chestplate, our eyes side-cross.

Cinnamon scented craft shop, crown of skulls;
goth king rising while a drag queen falls.

[and I, thirty thousand feet in the air, pop]

Wo Chan

the marvelous children too small
to fill their first class inheritance

and man pink baked
tan with no regrets nor SPF

occupies the overhead
with his Fender and Razor scooter

blocks all others' possession
while across the cabin

I gift too easily
my armband to the adolescent

kith whose
eyelashes perk like black grass

around a wet well asks me why
are you so sorry

and I, thirty thousand feet in the air, pop
an erection while asleep

due to low cabin pressure and watching
American Ninja Warrior on repeat

I dream slack jaw the fuselage
loop-the-loops and loops watch out

I am shameful and lucid
and so dangerously weightless

Sonnet by Lamplight

Wo Chan

I remember one time: quietly
you closed the door behind us, quietly

always, embarrassed your housemates would hear
your door clicking shut, as if we weren't here.

With your back to me, you took your shirt off,
shoulders flexing before the lights went off

too. I smiled, clicking on your blue bedside
lamp—small, starshaped. It cast us beside

ourselves, tall battery-powered shadows
projected large on the wall, two shadows,

one shadow, two shadows, one—suddenly none.
The star goes out, a siren wails by full to none

for a bank robbed, a building scorched to earth,
aneurism, gas leak, the turning, turning earth.

Mortars

Yana Calou

Mortar, def:

1. A receptacle of hard material, having a bowl-shaped cavity in which substances are pounded or ground with a pestle.
2. An indirect fire weapon that fires explosive projectiles known as (mortar) bombs at low velocities, short ranges, and high-arcing ballistic trajectories.

It's not that I use it all the time. The few things I crush in the mortar and pestle are lovely though: coriander, cumin, fennel, mustard. Crushing a seed, extracting its encapsulated fragrance, its dormant potentiality broken open, pressed past the point of collapse. Pressure on stone from bone on muscle to mash the kernel.

My crush on Carlos unfolded the time I met him on a trip to the big city, which was Salt Lake City. He hung out with Ava and I loved his metal hair: elbow length, straight black and already striped with grey in high school. Tool scratched onto his backpack, 35mm camera around his neck, gentle vampire-like canines suspended from upper gums. His nervous high-pitched laugh, wild energy, Mexican Jewishness, and mama's boy sensibilities made Carlos special. I was thirteen. We assigned each other Mexican Jewish monikers: Ava was Maria Weinberg. He was Pablo Berkowitz. He named me Rosa Goldstein and it felt like a present. We mailed each other some letters.

We didn't date for four more years, until I moved to the big city. Then we were serious about playing house; at least I was. From our first kiss on the ashtray-filled porch of my first apartment, I harbored a plot to move him out of his parents' basement where he read Kafka, Calvino, played bass, made me mixed tapes of Radiohead, Tool, the Talking Heads and drank PBR.

A few months later, at eighteen, we moved in together, sharing car

insurance and a credit card. Like the Dylan song, I was so much older then – I’m younger than that now. I dedicated an inappropriate amount of energy trying to get us to cook and eat dinner together. A long forming cavity existed inside my gut, where food meant constancy, but it never seemed to stick or lodge. I was always hungry when Carlos was around.

We drank so much that first year spent in our little apartment on G Street that the days still hide from us both. I mistook the hallway for the toilet, drove home in a blizzard on acid, gave the cat away, kissed Christine from the unit downstairs whenever I could, and obsessed about death and suicide – believing I could solve them. The wine, like women – they both stretched the time. Still, I craved dinner together, *the* indicator of stability. My belligerent tantrums about dinner had a violence to them. After a bottle of wine I’d begin a turbulent, forceful, sloppy, and teary argument about how I cooked dinner and cared about spending time with him, so it was anti-feminist of him to not reciprocate.

Things started to look up when Carlos bought one of Madhur Jaffrey’s cookbooks of Indian recipes. When he got excited to go buy bulk bags of spices and dal at the Indian market, all my displaced anger found a hopeful solution. If Carlos would cook dinner, my emotions would be under control. He filled our microkitchen with bags of turmeric, cardamom pods and a couple of times, with smells of Jaffrey’s recipes. For Valentine’s Day, I bought him a small, sweet, tan marbled mortar and pestle so he could grind his spices. Cold, hard, smooth, and nearly sexual in its texture, form, and purpose. He bought me copo-de-leite flowers and he made one of these dishes: Okra and dal, flavored with seeds ground by the stone tool. We shared dinner to *Stories from the City*, *Stories from the Sea*, PJ Harvey’s new record.

A few years and several apartments later, for many reasons including but not limited to: gayness, drunkenness, treason, mental illness, the lingering traumas of childhood abuse, and cocaine-fueled battles of exaggerated proportions, we broke up. When we divided our belongings, the mortar and pestle traveled in a box with my name on it. I don’t remember if we concluded together that I could have it since I cooked

more and he was moving back in with his parents, or if my distorted logic justified a furtive repossession of his Valentine's Day gift. I just wanted a nice clean room to be inside.

Somehow, at a slackish pace, I pulled my shit together. Carlos sort of didn't as much. But after a murky couple of years redrawing the lines between friends and jealous ex-lovers who had lonely sex, we called each other best friends. A close, fraternal sort of pair. Friends lasted longer than lovers, and were just as good at reassuring me that familial pain is usually warranted. I learned this about queer kinship from Carlos. We drove all night after driving all day to see Bjork at Red Rocks. I bought him five Arby-Qs for five dollars so he could try and eat them all. We made some batches of bacteria-infected beer after touring the Cantillon brewery in Brussels, and then drank most of it anyway. He let me sleep on his couch rent-free for three months as I went through a challenging break up, and then gave me the apartment since I needed a place of my own.

Inseparable was more than supper, inseparable felt good, and the good thing was keepable. As our post-relationship relationship settled at a lower velocity, there were punctuated times of anguish as Pablo struggled with mental breakdowns spawned by binge drinking and drug use, or vice versa. When the benders came, I spent nervous days and late nights driving around parks, walking into bars during the daytime, calling jails and hospitals with his sister or mother in frantic search. Sometimes he'd show up at my apartment at 4am barely able to walk, then sleep for a couple of days. We'd watch PBS and cuddle on my couch, eating Vietnamese food, drinking Gatorade and low-point Utah beer as he recovered.

It was hardest to leave him when I moved to New York. There is little peace with possible news all the time. I worried about not being there for future episodes. He visited me in my unheated Williamsburg warehouse-cum-shithole loft. During one particularly lengthy disappearance, I flew back to Utah to help find him and try to check him into rehab

once again. I pieced this most terrible story together: his emptied bank account, the razor blades tucked in between the pages of the books that used to fill our walls, the long sleeves, the arrest outside the Motel Six. I was terrified but we were family.

Four years ago is the last time we spoke. There are some ends that don't trade in death. Before he got married, his fiancé forbade him to speak to any "exes." So the unraveling went. If he needed another go with codependent caretaking, he'd found it. The decision didn't even seem difficult. After writing his fiancé a letter to confer my congratulations and harmless intentions, and a hot angry protest over the phone in which I accused him of betrayal in the highest degree, in a letter explaining why we could no longer remain friends, he wrote:

Friends, even 'best friends' are just that, friends. They are not family. I know you're not keen on what you have been dealt in the family department, so if they disturb you, perhaps you should be working on building a new one. I really don't know what else to say without putting you on a skewer so I'll stop here. My fondest hopes, Carlos

The letter crushed with its teeth. Forced to imagine so many possible endings, this was not one I'd considered. We had finally constructed a stable form of caring for one another. I tried very hard to tell myself that that time-world is over now.

Tonight, his pestle gnashes cumin seeds into dust for these black beans I'm cooking. When the seed is crushed to powder instead of planted, its pleasant properties disperse and disappear into the purple-black stew. What can help me accept that this fragile tool has enjoyed a more enduring relationship to time than Carlos and I have? When the relative length, sticky contents, humiliating secrets, transference, brotherly love, and stoned histories of a friendship strung out across decades ceases to be enough, one wonders what connection can withstand a lifetime.

I don't know where those big bags of seeds ended up, and I wonder why the stones haven't broken by now to release us. The mortar and pestle is my measure that I loved more, gave more – but that's not even coolly satisfying anymore. The two stones, those many days I remember – they aren't substitutes, not Harlow's comforting wire mothers. I took his gift, and the mortar between us dissolved, any way you tell it.

Sharp in the Dark (*excerpt*)

Hope Thompson

PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR SIDNEY Sharp was lucky with women. She attracted them fairly easily--but hanging on to them was another matter. This particular night, it was a blonde, early twenties and out of control. She had the scent of money about her and it smelled good to Sharp. Her clothes were tailored, tight and carefully casual; she wasn't a regular. She pressed herself against Sharp and whispered in her ear, pleading her case, as if she had to. In the black-walled basement club, women moved through the shadows like caged lions--their eyes lazily sized each other up. The tiny parquet dance floor was packed with bodies grinding together. The rotating mirrored disco ball showered stars of light around the room. It was Saturday night in 1984 and the place was thumping. But for Sharp and the blonde, it didn't matter; they had something else on their minds.

Sharp's beige K-car moved through the darkened streets of Toronto. The blonde's hand made Sharp grateful her car was an automatic. They turned down a residential street and parked in front of a two-storey, yellow brick 1920s apartment building. Not saying much, the blonde unlocked the front door and Sharp followed her inside. 23 Crossley Street. Apartment 3B. Inside the apartment, the blonde slipped into the bathroom to "freshen up." Sharp didn't think she could get any fresher.

A coat stand stood against the wall. Sharp hung up her jacket. *Nice piece of furniture*, she thought to herself. She should get one for the office. One day. One day when she had some money.

"I'll just be a minute, Sid." The blonde's voice came through the bathroom door.

"That's fine... um?" A pulse in Sharp's cheek twitched. She realized she'd forgotten the blonde's name! What was it? Sharp groaned inwardly, imaging the blonde in her arms later that night, sighing and saying, "You're so good, Sid." And Sharp having to reply, "Yeah, well, you're pretty great yourself... you. You, there."

There had to be away out of this.

Sharp's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of running water

coming from the bathroom. The blonde was freshening up--and Sharp suspected the process was almost complete. She had to think fast. There wasn't much time.

Sharp's eyes darted around the room for clues. Her gaze fell on a small table by the front door. Laying on it next to a black, rotary phone and a dish full of pennies were a few pieces of mail. She leapt across the room and snatched up an electricity bill.

It read, "Attention: Miss Claire Iverson." Iverson? Why was that name familiar? The image of a church pew flashed in Sharp's mind....

Just then, the bathroom door swung open.

Miss Claire Iverson stood on the threshold, wearing nothing more than a small, gold cross. The world stopped spinning long enough for Sharp to decide that this moment, and this woman, would be the beginning of something beautiful.

Boy, was she wrong.

CHAPTER ONE

SIDNEY SHARP PUSHED her bangs back from her eyes. She needed a haircut. The standard: longer on the top, but not too long, and shorter on the sides, but not too short. She knew she looked like a guy. She was mistaken for one often enough. Sure, it bothered her, but she had to admit that she wasn't doing much to make her gender apparent; everything she wore was from the men's department--except her bra.

She'd been mistaken for a guy ever since she could remember. At fifteen, she went to the Charles School of Hair Dressing where cheap haircuts were available from hairdressers-in-training. Sharp sat under a plastic cape with her head tilted forward and her mind happily wandering. Suddenly, her eyes shot open. Her hairdresser had uttered a word that made Sharp freeze. She had just yelled across the room, "I'll take my break when I finish with this young man." Sharp's cheeks flushed hot red. If she made it clear that she was, actually, female, what could her hairdresser-in-training possibly do? Judging from the heap of dark slices on the floor, it was already too late. Her hairdresser might panic and give her some lopsided salad bowl of a cut, making her look neither male nor female, just--strange. She rolled her shoulders forward

to conceal her breasts and waited, silently, for the torture to end. But she could sense the hairdresser looking at her curiously, wondering.

Sharp sat in her beige K-car watching a detached, three-storey house in the middle of the block: 17 Glenfield Lane. A flowerbed fringed the front of the property and a maple sapling, newly planted, held itself up in the centre of the front lawn.

It had been a week since Sharp had had any cases, so she was grateful when the call came in. Mrs. Geraldine Mintz was under the impression that her husband was having an affair. She wanted Sharp to follow him around for a few days.

“I want to know where he goes, who he sees. He’s up to something. I know it. I just know it.” Mrs. Mintz’ voice was sharpened by the pain of suspicion.

“Has your husband been coming home late?” Sharp asked.

“That’s just it. He always leaves for work at the same time and comes home at the same time. But I can tell he’s up to something. There’s--a quality to him that’s different.”

Sharp thought that was about as vague as it was helpful, but she didn’t say so to Mrs. Mintz. Instead, she agreed on the terms and hung up.

Two people stepped out the front door of 17 Glenfield Lane--a woman in a pink housecoat and a man in a brown suit. They pecked each other’s cheeks, then the suit walked over to a silver Ford parked in the driveway and climbed in. The Ford backed up, turned, and drove off down the street. The housecoat waved at the departing vehicle, then looked around, wondering where her private detective was hiding, what in heaven’s name she was paying her for anyway, etc.

Sharp put the K-car in drive and followed the Ford. As she passed 17 Glenfield Lane, Sharp glanced in the rear-view mirror. Mrs. Mintz was still peering around, her hands on her pink chenille hips, her face set hard.

No one suspects a beige K-car of anything.

The October sky was the colour of bones.

The K-car crawled through mid-morning traffic. Up ahead, the

Ford slipped in and out of view--then disappeared. Sharp turned onto Bathurst and clocked the Ford parked in front of a low-rise office building. She parked a few car-lengths ahead and grabbed her binoculars from the glove compartment. The sign on the building read All Trust Insurance. *An insurance man*, thought Sharp. *Classic.*

Mr. Mintz walked briskly up the front steps.

Sharp frowned. *This could take hours*, she thought to herself. She spied a coffee shop half a block up. She could keep an eye out for Mintz and satisfy her endless need for coffee. She climbed out of the car and started walking. As she pulled open the door of the coffee shop, the Ford sped past her.

“Damn it!” she cursed and raced back to her car.

A furniture truck slammed its brakes as Sharp U-turned in front of it. She waved an apology that wasn't accepted and hit the gas hard. The Ford was heading south, towards Lake Ontario. It turned right on King. Sharp did the same. The Ford was far ahead now and moving fast. Sharp saw something silver turn left.

Sharp waited at a traffic light. When it turned green she sped forward to where she had last seen the Ford and turned left onto a narrow, residential street that, amazingly, allowed parking on both sides of the street. She braked hard. In front of her, a cement truck in mid-pour blocked the street. A handful of cars waited for the sludge to roll down the shaft and into the sidewalk's wooden framework. Sharp pressed her forehead against the K-car's steering wheel and groaned.

After 7.3 minutes, the cement pour stopped and the K-car's transmission was again in drive. There was no sign of the Ford. She figured Mintz wouldn't have entered the rough-edged Parkdale neighbourhood unless he had a reason to. If he'd wanted to go to the highway, he'd have taken Jameson, the next left, but he'd turned into Parkdale. He was in here somewhere; she was sure of it. All she had to do was find him--in a ten-block radius.

Pursing her lips, Sharp scanned each block. No silver Ford. One more block to go--she turned onto Fulgrove.

Mintz strode across the porch of a three-storey house--white paint peeling over brick--and disappeared inside. The place was divided into

apartments: Sharp could tell from the multiple buzzers next to the front door and from the rusted-iron fire escape that zigzagged up the side. Overflowing trash containers stood in the driveway and a mattress lay sprawled on the front lawn, stains and all. *Now we're getting somewhere*, thought Sharp. She shoved her floppy bangs straight back off her face. 141 Fulgrove, the home of Mintz' lady friend. Sharp scratched down the address and time in her notebook.

Sharp leaned back against the K-car's bench seat, closed her eyes and let her mind drift where it wanted--and it wanted Claire. She had reluctantly left her, still in bed, the day before and called her a few hours later, but there was no answer. She wouldn't call again, she decided. She didn't want to appear desperate or madly in love, although that was precisely how she felt. Instead, she left a cheerful and restrained phone message that sounded both desperate and mad in its own way.

It was Tuesday morning. Sharp decided she would "drop by" Claire's Crossley Street apartment on her way home, after she followed Mintz back to his. She imagined Claire opening the door, her face, her smile....

Across the street, a man wearing a blue, pin-striped suit--whose face Sharp would have recognized from a recent newspaper story on Canadian bank executive's salaries, if she hadn't been daydreaming--pulled open 141 Fulgrove's metal front door, looked around, then stepped inside.

#

A pale blue Cadillac with sparkling chrome hubcaps turned onto Fulgrove Street with its windows down. Donna Summer's "On the Radio" played at full volume on the vehicle's sound system. Pulsing bass beats vibrated through the frame of Sidney Sharp's K-car and launched her clear out of her seat. "Huh?" she gasped, looking around and trying to remember where she was and what she was doing.

Up ahead, Mintz' Ford stood parked at the side of the street. *Right*, thought Sharp. *You followed him to the home of his lady friend. You're on a case, remember?* The Cadillac turned at the end of the street. There was a moment of silence before Sharp heard the first strains of "Love to Love You Baby." *He's got the album on cassette*, thought Sharp.

Dead leaves had settled on the Ford's roof. They were rustling

around, too, now that the wind had started.

Sharp peered upwards, frowning. Purple-black clouds pushed across the grey dome of October sky. It looked like a dismal day was about to get even worse.

Sharp rubbed her face to wake up. She had to stop daydreaming on the job. She looked at her watch. She'd been out for over an hour. That was one of the things Meg had complained about, Sharp remembered, bitterly. One of many things.

"You're so--silent! I never know what you're thinking and it makes me not trust you. Honestly, Sidney, you should get help. And by help, I mean professional help." Sharp winced, remembering their final argument. She had forgotten something important--though even now, two days later, she couldn't remember what it was, except that it was the last straw for Meg. They broke up that night. Or rather, Meg broke up with Sharp. All her relationships seemed to end quickly. A smile drifted across Sharp's face and a pang of desire coursed through her body: Claire. Claire would be different! She let her mind drift back to their night together....

Sharp shook herself. She had to stay alert. She had a report to file for Mrs. Mintz with all the proof of her husband's infidelity clearly outlined, so that it could be used as evidence in court. Sharp took a Kodak Instamatic camera out of her kit bag. She climbed out of her car, walked along the sidewalk until she was dead centre of 141 Fulgrove and snapped a picture--then walked briskly back to her vehicle.

The curtains were drawn on the first-floor apartment. A confederate flag covered the second floor's bay window, and on the third floor, a pair of faded, rose-patterned curtains hung closed across the window. Or were they? She squinted, rubbed her eyes and looked up again. Now the curtains appeared to be slightly parted. Had they always been? Sharp leaned back in her seat. Probably just the breeze, she thought to herself.

#

A newspaper lay folded on the seat beside her. She picked it up and scanned the headlines: Oil Exec Gets 10 Years, Raglan Road Fire Kills 3, East End Burglar Still at Large. As usual, Toronto was full of crime, but none of it seemed to come her way. All she got were the cheaters.

A sad smile slid over her face. Tailing cheaters for a living. Well,

thank god for them, right? They paid her bills. And it wasn't an office job. There was always that consolation.

Her career started with a pack of matches. "Success Without College" was written across the front and on the other side, above the strike plate, a list of professions. Alongside "small engine repair," "taxidermy," and other skill-based professions was printed "private detective." Sharp liked the romantic and dangerous way it sounded. She liked the aloneness of it, too.

By correspondence, Sharp studied for eight weeks until a certificate arrived in the mail. With the last of her savings, she rented an office, framed her certificate and hung it on the wall. Sure, she did it without college, but as she waited, staring at 141 Fulgrove, the house Mintz had vanished into, she wasn't so sure about the "success" part of the equation. She leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes. She shook herself. *Must stay awake*, she thought. *Think about something!* Her mind turned to money....

Sharp calculated her earnings. The Mintz fee would pay her October rent, which was two weeks overdue. Any money left over? Well, she'd use that for food. It sure was a great way to stay in shape. Just don't eat. Sharp's stomach rumbled. She took a sip of water from a plaid thermos. The cool water focused her mind. Almost. There was something she was forgetting. Was she supposed to be somewhere? She strained her mind, trying to imagine the small, galley kitchen in her apartment, the pale blue fridge in the corner--and the calendar attached to its door under the pressure of an orange truck-shaped magnet--a freebie from a neighbourhood carwash. She could picture the calendar and clearly see the October photo of a New Brunswick covered bridge against a backdrop of autumn foliage. But the little day box of information--what she really needed to see--was a fuzzy scribble.

The K-car was cold inside. She rubbed her hands together. *A coffee right about now would be just the thing*, she thought, knowing it wasn't going to happen. An hour passed. The wind whipped funnels of leaves around her car. Inside, Sharp wiggled her toes and feet and patted her thighs to keep the blood moving. She pulled a blanket from the back seat and draped it over her.

She looked at her watch. 1:59 pm. She would listen to the news. *Just five minutes of car battery wouldn't hurt*, she thought. She clicked on the radio. A news report was just starting. Sharp trained her eye on 141 Fulgrove, half listening. *What is he doing in there?* she wondered. The weather update flowed by her ears. What would a middle-class, middle-aged insurance man be doing in a Parkdale rooming house for four and a half hours? The international news flowed by her ears. Drugs? A prostitute? Visiting a client? The local news flowed by Sharp's ears--then her eyes popped open. She grabbed the volume knob and cranked it.

"...a woman's body was discovered this morning in a Crossley Street apartment. The police have not released the cause of death, though they have confirmed that a homicide investigation is under way. An anonymous source close to the investigation tells CNCH News that the police suspect the East End burglar was interrupted during a break-in, though this has yet to be verified. Turning to sports, the Leafs are off to a poor start this season, dropping a 5-1 loss against the Habs...."

"Crossley Street?" Sharp's breath caught in her throat.

She threw off the blanket, turned the key in the ignition, popped the transmission into drive, and pressed down hard on the gas. The K-car swerved out of its parking space and screeched off down the street.

The faded rose-patterned curtains in the third-floor window twitched open, further, revealing the profile of Jeffrey Mintz. He leaned forward slightly and watched the K-car's sudden departure on the street below. A trace of fear flashed in his eyes.

In an instant, the curtains closed again and were still.

Mother and Son Go Shopping

Yuska Lutfi Tuanakotta

“Listen, you really should see this,” the mother says, but the son has already wandered off in the women’s section of the store. She lets go of the thick woolen jacket. The mother sees the son touch the sleeve of a woman’s jacket. The son is smiling.

“It’s beautiful,” the mother says. The son nods.

“But it’s not going to be warm enough,” the mother says. The son nods.

“Here, this one should do it,” the mother says. The son nods.

The black coat was made in Turkey and made its way to Indonesia. It’s now purchased by a mother whose son is going to leave her to get his master’s degree in a country an ocean away.

They share an understanding of fabrics. The mother kept a sewing machine in the son’s room back in their old, two-storey house. The son’s room was the tiniest room, but then again, he is the youngest soon. His parents’ room in the old house was the biggest bedroom, the second biggest was his big sister’s, then his older brother’s. The son didn’t have many things to keep in the floor-to-ceiling wardrobe, so the mother used some of the space to store the household’s linens and the fabrics that she’d bought that she’d one day turn into a pair of pants, or a shirt, or a dress.

The son saw the mother sew.

“Teach me,” the son said. The mother nodded.

There were two different spools of thread. The bigger, taller one stayed upright far above, then the thread of that spool went down, through this loop and that loop until it finally reached down and looped into the needle. The smaller spool stayed hidden in a steel compartment that clicked safely shut, and the little wick of the thread was exposed just enough. The threads from the two different spools would meet and sew the fabric tightly.

“See?” the mother said. The son nodded.

When they moved into a new house in a better part of Jakarta twelve years later, and the son had a bigger room – one of the biggest bedrooms in the one-storey house – they'd keep the sewing machine in his room.

“Listen, you really should see this,” the mother says, but the son has already wandered off in the t-shirt section of the store. She lets go of the grey cap with faux-fur earmuffs. The mother sees the son touch the sleeve of a black shirt. The son is smiling.

“It's beautiful,” the mother says. The son nods.

“But that's not what we're here for,” the mother says. The son nods.

“Here, what do you think of this one?” the mother says. The son nods.

The cap was made in China and made its way to Indonesia. It being sold in Jakarta makes no sense whatsoever, but the son will take it to San Francisco, where it will keep the son's ears and head warm in the rainy and windy February weather, where he will write stories about cats, a jilted lover who drives around in a stolen car with his boyfriend's body in the back seat, an estranged gay couple facing alien invasion, drag queens, their sexuality, his sexuality, his lovers, and eventually the mother, but she will not understand these stories, because she does not speak the language they will be written in.

The son was four years old. He was silent.

The mother was forty. She was watching her son.

They were in the car. It was Saturday afternoon.

His teacher had scolded him for not following her order. She'd told him that he should only color one page for his homework, not the whole book. He'd colored the whole book. He was so happy when he was coloring them in front of the television, surrounded by his mother, his father, his sister, his brother. He'd misheard the instructions. He didn't know English. Or perhaps he hadn't understood what the teacher said even as she'd said it in Indonesian.

Before the son was born, before the son's older brother was born, the mother and the father traveled to the United States with their daughter

to get his MBA degree from Harvard.

The mother would smile every time she told the son the story about how difficult it was for her to explain to the store manager that she wanted peanut butter, to explain to the landlord that their heater wouldn't work, to explain to the doctor that their daughter had been sneezing and coughing.

But there they were, the mother and the son, in the car, on that Saturday afternoon.

"Something wrong?" the mother said, not in Indonesian, but in English. The son nodded. He cried in her arms as he told her everything, but she said he must continue taking English lessons because it was could take him places.

The son remembers the pain, the humiliation, the feeling of incapability that would ruin him, but he also remembers how his mother uttered those two simple words, not in Indonesian, but in perfect English, the most perfect he'd ever heard his entire life.

"What did your friends say?" the mother says. They're at the mall's food court. Sitting down and snacking. The shopping bags occupy the third seat. Her bag and his purse occupy the fourth.

"They asked me when I would be coming back," the son says.

"Then what did you say?" the mother says.

"I told them I'd come back in June. Then they laughed and said they thought I'd be gone for years."

"What did your boyfriend say?"

"Well, this is a good change for us. I mean, we're already in a long distance relationship anyway, what with him being in Bali and all. Now he can focus more on his job and I'll visit him in Bali when I'm here."

"I like your boyfriend. I think he's a good person," the mother says. The son nods.

The son was five or six. He was bored.

The mother was 41 or 42. She was reading.

They were in the car, in front of a Methodist church near their old house in Jakarta, where they were waiting for her husband, his father, to come out. It was their monthly visit to the church, where her husband, his father, a private accountant, donated his time to audit the church's bookkeeping.

"Dad is taking a long time," the son said. The mother nodded.

"Let's play a game," the mother said. The son nodded.

The mother took a small blanket from a compartment, she spread it and covered the son with it. The son giggled. She told him that he was a chick, in an egg, all warm and safe.

The son saw the silhouette of the mother through the worn blanket.

The mother told him that he had to wait 21 days to come out of the egg.

"But for this, we'll just count to 21," the mother said. The son nodded.

When they reached the number, the mother told the son that it was time to wake up, to stretch his arms until the blanket fell around him, like soft eggshells.

The golden afternoon sun filtered its way in through the tinted car windows and the son squinted as he opened his eyes and saw his mother.

They played the game five more times and each time the son hatched out of his blanket shell, she'd kiss his forehead and his cheeks and told him that he was hers.

"I'll see you in six months," the mother says. The son nods.

People walk around them. Suitcases after suitcases.

"You have everything?" the mother says. The son nods.

Passport, boarding pass, student visa, I-20, acceptance letter, insurance card.

The mother wants to say something else. The son expects the mother to say something.

The mother doesn't say anything else, but the son still nods. The son, now taller than his small, Asian mother, bends forward.

A tight embrace. A kiss. An ocean of tears.

And this will repeat, this will repeat every time the son comes home at the end of every semester and flies away again before the beginning of every semester, enduring twenty two hours of economy flights and transits each way.

The mother expects it will stop, the mother expects the son to come back to her, to stay with her.

The mother doesn't expect the son to break up with his Indonesian boyfriend, to fall in love with an American Methodist priest, to be hurt by that priest, and in his quest to forget the priest, to meet a lawyer, a businessman, an engineer, a poet, a human rights activist, a photographer, a teacher, a nurse, a pilot, but nothing will work, until he meets an American musician, who loves the son so much that he'll fly to Indonesia to meet the mother and her husband and the sister and the brother, a musician who promises a better life for her son, although the mother has given the son the best years of her life and in return the best years of the son's life, but she sees the son smiling when he holds this man's hand in front of her, she sees that the son is smitten by this man, that the son also loves this man, and she can't say, "He's a wonderful man, but I want you to stay with me," so instead she will be the one who nods, she will tell the son how much she loves him and she wishes him the best, even though it means they won't celebrate his birthdays together, or her birthdays together, even though it means long distance phone calls will have to do, even though it means she has to learn how to use emails, and how to live far away from him.

But for now, they have this tight embrace. They have this kiss. They have this ocean of tears.

I Don't Need to Talk Every Day

Megan McHugh

for Adrienne Rich

The water itself mutes you.

I ask you to draw letters
with a twig in the silt, but
your body in articulates in waves.

Evening can't be forever stalled.

I look up from studying your face –

I love this drift
so long a lover to me
before you.

The white's a bluish gray.

One by one, the trees
step back into the forest.

So long a lover to me –
the grooves well worn.
I slip
with a splash back
to her.

It must be that I love reaching

for that grip rope
that is has to feel desperate.

So long a lover to me –
your words
still do my saving.

Your silence today is a pond where drowned things live.

No Little Oh

Megan McHugh

You say you want to be unbearable.

Do you even know what that is? Ask the ocean.

Compare your multitudes to the octopus.

I've got three hearts: one sooted, one small, one obese.

But legs? I can't tell.

With her hand up in me, I've got three at least.

She pushes me against the doorframe. I stand it.

I stand it. The nauseous too much of it. Ask the ocean
about seasick. Ask her about the rain troubling

her surface, the glaciers railing into her,

more and more of her. She withstands it all.

In The House of Absolute Forgetting A Deal Was Made

Megan McHugh

No branches in breeze no tongues chatting in breeze
No dogs flipping metal bowls no cockroaches rustling
Through stalks of ginger no ginger scent
No white clit of ginger peeking no pigeons no oil spills
No bounce no NOPD No bougainvillea No soul
No brass no moonflowers and their one night only
No mouths to spit watermelon seeds No giants
Swinging chandeliers over their shoulders No dogs to flip
No breeze no bounce no branches no breeze

St. Ann St.

—
Megan McHugh

I cannot tell the difference between
Our closings and our openings. Flowers,
Is it raining or is that just the trees
Shaking off last night?
Our tongues: line-hung
Chit-chatting with clean white
Moonflowers, goodbye waiving
This one night.
A loud, loud mute:
A hard hand pressing.
Blind-mouthed in bed, we absorb all light.
Did you know, love, stones –
They make a noise
When they sing,
When we sleep giants rub us clean?

When we sleep giants rub us clean,
They make a noise
When they sing
Did you know, love, stones
Blind-mouthed in bed, absorb all light.
A hard hand pressing.
A loud loud mute:
This one night.
Moonflowers, goodbye waiving
Chit-chatting with clean white.
Our tongues: line hung
Shaking off last night?
Is it raining or is that just the trees?
Our closings and our openings. Flowers,
I cannot tell the difference between.

The Blizzard (*excerpt*)

Jeffrey Ricker

By the time I pulled my into my parents' driveway, I was almost an hour late. I fishtailed slowly down the snow-packed streets of their subdivision before narrowly missing my brother's 4-by-4 parked along the curb just beyond their mailbox. My car's rear slid left, the front slid right, and I coasted down the slope of the driveway and came to a stop before I banged into their garage door.

"We weren't sure you were going to make it," my mother said when she opened the front door.

"Neither was I." I shrugged out of my coat and she hung it on the rack beside the door. It smelled like she was making pot roast, Dad's favorite.

Mom smiled at me, a wan, curving facsimile that might as well have been a frown. She had dark circles under her eyes, and for some reason she'd pulled her hair back into a ponytail, which made her hairline severe and pulled her wrinkles wide instead of smooth, like they were canyoning.

"Everything okay?"

She must have realized her mask had slipped, because she blinked a couple times and smiled a little wider, showing teeth. Company face. I was getting the expression she normally reserved for people she'd rather not deal with. "Of course, honey. I'm just worried about the pot roast drying out. I've already dished some up for your dad and Dustin, but if you wanted any—"

"Still a vegetarian, Mom."

She nodded vigorously. "Right, of course."

Before we walked into the dining room, she whispered, "I would have made pasta or something for you, but your father requested the pot roast especially."

"It's okay," I said. I should have eaten something before I left home.

Dad and Dustin already had plates in front of them and were eating. I slid into my chair and picked up my napkin. The dining room table hadn't changed in the sixteen years since I'd last sat at it while living in

this house. To the left of my seat, the same place I'd sat all through high school, a gouge ran through the butter-colored maple where Mom had dropped a pair of metal tongs. Dad and I had argued that night, and I'd gotten up from the table too fast. Mom stood behind me, the salad bowl and tongs in her hands. She dropped both. The glass bowl landed at her feet and made a popping sound like a cork as it shattered, and the tongs hit the table. Mom cut her ankle on the broken glass and wound up needing stitches. No matter how many times I apologized, all she said was it wasn't my fault.

"Roads that bad?" Dad asked between bites.

"Probably six inches already, and no plows out yet either. Anyone see the weather?"

"Didn't say a damn thing about this," Dad said, and added under his breath, "Damn meteorologists are always useless."

I slid my napkin into my lap. Dad looked more red in the face than usual, like he might have had sunburn. As he got older, what used to look like a healthy glow began more to resemble an imminent heart attack, his shirt collars appearing to cut off the circulation from his neck upwards. The white halo of hair surrounding a bald crown didn't help matters, just made his face look that much redder.

"How's it going?" I asked Dustin, who had his head bent over his plate. He paused, looked up, and nodded. "Good, good," he said. For a second he looked like he was thinking of something else to say, but then went back to eating, still nodding for a bit as he did so, as if praying. I picked up my fork and started on my salad. They were already ahead of me and halfway through their pot roast.

Mom came back from the kitchen and set beside my salad plate a small bowl of linguine that she's doctored up with olive oil and garlic, some cheese, and a sprinkling of black pepper and some green flecks of dried something; basil maybe, or oregano. We'd always been a meat and potatoes family. Pasta was never in her repertoire.

"You didn't have to make me something special, Mom," I said. She waved a hand.

"I didn't want you going hungry."

"The pot roast is great, Mom," Dustin said. She smiled as she took her seat and picked up her napkin.

Silence snapped taut over us as we ate, the click-tap of silverware against plates the only noise we made. I kept my head down but glanced quickly at each of the people around the table. None of them looked up either, except Dad. I returned my attention to my plate before he noticed. Dinner conversation was a verbal minefield I didn't want to risk treading across. I'd blown up and been blown up at that table too many times to count. By the time I finished my salad, the familiar sour ache had settled in my gut that had nothing to do with bad food or overeating.

"I hope you boys will be able to get home with the weather like this," Mom said. Her voice startled me out of the silence.

"Shouldn't be a problem," Dustin said. He drove an F-150 extended cab with four-wheel drive. The tires were about the size of one of my car's doors.

I turned toward the bay window taking up the wall of the dining room opposite my parents. Dad sat on the far end of the table, my mother to the right of him, my brother opposite her, and me to Dustin's left. The other end of the table wasn't occupied. Mom sat there during holidays and special occasions when the table that seated twelve was more fully occupied, but when it was just the four of us, she preferred to sit close to Dad. Dustin and I had always sat on the same side of the table, and I don't think it had ever occurred to either one of us to sit anywhere else.

The bay window overlooked the back yard, which had been flat and treeless and almost grassless when we moved in the same year I was in the sixth grade. They'd planted a maple in the middle of the yard, and twenty-four years later it was taller than the house. Stripped of leaves, its bare limbs trembled in the wind as the snow pelted it. I wondered why it didn't break.

My food was underdone; when I twirled my fork in the pasta, it resisted bending around the tines. I pressed the side of it through the noodles, feeling the crunch more than hearing it. I kept using the fork to split them apart until I'd reduced them to tiny nubs swimming in a shallow puddle of olive oil.

I pushed my chair back and put my napkin on the table. "I'll be

right back.”

Dad, in the middle of talking, looked up at me with a grimace. “I was about to say something important.”

“I really have to go, Dad,” I said.

“Well, try and make it quick,” he said.

As I headed down the hall to the bathroom, I caught Dustin starting to say, “Better not stop him on the way to the bathroom. Remember when he was six, that time in Sears—”

Oh great, the peeing-my-pants-in-public story. I slammed the bathroom door, turned on the ventilation fan for cover, and pulled out my phone.

“You are not calling me from the can at your parents’ house,” Jackson said when he picked up on the third ring.

“I wanted to get away from the table for a while.” I sat on the closed toilet seat. “It’s not like I’m actually going at the moment.”

Jackson laughed. The bathroom fan made it hard to hear the background noise on his end of the call, but I caught the hum of other people talking. “Are you at home?” I asked.

“I’m in line at Straubs. We were out of wine and I felt like having a glass with my leftovers. You wouldn’t believe how crowded this place is. They’re all out of milk and bottled water already.”

I leaned back against the toilet tank. “I don’t know which is more dangerous, going to the grocery store the night of a blizzard or coming out to my parents’ house at any time.”

“I can barely remember what that’s like,” he said. I’d brought Jackson out for Thanksgiving one year. My mom put on her best company face and Dad didn’t say much until he found out that Jackson was a mechanic. Dad, who used to work at the old Ford plant in Hazelwood before it closed down, gave him some good-natured grief about preferring Camaros, but they both agreed they’d never drive a Dodge.

“How was the drive there?” he asked.

I sighed. “Nightmarish. It took over an hour. They were halfway through dinner by the time I got here.”

“Yikes. What did your mother make?”

“Pot roast.”

“Wasted on you.” He laughed again. “It’s still coming down pretty hard. Maybe it’d be better if you stayed there tonight and hope this lets up by the morning?”

On the face of it, what he said made sense. In my head, it sounded like he was trying to get me out of the way. “I’ll be fine. It might take me a while, but I’ll get home.”

“Well, if you wind up in a ditch on the side of the highway—”

“I know, I know. I’ll call Triple A.”

When I got back to the table, Dustin said, “I was about to come see if you’d fallen in.”

“Ha ha.” I rolled my eyes at him. His plate was empty, but I still had most of mine left. It didn’t occur to me until I went back to eating that Dustin and I had exchanged more words at dinner than we probably had in the past year.

Dad started speaking again. I almost missed the change in his tone of voice, but it began to waver. I looked up and caught a tremor passing through his lips. He was paler than normal. He kept his gaze directed at his own plate, largely empty.

“Anyway,” Dad said, “the biopsy came back positive, so it’s definitely colon cancer.”

I let my fork drop into the bowl. “Cancer?”

“Yes, cancer.” Dad’s mouth set in a hard line for a moment before he added, “It’s what I was about to say before you went to the can.”

From the way he said it, he must have started telling Dustin about it while I was gone. I looked down at the linguine, still lukewarm in the bowl. It felt like the ground had shifted underneath me, and I was sitting in a different place from the one where I’d sat when I came into the house.

Mom laid her hand across Dad’s and stared at Dustin and me. For once, she looked like the strong one. Dad kneaded his napkin as she spoke.

“Colon cancer is very treatable when it’s caught this early in the process. Your father might not even need chemo after the surgery. But,” she drew in a breath, like she was about to go underwater, “there’s a small

chance that it's hereditary, so you both should plan on getting tested."

Cancer. The word echoed in my head, to the point where I almost lost track of what was being said. Dustin's eyes widened and he looked down at his lap, maybe wondering if he could tell whether his own body was betraying him already.

"In the event that this *isn't* hereditary, you'll probably be fine, Eric," Mom said, "being a vegetarian and all."

I knew she meant well, but inwardly I cringed, because I knew how that would sound to Dad. He slid his hand from underneath my mother's and glared at her.

"What, it's my fault now that I've got cancer?" he asked.

"That's not what I meant—"

"What about Dustin?" He jabbed a finger toward my brother. "If he ends up having it, is it *not* his fault then?"

"It's no one's fault," I said, only to have the finger jabbed in my direction.

"You just zip it, mister."

I should have known to keep my mouth shut, but sometimes it got old watching him bully everyone in reach.

"Dad, why are you picking a fight? This isn't about—"

I was going to say *this isn't about us* until I realized how awful it sounded. Dismissive. Not what I meant at all. Anyway, wasn't it about us?

"Isn't about what?" He braced both hands on the table like he was about to get up and give me more than a piece of his mind. I knew what he was doing: deflecting from himself so that we wouldn't go on worrying about him, that he might die.

"It's just that you always do this."

"Do what? Get cancer? Sorry if this inconveniences you."

"Dad, come on, you know that's not what he means." This from Dustin. The sweat on his face caught a sheen from the light over the table.

Dad waved his hand with the napkin in it. "I'm sure Eric's dying to tell us more. I'd love to hear more about how I've done everything wrong."

In my head I was thinking *shut up shut up* and I wasn't sure if I was

directing that thought at him or at myself.

“Honey,” Mom said, “just calm down a moment.”

“No.” He shook his head, then pointed at me again. “I want to hear him tell me all the ways I’ve been a lousy father. Don’t deny you think that.”

“Richard,” Mom said, her voice heavy with warning. I let my fork and spoon fall into the bowl.

“Great. Here we go again.”

“Honey, please try not to get upset,” Mom said. “Your condition—”

“Don’t tell me about my goddamn condition, Doris. He—” Dad pointed at me again “—is always blaming us for every thing that goes wrong in his life. How did you put up with us for so long?”

He was waiting for me to answer. Mom’s face trembled, like she’d just seen a ghost, or a murder. When Dustin looked at me I could almost hear him pleading with me not to take our dad’s bait.

Right then, though, I was remembering something from when I was young, maybe only three or four. “Remember your old Mustang, Dad?”

He frowned, maybe wondering what I was leading up to. “The 73 convertible?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, maybe. I think it was a convertible.”

“Yeah, it was,” Dustin piped up. “I wanted that car so bad.”

“We got rid of it before either of you were old enough to drive,” Dad said. “Not practical when you had two kids and a lot of groceries to haul.”

“Maybe,” I said, “but do you remember driving around the neighborhood when I couldn’t sleep?”

Gradually, the wrinkles between his eyebrows softened, relaxed. “You remember that?”

I nodded. “You’d put the top down if it was warm enough and I’d lie in the backseat and just stare up at the clouds or the stars as you drove around and around. Sometimes you’d turn on the radio to the oldies station, and it always seemed to be playing Diana Ross and the Supremes.”

He nodded. “That was your mother’s tape. I don’t know if it was the

driving or the music that put you to sleep, but I'd ask if you were awake every so often and keep driving until you didn't answer. I usually had to carry you up to bed."

We all sat there for a moment, not saying anything. Each of us, I think, was lost in our own memory of that car, of how we were thirty-odd years ago. Maybe Dad was wondering what happened to the boy he used to carry up to bed. Or maybe he was just wondering how long he had.

I pushed my chair back. "I'd better get going."

Lonely Chains: Notes on *The Swimming-Pool Library*

David Weinstein

I was born in 1988, the same year that Alan Hollinghurst published *The Swimming-Pool Library*. Twenty-three years later, I would fall hard for the narrator: William Beckwith, blond hair and blue blood, the wayward heir to a British viscount. To this day, he is my tour guide through gay life in 1983 London, where, as now, “happiness can depend on the glance of a stranger, caught and returned.” Independently wealthy at twenty-five, Will doesn’t work and thrives instead on men, who meet him at parks, in the dark of theaters, and in the Corinthian—“Corry” for short—the athletic club whose very walls, “classical at a glance... homosexual parodies when inspected close,” shelter the longings of men inside.

Will and I share a taste for nostalgia. Like me, he prefers the swollen sentimentalism of Mahler to an “inane pop song,” lonely and pleading in a nightclub. He studied history at Oxford, whereas I attended Yale, whose roof tiles were buried three times underground to pretend the history of a place like Oxford. When the past is unattainable, I, too, try to recreate it, like a scummy roof tile or those clumsy impostors of classicism at the Corry. Will becomes my mold: a family lineage as long as Britain’s; the confidence that comes with unceasing luxury; the kind of button nose that seduces any man, if not his loyalty. Even as I envy Will, growing in me is a despairing desire for him.

Despair is my inheritance, it seems, from the previous ranks of gay men. Will sulks as his love life becomes monotonous, or after roaming fruitlessly for sex around London. And one afternoon, in a dank lavatory while cruising Kensington Gardens, his disappointment flares into worry; another pleasure seeker named Charles Nantwich, much older than him, has a heart attack and probably would have died had Will never found him. Days later, after a chance encounter at the Corry, the two begin an unlikely friendship, with Charles suggesting that Will write his biography. We read Charles’s journals, whose stories bear an

eerie likeness to Will's. Both were initiated into the erotic underworld of public schools, where boys snuck away to the swimming pool at night. Charles wrote later of affairs between soldiers in the Great War, and then the bristling of sex against power as he, an official in colonial Sudan, discovered his love of African men.

I follow Will's relationship to Charles eagerly, knowing few people in my own life who can elucidate my past. In books I seek them out. Sometimes this feels like reaching for Eden: that place and time when men could love without the shameful knowledge, as much a part of us as our bodies, that we might die from AIDS. *The Swimming-Pool Library* is a eulogy for the era before the epidemic, or maybe a prayer to resurrect its spirit. Will delights in muscles at the gym and those other parts in the bedroom. His world is virile with possibility, with a sense that sex is the stuff that keeps us alive. His life, in sex, is a counterexample to our death.

But Will's life isn't immune to tragedy. From Charles, he eventually learns a devastating secret about his family's past. And Will's circles of gay men, focused more on sex than companionship, leave him unmoored in his search for identity. Or, just as accurate, he feels trapped in his search—a cycle of sex and isolation—just as I feel trapped in my own quest for understanding all these years later, unable to know his pain or to alleviate the suffering of so many men thereafter. In Hollinghurst's novel, we from the future are only ghosts. Lonely cadences, here and there, in Will's words.

Words are all I have to connect me to these men, so like me and yet from another world entirely. My longing for them is natural, a long-lived melancholy in literature. I think of Pip in *Great Expectations*, the orphan, when he describes the experiences that shaped him: "Think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day."

I look around me, and back through time, for the links to my

community. I pull on these chains of books and journals, of ancestors and advisers, trying to find the first ring. With so many forefathers gone to an epidemic, and with the rest dispersed all over the world, I am orphaned by history. Still, though, I read. Always I feel on the edge of discovery; never do I quite arrive.

[if nothing else, be still]

Ricardo Hernandez

if nothing else, be still
 this morning
we both know how
 these things end
tumblers rinsed
 cigarettes flushed
the refuge

 dismantled
remember the altar
 you raised
on my back, the offerings
 you made: oily
meats, sweet-bread
 dipped in wine

how it felt to bite
 and praise these
each skin breaking
 releasing
its juice on your lip
 and chin, leaving
behind a sharp dark

 trail down
your chest
 I see it
more and more
 clearly
in the looming
 light

pretend you don't
 have to
slip your ring back
 on your finger
and I could stay here
 if you want
me to (and you

 always want me
to) so you might
 discover new uses
for the useless
 parts of me
because if nothing else
 by now

you've seen what
 lies beside you
is not a body
 but a stack
of new wood
 young, freshly
quartered

and if nothing else
 maybe
you could build
 a home
with it

False Idols (*excerpt*)

William Lung

“Aaa-uuu-mmm... Aaa-uuu-mmm... Aaa-uuu-mmm...”

Ellie struggles to be both mindful and mindless at the same time, struggles to allow her “oms” and those of her classmates to reach out and vibrate into one unifying present in the otherwise stillness of the studio. That was the recurrent theme of the yoga she’d been practicing though, wasn’t it? Conflict. And conflict as resolution, resolution as truth? Bone versus muscle, muscle versus tendon; mind versus heart, thought versus emotion? Where after enough struggle, the one becomes the other and unity is achieved?

But that isn’t exactly right, because there’s no such thing as mindlessness in yoga, much less Samasatya Yoga. Although she’d only been practicing Samasatya since the winter holidays, the tenets of “harmony through truth” and *mohasantyai abahu*, “pacifying delusion”, were ones that deeply resonated with her. Today though, she feels on the losing end of the battle.

“This weekend, an old friend of mine whom I hadn’t seen in years came to visit,” says Michael, the silver-haired founder of Samasatya, poised atop his Native American wool blanket cum bolster, “and we had a wonderful time reminiscing about our shared past. As we talked deep into the night, I realized how much had changed for both of us, how we were in fact such different people than we were even five years ago,” Michael continues, his fingers raking his silver hair to rest behind his ears.

“And with this being the first week of spring, I thought about how a season like winter can in many ways be a time where our bodies, minds and spirits freeze up, tighten, where we hold on to things that are not necessarily healthy. And the transition to spring, the change if you will, is a part of the renewal process, the thaw, the rebirth of our bodies and our spirits. So today I want to focus on *shodhana*, the cleansing of ourselves.”

Mounted atop a bolster, Ellie watches Michael intently but finds it difficult to hone in on his words. She is distracted. A cursory glance

when she entered the studio, and into the mirrors along the front wall, confirmed the regulars in attendance. It normally hadn't bothered her, but recently Ellie felt a growing unease. All the other women in the class were younger with names like Charlotte and Emily, when did the Brontë sisters become twenty-something public relations flacks in form-fitting yoga pants and sports bras? Ellie, née Ellen, was of the Nancy and Diane generation, and before the Heather, Jessica and Jennifer generation. It wouldn't be long before yoga studios, or its future equivalent, would be populated by young women named Ava and Sophia, evoking buxom Hollywood bombshells of yore. She wouldn't be caught dead in a sports bra at her age, and wonders if she would have even when she was young and lithesome. Ellie knows she looks great for her age, people always remark on it, but there was always a qualifier at the end of those assessments, her own or those of others. "Ellie, you look incredible! I can't believe you just had a baby!" "Ellie, you look amazing! You'd never know you had cancer."

"And to cleanse ourselves, to attain *shaucha*, we must build *tapas*, the heat that is at the very seat of our souls, the intent that impels us to live," Michael continues, "As we go through the poses, I want you to pay attention to your body, but also to your spirit. I want you to consider all that serves you well, the blessings that feed into your contentment. Then I want you to think about the things that don't serve you well, the things that make you unhappy, stressed...I want you to think of the *tapas* as a roaring fire, and then to visualize throwing those things that do not serve you well, into that fire."

Lumps in your mashed potatoes. A *lump* on your head. A *lump* of sugar... Ellie itemized related idioms and phrases as one rose in her throat when the doctor said, "We've found a lump. The good news is that we found it early." That was good news, Ellie absently thought; she had steeled herself for this, as the casual calls to and from the doctor's office over the past few years that yielded negative results gave way to a voicemail that said, "You should come in." But as her breasts had been hoisted and pressed, pinched and smushed between the plates of the mammography machine and left her unable to breathe at times,

a similar feeling now extended to her entire body as she felt herself melting over the sides of the chair, oozing onto the thin pile carpet of the doctor's office.

She had been getting her annual exam for over a decade and with regularity, met the good news with a sigh of relief. Towards the beginning, as May would roll around, Ellie regarded the exam with understandable dread and apprehension, it was like a game of Russian Roulette and she had always thought it was a matter of not if, but when her number would come up – despite the fact that cancer did not run in her family. Her mother was still vibrant at seventy-five, volunteering for Hadassah, collecting donations for the local food pantry in Westchester, and taking bi-weekly Aquacize classes at the Y; her two aunts who were even older were taking Mediterranean cruises and criss-crossing the country to visit their children and grandchildren, all without the spectre of serious disease. So by the time year seven or eight rolled around and she'd continually gotten a clean bill of health, Ellie renounced the fear that had dogged her every spring.

Now, it had come back to bite her. Hubris, she thought.

But somehow, the skin that threatened to give way and allow Ellie's most vulnerable and exposed self to spill out like the contents of a water balloon onto the floor of the doctor's office, held firm. A certain resolve, a matter-of-factness, an inner voice whose register took on an authoritative calm seemed to come out of her own mouth and spoke, "So what are our options," Sasha asked.

When they had gotten home, Sasha drew Ellie a hot bath. Their master bathroom was a mix of the old and the new, the vintage and the modern. Cararra marble counters encased brushed stainless steel fixtures, white subway tiled walls were horizontally split by a one inch strip of variegated Murano glass that ran the length of the backsplash, heated slate floor tiles upon which sat an oversized, claw-foot tub they had discovered on an antiquing trip in the Berkshires. When her own hands gripped the sides of the tub and Ellie lowered herself into the hot water, it did nothing to take away the chill in her bones. She sat up in the tub, her knees like soft hills poking out of the water; her eyes were unable to focus on any points outside of herself and so she closed them.

Auden's small, newborn hand in her own, his now floppy brown hair falling in soft curls over his blue eyes. His blue eyes, the ones he'd gotten from Sasha. The impressive silhouette he cast racing across a field wielding his lacrosse stick like a noble warrior heading toward most certain victory, she had long presumed came from her. What would he look like years from now, a thick growth of hair in the valleys of his face forsaken of its baby fat, broad-shouldered and assured carrying his own son in his large hands. The thought that she might not live to see it, like the compression of bath water on her chest, pressed uncomfortably against her. Ellie began to feel consumed by it all, and she sunk slowly, lower and lower into the tub until she was fully submerged under water.

"So as we move into *ardha chandrasana*," Ellie finds herself being drawn back into the studio by Michael's words. Samasatya was the fastest growing form of yoga, and Ellie had been turned on to it by her best friend Gail who had gone through an acrimonious divorce, being downsized and her own bout with breast cancer. A plague of locusts was sure to follow. Samasatya's popularity had as much to do with its philosophy as with Michael Goodloe's warmth and passion. He and Samasatya were in such high demand that the actual classes he taught grew less frequent as he jetted around the country and the world, training acolytes to be Samasatya teachers. Ellie takes a few additional deep breaths and feels fully present.

"While you're on your standing leg, I want you to pull into your middle, feel your muscles stretch and lengthen over your bones. Pull up through the arch of your foot, into your calves and hamstrings. Extend that back leg in the air and flex your foot. Feel your hips and shoulders open up," Michael directs. The class was now in half moon pose.

"Ellie, that's great form," Michael compliments her.

She knows it is from her formative years of ballet training. She had always had good form and posture because of it. Sasha often said she glided into a room. Everything about her had always been just so. She had been a good girl, then a proper young lady, then the dutiful wife and mother, transgressive was a foreign word to her.

"But you want to open up those shoulders and hips just a little

more.” Michael comes up behind Ellie to adjust her. His vertical chest presses against her horizontal torso, his left arm reaches under her left armpit to push back her right shoulder. He firmly places the fingers of his right hand on the inside of her right hip and presses, rotating her hips toward the ceiling. Michael holds Ellie like a guitar and opens her up.

The warmth from Michael’s body was emanating to hers, the tensile strength of his fingers felt like hot stones from a massage and Ellie felt another growing unease. The fire, the *shaucha*, she’d been trying to build all class long seemed to finally be working, as heat from the fringes of her body collected in her pelvis, traveling up her spine to the back of her neck and ultimately, an uncomfortable flush in her face. Ellie is a few years beyond hot flashes and menopause so it surprises her, but she swears that she feels herself get wet. She stumbles out of *ardha chandrasana*.

“Are you okay,” Michael asks.

“I’m just... feeling a little dizzy,” Ellie says, and excuses herself.

“Tish! Tish!” Jess screams and barges through Tish’s bedroom door, “I got the part!”

Tish sets down the manuscript she is reading on her iPad and hugs her roommate, “Congratulations! That’s great news.”

“Thanks! I know, right? I’m so excited! And like, I can not wait to give notice.”

“Wait. You’re quitting your job?”

“Of course, why wouldn’t I?”

“I uh... I don’t know. I just thought...”

What Tish thought was that Jess was out of her mind.

“You know, I just thought what if the show,” Tish struggles for the right words, “doesn’t work out. It’s almost impossible to have a hit show these days.”

Jess is a barista and aspiring singer/actress who has just been cast in *Blight*, a new off-Broadway musical about Typhoid Mary. Jess would be playing half of a doomed pair of paramours whose ballad, *Love is the*

Only Cure, closes the first act.

“*Thanks!*” Jess spits out. “I knew I could count on your support.”

“Jess, that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

The roommates had been fighting more and more lately. Fundamentally, Tish and Jess had always been frenemies, dancing delicately around the Venn diagram that was their relationship. At first, their intersection of commonalities seemed large enough to accommodate a budding friendship: smart, pretty Barnard girls who liked neo-soul music, *Pride and Prejudice*, and frozen yogurt. Now just a few years later, the outer circles of their respective differences seemed to be growing larger: Tish was black, Jess was white; Tish was from Raleigh, North Carolina, Jess was from the D.C. suburbs; Tish was lower-middle class, Jess was upper-middle class; Tish was a young professional, Jess was a hipster/artist; and perhaps most importantly, Tish was resentful and Jess was entitled. Aside from a few friends, their intersection of commonalities was shrinking at an alarming rate and now seemingly only included: being Barnard alum, and as roommates going on almost 4 years together, a menstrual cycle. Living in the real world had begun to cast their differences in a harsh new light, but the truth was that the intersection of what they had in common was never really that big to begin with.

“I just meant that maybe you should... think this through.”

“What makes you think I haven’t?”

“I just think it’s risky Jess, and I don’t want you to...”

“What? Take a risk?” Jess snaps, her eyes narrowing into slits. “You know Tish, some people take risks and don’t hole themselves up all day and night reading books and sitting in front of a computer. You should really get out more.”

“Fine! Quit your job. I’m sure everyone will be beating a path to see ‘Typhoid: The Musical,’” Tish’s hands mimic a marquee in lights above her head.

“I knew it! You’re so fucking judgmental and condescending,” Jess moves into the kitchen, unlocking the window, climbing half-out onto the fire escape and lighting an American Spirit. Romeo, Jess’ fawn-colored chihuahua bursts into the kitchen, roused by the noise. The words sting

Tish's ears, but they are not new to her. Judgmental? Condescending? How could she ever articulate and rationalize for others that the world *she* lived in was not the same, that she was being judgmental but only by *their* standards? Tish's logic and sense of being threatens to collapse upon themselves momentarily, and her very existence and justification of it is called into question because if life is lived and assessed by an elegant bell curve, there seemed to be little allowance or probability that someone inelegant like herself could be real, could exist in this world. She was beyond a standard deviation. She was an anomaly.

Tish and Jess had met in Ellie Hesser's freshman seminar "The Body Politic: Mapping Female Objectification in Post-War American Literature." The class was in the middle of reading Zora Neale Hurston's reclaimed novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

The topic soon turned to the protagonist's third husband, Tea Cake, and his physical abuse towards her, "Janie was always like, owned by men, you know? Passed around like property, right?" said a young woman, twirling her long brown hair with an index finger. "First her grandmother married her off to Killicks, where she was expected to be a laborer. It was a form of physical abuse and slavery saying, 'Your body is mine,' right? And then with Jody, there was prolonged emotional abuse, which was like saying, 'Your soul is mine,' right? Then Tea Cake with his physical abuse – the stakes keep getting higher and like, Janie's life and her body are never her own until she kills Tea Cake and is finally without any man. I think Hurston is saying that it's a patriarchal society and that women are commodified and degraded and will never be their own selves as long as they are tethered to men."

Tish was shifting in her seat, a sense of the self-censoring that her mother had instilled in her became unmoored. A well of courage and contempt began to grow in her, "Well, I sort of disagree," Tish said. "On some level, I think this is a love story between Tea Cake and Janie."

"What? How can you say that?" the brown-haired girl interjected.

Sitting on the edge of her desk, Professor Hesser straightened up, "Jess, let Tish continue," her head nodded ever so slightly.

"Well, in their world, it's an expression of love. This sense of

possession and belonging to someone else is primal and you can't intellectualize or project a different context onto it."

"But abuse is abuse. It doesn't matter what the *context* is," Jess' shoulders and voice rose in protest.

"But it's all *about* the context. She hit him first, it says it right there," Tish points to a page in the book and starts reading aloud. "She cut him short with a blow and they fought from one room to the other, Janie trying to beat him... till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance... You'se something tuh make uh man forgit tuh git old and forgit to die."

"I think jealousy is primal, regardless of race, or gender or orientation. And she was jealous and self-conscious and she wanted to feel the passion of his love for her, to make sure it was real. To have finally found the man that fulfilled all of her needs, that was too good to be true. So she doubts herself and Tea Cake's love for her, and you know, insecurity isn't confined to any specific group either. She wants affirmation from him, she wants to get slapped around."

All the shifting in seats, pen tapping and paper rustling came to a dead silence. "The Body Politic" was classified as an interdepartmental course between the English and Women's Studies departments and Tish had just uttered the words no one ever expected to hear.

At the time, Tish didn't realize the word and concept she was grasping for was relativism. She knew there were people who would try to tell you that there were some things that should have the same meaning for everyone, she had experienced it all her life; but it was often as if she were being spoken to in a foreign language. And she suspected it was a fallacy of arrogance and ignorance, two faults which shared a large intersection of commonality in their own Venn diagram; but relativism, whether Tish knew the word for it or not, was not something you necessarily learned in school.

"What?!" Jess' incredulity pierced the silence.

"I think you both make some interesting points," Professor Hesser said, "Let's pick this up next time. Tish, can I speak to you for a minute?" Jess left in a huff, a blur of brown hair and multiple bags slung over her shoulders.

“That was really great Tish. I’m glad to hear you speak up. I think the class could always use another perspective,” said Professor Hesser. “Do you know yet what you’re doing for your final project?”

“I’m not sure, probably something on Hurston. I really like her writing and her story is so... interesting.” For Tish, interesting was an understatement. She became a little obsessed with Zora Neale Hurston and wondered why she had never heard of or read her before that semester. Like Tish, Hurston had gone to Barnard, was from the South, had thrived and blossomed under the patronage of rich white people. The parallels sickened and fascinated Tish for the same reason: she was not alone. Hurston was like an inheritance nobody in her family knew of, as if her own family and people like them didn’t know they were related to royalty. Her final project for “The Body Politic” turned out to be a creative homage to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, an alternate ending where Janie tells off the gossipy and judgmental townspeople. Professor Hesser had Tish read aloud an excerpt to the class:

“Everybody thinkin’ theys lives is all that interesting or important for God, or anyone, to notice. Thinkin’ ‘Ah know pain,’ thinkin’ ‘Ah know sufferin’’. Y’all don’t even know yo’ mouf from yo’ asscrack, and dat de truth. Your eyes all so busy watching God, yuh dun see the Devil sneak right in through your back doors and sleep with your women and drink and gamble with your men, and damn your chillun for least ‘nother generation. All dis talk bout ‘save me,’ ‘have mercy on me,’ ‘thank de Lawd for dis, thank de Lawd for dat!’ Whatchu thankin’ him for? Well, is he gonna damn you or save you? All dis yammerin’ and teeter-totterin’ like some chillun’, runnin’ youselves into da ground. Yo’ God dun made a world of fools and anointed me its Queen.”

“Well, Ah have mah own God and he don’t like playin’ with yours, says he’s always down, sayin’ his people ask too much of him, whinin’ and moanin’, ‘Oh Lawd this, Oh Lawd that!’ So why doncha all do fuh yuhselfs and git off your moufs where your asses should be and help a brotha out! Mah God is lonesome and he needs somebody to play wid!”

When Tish had written the homage in a frenzied burst of inspiration over the course of one evening, she wondered where it was all coming from; it was as if she was channeling a black woman. As if... as if...

Then a torch was lit in a primordial cave, “You are a black woman! Yes. Yes, you are. And an angry one at that.” But Tish could not locate where the anger, dispossessed and free-floating, was coming from. Like relativism, its meaning and provenance had yet to make itself known to her.

At the end of that class, Jess came up to her and said, “That was really cool, how’d you come up with that? It was like, *so real*.” And thus began Tish and Jess’ Venn diagram dance.

“Oh come on, Jess! I’m just worried about you,” Tish coughs as a plume of cigarette smoke blows back from the window.

“Listen. I don’t tell you how to live your life,” Jess casts her eyes on the greasy cardboard box of fried chicken sitting on the counter, “don’t tell me how to live mine.”

What a hypocrite, Tish thought. When they first met Jess was a squeamish meat-eater, never touching anything on a bone. By the time they graduated she had become a vegetarian, and when Jess evolved into a full-on vegan, Tish often thought to herself that Jess had instead become a *proselytarian*. They had agreed that Jess keep her cigarette smoking contained to her own bedroom. In return, Tish would keep her kitchenware to small corners of the cupboards and drawers and her food on separate shelves in the refrigerator, as if Jess was an Orthodox Jew and Tish the milk, meat and all-animal-consuming Neanderthal. The day Jess announced Romeo would be vegan too, Tish almost lost it. In some parts of the world, the dog *was* the protein, Tish thought to herself, frustrated by Jess’ holier-than-thou-ness.

Tish looks at the box of fried chicken and touches her fingertips to her cheek, noting the acne scars and oil she knew were on her face. Jess picks strands of her long brown hair out of her mouth as she takes one last drag and exhales dramatically, “I’m out of here.”

In the wake of putrid cigarette smoke and a mass of brown hair heading out the front door, Tish pops open the box of chicken and instead of biting her tongue, chomps down vengefully on a drumstick. If a bite could kill... Romeo yips excitedly, he suffers no fools but one; he weaves in and out of her legs like a slalom skier, all the while looking up expectantly, ever optimistic.

“Fine! You little beggar,” Tish says, flinging a meaty piece of chicken to the floor, “at least one of you has some sense.”

Wolf pack in the Tenderloin at midnight

Celeste Chan

Walking up Hyde Street, wrappers litter the ground, wet from rain. “Hey Sweetheart,” comes a low, gravelly whisper, the disembodied voice from a car to the left. The four women keep walking, past the locked children’s playground, past the Gangway – SF’s oldest gay bar, past the New Century Theater with its promise of sparkling lights and dancing women, and then past rows of closed shops that look like dank confession booths. They cross on Post to Polk, past the sweet smell of fried dough at Katana-Ya, past an embroidered alleyway mural of peonies.

They stumble into line at Grubstake, waiting on the sidewalk until they are called in. API and queer, butch and femme and in-between. Hong Kong immigrant and Filipina mestiza, Bangladeshi and Chinese/Malaysian. They swill beer and swish their legs, clad in a swirl of black jeans and leather jackets, magenta velvet dress, teal rhinestones and a crusty polyester gown. Finally, they are eating a meal. They talk over turkey dinner and mashed potatoes. It is pride month in the city, this city of queer mythology. A buttery smell wafts from the kitchen. She sees onions curling up like sweet question marks. Sausages frying in a steel pan, flames fanning out blue halos. And then they are done.

Outside Grubstake, there is a glint of broken glass, lying silver in the ground. Brush against a beefy arm. Beer breath. Registers drunk white dude. She doesn’t remember the words spoken, only the sights and sounds. Tense arm gripping a corona bottle. Her friend, full of Butch swagger, doesn’t move. She sees the man’s tight jaw. His head, a giant pink Cabbage-patch doll, bald, pursed lips, atop a wrestler’s body. He reaches past her, puts a gleaming bottle between her friend’s legs. “Are you a man or a woman!” he says. Laughs. His two faceless friends laugh next to him, but they sound canned, hollow. Her friend doesn’t flinch. Grabs the bottle tightly. Holds it. If she needs a weapon.

He looks. Her friend still stands unmoving, in the doorway of Grubstake.

Four women, unmoving. She takes off her high heel, readies it with her hand. She remembers reading somewhere, that you could pierce a human heart with a heel. Used with force, the spiked stiletto could cut through flesh, through muscle. So she gets ready.

The Cabbage-patch man moves first, pushes past them. “Go back to Concord!” her friend yells. They are luckier than the New Jersey 4. Cabbage-patch and friends are a beige and faceless blur, pushing past the women and into the restaurant.

She needs to be in motion. Pulls her friends with her, to embrace the Tenderloin streets at midnight. Drunken heart, crushed. For what almost happened. For what didn't happen. They are morphing. From women to wolf pack, swallowing the night sky. Deviant and defiant.

A Weird Blue Moment

PJ Carlisle

Angel-Yu

. . . calls a taxi to take her to down to the Wedge. The guy behind the plastic wall tells her Al is dead; they've got new owners now. Sorry, no, he's never seen Manny. He doesn't allow eleven-year-old kids in his strip joint, (which is a lie. We just need to tell you right now that Manny's been there before with Cid. But he hasn't danced. Cid said he was too clumsy. He needs a few more years for that). The underage thing makes the plastic-wall guy feel sleazy about himself . . . but Al started it years back in the eighties. And the plastic-wall guy, who really is the new owner but doesn't like to tell people his business, knows the money is too good to quit.

The bartender gives Angel-Yu a drink on the house. He has a son in fourth grade, nine-years old. That's the part he tells the cops, Lt. Duse and Officer Grind, who come asking the same questions later that night. The bartender feels sorry for her. Angel-Yu is blonde and white, or whiteish at least, and he's racist like everyone else in America. He identifies more easily with the white girls on the strip, the ones who might be his daughter. The daughter who is eighteen now. She's the daughter his wife claimed he inappropriately touched one night at the end of a week-long binge. They got their divorce. But he misses his kids. Really, he does. His heart's broke. Lost kids? he can identify with that. He even lets Angel-Yu use the phone to call home.

—Manny's not here, she says into the receiver. Nobody's here.

But we're sitting at the dark tables along the walls; we're standing invisible at her shoulder. We watch her watching the pole dancer in the back bar mirror: smooth, sexy, upside down now, white knuckles and bent knee around the pole, she points her toes, loses her grip, slides a few inches too far toward the floor. For a second she's awkward, like a kid on a swing. Angel-Yu closes her eyes.

Jamilla isn't talking as usual.

Angel-Yu imagines the hard black spots at the inside bend of Jamilla's arms. Pushes that image away too. Tries to picture Jamilla like she was when they first met. Back on 42nd Street when they were making big bucks. That first summer. Jamilla borrowed Cid's convertible. Like a boy in her white tank top, changing lanes with a curse to the sideview mirror, cruising slow through the seething late-night traffic.

Cid and Jamilla went a long way back; she ran his Times Square track. On the streets since she was fifteen. Angel-Yu, just barely surviving hadn't been in New York more than a year when they met, was waitressing here and there. Her one pair of jeans almost worn through at the knees, hustling spare change.

—You looking at me, lover girl? Jamilla said, cut off men's flannel, a four-dollar barber cut. Drives the supposedly-hetero Johns wild.

Like love at first sight for Angel-Yu. The way Jamilla looked into her eyes. As if she'd been waiting there for that moment, on that corner, forever. Almost shy to take it up now that it had come. But maybe they were always meant to take it up. Again and again.

—Go for a ride? Jamilla said.

They drove down 5th Avenue and around Washington Square. Pulled over to smoke and talk to the regulars. Got a real Thai-stick off of an ancient rollerskating hippy who said he'd brought them in from Amsterdam. They slipped by the front desk of the NYU Union and took the elevator to the roof. Angel-Yu leaned out over the cement balcony and looked down through the trees until Jamilla had to grab her. Jamilla used to giggle. They folded slices of sausage, garlic pizza into each other's mouths at Lombardi's to kill the munchies. Shared a king-size Dr. Pepper. . . .

The pole dancer recovers, stubborn, does the splits even wider now that she has something to prove. On the phone Jamilla takes in some air. Sounds like crying, maybe drinking, maybe taking a drag.

—Just get rid of the stuff, baby, flush it down the toilet, Angel-Yu says.

She promises she'll keep looking for Manny of course, but she has to get back to work or Cid'll have all their hides. She'll get a trick to take her past Inocensio Casanova P.S. 62, Manny's school. She'll stop into all

the late night hotspots, the diners and clubs.

Jamilla's quiet, maybe pissed, maybe rolling another joint.

—I'll find him, Angel-Yu says. It's good that he's not here at the Wedge, right?

Al's had been a long shot. Manny'd mentioned the place during dinner. They'd heard rumors about underage dancers.

Jamilla is too quiet now. When Angel-Yu realizes the phone's disconnected she hands it back to the bartender. He shrugs and puts it under the bar.

Damn Cid and his cut. She finishes her drink. Her next date is waiting at the door. She turns on the camera in her mind. It's like a strange HBO documentary, her life. Only weirder, because no one is watching, she thinks. She doesn't know that we're watching. We're there. We're as close as her thoughts.

Scene 1: A Weird Blue Moment

Switch Point, The Bronx, just after dark. Shadowy figures hunch in an alleyway . . . the silhouette of a whore giving blowjobs to the pedestrian crowd . . . bouncing cars park along the riverfront in the fog . . . cop cars blip . . . hookers run.

We hear diesel engines gear down and scream. CLOSE UP ON: rows of truck tires. Semis peel up the gritty, wet street and fling it in a spray. WIDEN OUT: to see the spray whip against our beloved Angel-Yu. Bare skin. Too bare. Everything blue.

CUT TO: various angles on streams of headlights . . . semis like mirrors reflecting . . . semis from the Cross Bronx Expressway as they merge with the Bruckner. Semis lean around the Sheridan's exit ramp. Surge and seize and surge again through Switch Point's streets like lazy fat farm rats in a maze made for skinny, hopped-up experimental lab mice. Semis stop in front of bodegas, chicken joints. Drivers run in for a bite. Semis roll slow through intersections. Hydraulic brakes sigh at the half-dressed whores. Semis converge on, and depart from, the 60-acre market. 55,000 trips through this neighborhood per week. The largest market in the world. Long lots and warehouses on the peninsula's eastern coast where thousands more semis are parked double

thick for overflow refrigeration and storage. Huge employee parking lots full of cars. Meat workers in shiny coveralls and hairnets headed home. Dockworkers load their last crates.

Almost nobody feels it. Unless they're above ground-level . . . above the crescendo of street noise . . . people who stand on rooftops for instance or in open-air garages, or sit in upper-floor windows looking out . . . only these are conscious of the weird blue moment.

Not our Angel-Yu, as she continues on her way to the west side, wiping gritty spray from her arms and her white vinyl get-up with a wad of napkins from the bodega. She's mired in the muck and Slough of Despond. O You! please don't judge her. Don't say it's self-pity. It's reality. She's been walking for blocks and seen no one. It isn't until she turns the corner onto Tiffany Street that she spots one other woman up ahead of her, winding her way. Beyond that stumbling figure the West End is nothing but low warehouses and junk lots. A few bars. Dangerous. More dangerous than the Market district. More abandoned. Angel-Yu does the slow sidewalk stroll. The thought of Manny out there on the streets is killing her. Nothing like a lost kid. She works her way southwest through the maze of mostly empty streets. Empty, except for . . .

The Nighttime Inhabitants of Switch Point

. . . everything still tinted in that strange blue light . . . this whole night will be one long moment, divided only by an arbitrary series of weird images like a sequence of camera angles and shots. People pose for the camera and hold it . . . awkward . . . almost painful to be caught, but wanting to be caught, as if for a Victorian photographer dependent on their stillness. She imagines a title card at the bottom of each:

The Guys Who Hunch Outside Junkyards On Stacked Tires

. . . graffitied stockade fenceline barely holds back the stacks of deconstructed cars and parts behind. A three-man crew drink coffee and talk about work, girlfriends, their latest ride, the parts they still need to make her sweet. Barely notice the rain, which lightens to a drizzle sometimes. Sometimes to a mist. One holds up a bill between

two fingers. Wears blue coveralls with his company logo over his heart. Horn-rimmed glasses make him retro-fifties. Crooked teeth but gorgeous regardless. His forearms black with the blood of these wrecks: grease, oil, and other fluids.

The Guys Who Lean at Street Corners

. . . elbows . . . hands . . . drugs . . . cash . . . grins . . . frozen . . . stretched out and shameless, caught in the dirty process of pleasurable exchange.

The Guy Who Slumps In His Lowrider

. . . chrome-spoked, tricked-out hopper with truck-gates, hydraulics, drag pipes, and curb-finders. The top half of his head and face framed in the window. His eyes dark. Mysterious even. A few springy curls spill out from his black dew rag.

The Guy Who Passes Her Twice

. . . in a Lux Sedan. Corporate lawyer-type. Leans out his window and tries to cut a deal. All the cash he has. Not enough.

The Poor Guy Who Lets Her Keep His Bottle

. . . instead of the cash he said he had. She holds the whiskey in her mouth on her tongue until it burns. She used to need the hard stuff to do it; but one junkie per family is enough. Angel-Yu kicks when Jamilla gets hooked. Does the methadone thing; even tries NA for a while, but they want her to quit the pot and booze too.

The Odd-Looking Guy In Orange

. . . stumbles out of the Barry Street Bar. Orange beard. Orange hair. Orange suit. Even his skin looks a little orange. With a clunky thirty-ounce transportable cellular phone, state of the art in its day. Just the rich guys have phones. This one holds his between his cheek and his shoulder. Talks to his sweetheart or wife. A briefcase in one hand, offers his joint with the other, still talking on the phone. Angel-Yu leans against him to keep the front of him warm while he finishes his conversation. (Believe it or not, she'll slip that phone right out of his

jacket pocket later while they're doing it. Not an easy feat. He won't even notice it missing when he takes out his wallet).

The Guy Who Hides His Wallet

. . . in the mesh pocket behind the passenger seat because he thinks it's the last place she'll reach while he's banging away.

The Guy Who Hides His Wallet

. . . in the trunk. The kind of rich guy she used to see all the time on 42nd street before Cid moved them out to Switch Point. She tells him to turn at the light, steers him over to the warehouses on Hallek where the truckers are lined up two deep, sleeping. Who swears he has only the amount of money he offered her, not a dime more. Who drops his keys he's trembling so bad.

The Guy Who Doesn't Mean to Hurt Her, But He's Paid for This Thrill

The Family Guy from Dutchess County Who Drives Down

. . . every weekend in his Green SUV because his wife won't blow him. And he deserves it. He deserves it all, and every which way.

The Hip Young Guy Who Calls Her a Working Girl

. . . who says it's a lifestyle choice and she's chosen it. Good for her.

The Guy Who Wants To Kiss Her

. . . who doesn't want to hear that there is no way to do this thing except high out of your mind. Because even the . . .

Guy She Likes

. . . the one who reminds her of Ray, the one who looks a little like Jesus with the halo and everything . . . even he doesn't know the way out . . . only knows the way in . . . tips her head and holds it burning to her lips; breathe it in, baby, he says. Take a breath . . . keep breathing . . . it's the only way to slip into that darkness.

Nighttime Places of Switch Point

Her back to the fence outside Drake's Cemetery. Alone. Mesmerized by the sound of the cell phone . . . Jamilla finally answers.

—You're so good, Ang, she says, thick as honey. —Cid stopped with more stuff, something new he calls AxCM. Says he'll be back for his money later.

Angel-Yu rests the phone on the fence without hanging up. Jamilla's voice like a bumblebee's hum. Fixes her makeup in the dark plate-glass window of Mary's Luncheonette. Lets the ripples in the glass change her face. She'll throw the dope out if she has to.

The Wall

. . . of the Monastery runs for blocks, thirty- or forty-feet high, treetops rise above. Tiffany Street and Lafayette. Across the street the Charter School in the old factory looms up against the sky, a few lights on inside. Rumor has it a couple of queens, literary-types, have rented a whole floor, are planning an art center, a theater, a new home for the Alvin Ailey troupe someday. Prodigal sons. The night is like a mirror, reflecting on and on. The sin of her life: being born a girl. The life itself, her life? just life. The goddamn sin is the unfairness. The rich get rich, the poor get fucked. She feels the flame inside her struggle hard against her fate. Be a hero, she whispers. No guide or map. Step into the wilderness. There are people who need you.

Huge branches hang over above her. The only real trees in the area reach up into the sky. The wind blows hard. We need her. We're there. So close.

DISSOLVE TO: another time. Another nighttime place. One she carries with her wherever she goes. Even here in the Bronx. Northern Quebec on Tiffany Street. Don't tell us we can't be two places at once. The trees above the wall are the woods out the bedroom window of her father's sporting lodge, Obatagama Lake. She hears his whisper right in her ear,

—you get lost in these woods you won't ever come out. The bears are wild hungry for girls like you.

Sometimes she fishes the river. She and her little brother, Ray, push through the brush at the top of the riverbank, climb down to the edge of the water near the bridge. She can do it with her eyes closed. Always the same. The river is high and fast, the falls a hundred feet beyond, the sound continuous, powerful, blocks out all other sounds, other thoughts. She stands at the edge; she wades in and strips out her line. Feels young and smart. Knows just where the fish are, behind which rock, in which tail-out or pool. Can manage a fishing rod as well as any boy.

Or sometimes she's the fish itself. She can become a GodDamn fish if she wants, sleek and submerged, waiting in the shadows, against the current, but not going anywhere. The jerk, the pull, she tries to hold still, doesn't fight.

She feels for the cash in the top of her boot, damp from her sweat and the wet night air. Takes it out and counts it. All there. ThankGod. Sees the car pull up behind her from the corner of her eye. Slips the cash back in slow. He passes by. Looking. He'll come back around.

1:00 AM, Angel-Yu makes her way north to call Jamilla again. No phone booths on the west side. She has her next date drop her off at the Chinese Chicken. Payphone just inside the glass doors. She makes her calls quick before the manager can throw her out: a shiny-faced kid who watches her, nervous. Still no Manny. Angel-Yu doesn't want to involve Cid, but she figures if she plays him right he might cut her some slack. Maybe even help look. At least keep his eyes open on his rounds. She calls his pager. He rings back on the pay phone. The manager kid steps out around the counter, picking his pimply face.

—Hey, baby, Angel-Yu says.

She holds up a finger, one minute, to the manager. She tries to sound upbeat. Tells Cid she's made a shitload of money for him. She misses him; she knows she'll get further with honey. She tells him about Manny. How she's afraid Child Protection will take him.

—Where are you? he says. I've been looking for you. Meet me at your place in an hour. I'll take care of everything.

—Move on, the manager says, kinda whiney.

She's clear across the Point. Needs a ride or she'll be late meeting Cid. Forces down the last of the whiskey in the empty parking lot. She needs one more trick. A guy in love enough afterwards to take her home.

It's like going back into battle. She does her makeup in the drive-thru's convex mirror: cerulean blue, ebony black, cherry red, high gloss, high femme. She heats a pencil in the flame of a lighter to sharpen the edges. Checks her teeth, slips a finger between her lips to blot the center. It's all about armor. That's what she'd told the female doctor at the clinic, the one who always asks her about it. She likes the doctor's pretty eyes; no make-up, all natural. The way she looks away, then has to look back. Angel-Yu wants to kiss her. Ruin those perfect, pale lips.

—You put on the right face, the right armor, and it keeps up the illusion. Buys you time to study theirs. Street-wise doesn't mean shit, just maybe you'll be able to read the signs; you'll be able to tell *before* you get in the car that the guy is a psycho, means to drag you off somewhere.

The woman doctor's smart; so nice it hurts. None of the whores go to the clinic until they're desperate. Can't stomach all the niceness.

—So you're a hero, the doctor says. —Is that what you're trying to tell me?

So smart. Makes Angel-Yu smile again to remember it.

—A superhero. But then you'll tell yourself anything when you're in the shit. When you need the next drink more than you need your skin. When your lover's kid waits up for your cash. Has to hide it from you for rent, not that video game he wants. A superhero. And the drink takes the drink. You finish the bottle, that's how it always is. And then the rest of the night is in bits and pieces between blackouts.

—Your life could be different, the doctor says.

O You! People say things like that without thinking.

—Sure, Sweetheart, Angel-Yu says —give me your parents; give me one chance at college and I'll show you how different. Come on; take me home, Doc. All I need is a bath.

A Subaru wagon, Connecticut plates, stays put at the traffic light. Bumper sticker "Baby on Board." He falls in love as planned, but wants

to talk in the afterglow. By the time she gets back to the apartment it's 2:15. Cid's van isn't there in his spot out front. The John needs change, if she has it.

O You! People can't see the forest for the trees, where their privilege comes in and their judgment steps out. Most people, even smart people, are content to just mouth the things they've heard, empty words: keep it simple; easy does it; but for the grace of God. . .

Inside the building Angel-Yu does the six flights slow, unlocks the door and steps in. The kitchen windows are wide open. Cold wind in gusts. Cid's not there. Manny's not there. Angel-Yu looks down through the fire escape grate. The rain swirls in the streetlights a block over. It's empty and dark in the courtyard cut.

The night she left Canada the rain was blowing in front of the headlights. Her father had a group of men in the woods. Spring bear hunt. She went with them. That was her plan. In her backpack only a pop-tarts variety pack, a canteen of water, rope, her compound bow. Anything else and her father would have suspected.

—Wait for me to come back. Don't wander off, he says.

The hunters nod. They feel helpless. They've totally put their lives in his hands. Sight down the shaft of an arrow; check the blade of a hunting knife. She can see they're scared, dropped off one-by-one at their treestands. Grown men afraid of the dark. Afraid to be alone in the woods. Miles of thick dark woods between them.

And then it's her turn to be dropped.

—Kill one this time, her father says. —It'll look good in the brochure. Even girls get bears at Obatagamau Lodge.

All by herself, miles from camp, in the middle of nowhere.

She'd seen plenty of bear that night. Not getting lost had been the trick.

Eleven-years old. She hadn't had the guts to leave until she was seventeen.

Just Inside the Switch Point Subway Station

Manny Villareal uses the railing to take two stairs at a time. He's never been out this late at night, alone. He stands in front of the spot. A

ten-foot billboard flat as a page. It used to be a Coca Cola ad before its cherry was busted by the POBoiz. Then it said: "POBoiz Slappin." 3-D, blended shading, semi-wild-style, eight def colors, puzzled letters, arrows and stars . . . a beautiful piece. Manny paid the subway fare twice that first day just to go down and see it. Before school and after. Were they his heroes? Sure. They were his heroes. The place was high profile. It took nine months for the Giz-gang to wipe it out. Some dude named Flax smeared a swath down the center for his throw-up: Flax and Wax. Bad cartoon of a bare-assed girl, mostly pale skin tone and heavy black outline. Lots of runs and holidays . . . pure amateur, lost control on the A, couldn't tuck the left arm of the X back behind. Only the ass looked pumped. All the Giz-gang signed around it . . . just pure go-overs, fuck-you to the Boiz. And the Boiz could never reclaim the ground. High risk. Security watching now.

Manny sorts all his colors inside his pack, straps the thing on backwards over his belly where he can grab them: Rusto, Krylon, the Devil. Light to dark. He takes his time; there's no hurry. No one ever sees him. He knows it now for sure, now that the POBoiz rejected him. Beat the crap out of him after school in the courtyard cut. No one watches over us. No one's listening. No one cares.

Manny snaps the cap off a can with the key around his neck: Quik-Dri White; lays the base out in patches. If he uses what's there, if he thinks, works his stuff on top of the layers underneath . . . he can do solo.

He holds his thumb down on the fat spray-tip, wide-angle. Watches the tags disappear underneath. Going over the go-overs. The hiss is like fire burning through. His hand a flame. Start fresh. He edges a backcloud. Sketches the outline. Rough-blocks the letters. By the time the six train burst through, the board screams **EvOL Is KiNg**. Train brake screams back. He hardly hears it. He's scrawling a bite-tribute to the POBoiz 80s-style. Cid's toons. The linking letters, the rainbow bursts. His own green face blurbed up in the middle. The train empties out behind him. He's a blinding speed genius. No one can touch him.

—What you think you're doing, dawg? a guy in Hilfiger says.

High, Manny's just a doped-out vision. But he won't tell anyone.

Manny doesn't care if he does. Maybe he'll even pull his knife; make the cops shoot him dead. The Hilfiger guy stands behind him on the platform. Burns a joint. Watches as Manny fills and fades the letters in shades of gem-blue flame. It's more than a throw up, it's a full out wildstyle. He's flying by the seat of his pants. Never let anyone watch you work, Cid says. Bad luck. But now he leaves Cid behind, fuck Cid; risk everything. The bubbles and blurts in brown and gray and green, dirty, street-tough combination. 3-D highlights. Gold crown. A piece in the making.

—Policeman comes, a lady whispers in his ear.

Makes him jump. The Hilfiger guy's gone. The lady pulls a dirty rag from her sleeve. Dabs her nose with something,, maybe a hanky once, limp lace hanging down. Three loose sweaters over a thin flowered dress. Neck as dirty brown as her brown legs. The grime in each crack of her wrinkled hands. Flopped socks. Guy's shoes.

—Jacques? she says, —is it you, mon frère?

—No, Manny says. —I'm nobody. You're seeing things again.

She smells like rat, dragging her pillowcase full of who knows what, but smiles.

—Keep it sweet, she says.

Manny nods, if it makes her happy. —Thanks for the warning.

He watches her climb the stairs back out. *Dormez-vous, ding-dang-dong* . . . To hell with the fucking cops. He's almost done. Reaches down deep for the skinny-cap-black-boy: second outline. Steady hand needed, movements quick and sure. The first four letters E-v-O-l going up without a glitch, crisp black cut. He hears the voices come down the stairs at the other end of the platform. Cops or subway officials. It doesn't matter. Just a nobody. Invisible. They won't see him. He focuses on the hiss. Hits the S a bit too slow, too thick. Like a snake, it comes alive. He glances back at it. Don't ever look back, that's Cid's motto. But it's too late. The black snake streams into tears, alive and bleeding. He tries to stop it with his fingers, thick black blood, wipes his hands against his sweatshirt. Uses his sleeves to stob at the drips. Smears the blue into the red, everything streaked and smudged in seconds. Everything falls. He drops the can to the pavement. It

bounces and rolls in a clatter. He grabs another fat tip, any color, just needing coverage. The cop at his shoulder yells something in Manny's ear.

—Hands in the air.

But we know he won't do it. He can't ever do it. Just like us. Can't follow orders. Can't *ever* follow orders. When the POBoiz come down they'll see it here, a messed strike. They'll say to each other how he was a real live weirdo, his tagname right there, "EvOl," the name he told them before they jammed their fists in his gut, the name everyone knows is completely psycho. Instead of up in the air, he holds out his arm and lays a quick go-over. Metallic copper. Instead of hands up, he puts his hands in the paint and smears.

The cop lifts his club. Thinks about hitting the punk in front of him hard, one sharp crack. Has every intention. These dirty hoods and their fucking paint. Make a mess of the world. Graffiti. Stuff spreads like disease. He yanks the punk's head by the hood but the hair catches him back. It's light. Straight up. He has kids with that hair. A daughter; bit of a troublemaker too.

—What are you doing? he says.

—Fuck you, the kid says and spits.

But the cop doesn't take him down, just knees him soft in the back and locks his hands in the cuffs.

—Motherfucker, the kid says on the way up to the street; but the cop doesn't shove him.

Under the streetlight he can see the kid's face, see the features mixed up, dark and light.

—What's your name, son? he says.

Manny feels for the knife in his back pocket. Opens the blade with just his thumb. The thought of it made him giggle.

—Evol, he says.

Railroad Flat, Brick Walkup, Switch Point

In the front room, Jamilla sits cross-legged on the futon, slumped all the way over. Even stinking high on a weeklong binge she's a headache.

The full moon just hangs there in the bare bedroom window behind her. First time Angel-Yu has seen it all night. Who looks up anymore in the USA? All the sheets hung for curtains are ripped down from their nails. Even when Angel-Yu touches Jamilla she doesn't straighten up; just tips slow to the side, curled fetal, naked, lit in relief. Opens her eyes though. She's alive.

—Where's my lovergirl? Jamilla says.

Like a song. Like she might just break into a hymn. Angel-Yu feels the heat push up in her. It doesn't make sense that Jamilla can do such a thing with just her voice. Make such passion. Jamilla calls it Love. But Angel-Yu can hardly believe it. Long before they met, she'd lost everything fragile like that.

—Come on, Angel-Yu says. We have to get you up before Cid gets back.

Angel-Yu helps Jamilla to the bathroom, gets her into the tub, has to keep lifting her up out of the water.

In those early days, Jamilla used to dance. Gypsy king on the sidewalk, scarves tied everywhere. Gypsies were part of why Angel-Yu had headed off to the Big Apple in the first place. She'd stowed away on the bus down to Trois Rivières, snagged a trucker in Quebec to get her across the border. The whole train ride along the Hudson, she'd imagined herself as something wonderful: an artist maybe, or a supermodel. Not the names her father called her, but a gypsy. By the time she met Jamilla she knew better. Already felt ancient.

Angel-Yu gets a T-shirt over Jamilla's head, pulls her arms through like a kid; half limp, lazy, Jamilla tries to plant kisses. She's forgotten about Manny again. Propped in a kitchen chair. Angel-Yu hands her the hairpick.

—Who's gonna do this for me when I'm old? Jamilla says. My momma warned me about white girls. Don't know a damn thing about real hair.

—Fuck you, Angel-Yu says.

—I've been thinking, Jamilla says, I'm going to get a job at that nice herbal shop in the West Village. That one you like.

—Put some pants on.

Angel-Yu looks for the ashtray. Finds the lighter under an old plate of Spaghetti-O's.

—Let's go to Canada, Ang. We'll find Manny and go tonight. You can show us your old haunts. Make Manny an early draft-dodger.

—You've got one sneaker and one boot, Angel-Yu says, holding up each. —Why do you always just kick them wherever?

—Cid comes here sometimes, Jamilla says, —when we're gone. To see Manny.

—Put that shoe on; at least you've got one. We'll pull your sweat pants right

over it.

—I got a call tonight, from a waitress friend. Jamilla uses her long toes to pick up a gameboy cartridge from the rug, holds the thing suspended in the air, then drops it. —She told me it's true. That Cid takes him.

—Keep your mouth shut this time, Angel-Yu says. I'll get him to help us.

Jamilla takes another back-handed drag off her cigarette, looks up at the ceiling.

—A couple weeks ago this old whore comes into her club with a kid, Jamilla says. Little girl in just a long t-shirt and panties. Platforms. They sit down at the bar. Won't budge.

—Is this a joke? Give me that shoe.

Angel-Yu takes Jamilla's cigarette and stubs it out in the ashtray.

—No, seriously, Jamilla says, —she knows Cid. Says they're meeting him.

—So some old whore knows Cid. Big surprise.

Angel-Yu ties Jamilla's hightop, wraps the laces around her ankle.

— . . . the little girl is just sitting there swinging her legs like a baby, sucking on the sleeve of her T-shirt. The old one says she's Cid's cousin, says he has her breaking in runaways from the country, somewhere upstate. No...Vermont. And then she mentions Manny.

—Our Manny?

The second shoe is behind the leg of the table.

—She describes him to a tee. Light hair. Pretty eyes. Hangs out

with Cid.

—Maybe she met him at school. Who told you this?

—Christ, honey. You're so stupid sometimes. That girl doesn't go to school. Besides, my friend says they both knew Manny. The old one too. They met him down at Al's.

—Al's, Angel-Yu repeats.

She finishes tying the second shoe. Stands up.

—I stopped in there. . . . No kids, they said.

— he doesn't dance, says the one. O, he dances, says the other. No, he just sits there with Cid in a booth. Doesn't dance. Draws people in a black notebook the whole time. Amazing stuff. That's how I knew it had to be our Manny.

Angel-Yu goes into the bathroom. Flings the wet towels out behind her.

—the MotherFuckers.

Jamilla yells from the kitchen. It's hard to hear her. She tries to yell louder, coughs, half chokes, coughs some more. Angel-Yu goes to the bathroom doorway. Still at the table, Jamilla has her head hanging, her arms on her knees, two deep dimples over her ass. The sight makes Angel-Yu ache. Too damn skinny.

That first night they met, Jamilla brought her home. Had both their pants unzipped in the hall. Angel-Yu had her hand down the back of Jamilla's jeans, her fingertips in those dimples. Manny was four. He was standing there waiting inside the door. Didn't see anything. Just lost a tooth. Had it wrapped up in a Kleenex. Jamilla went up and down the block. Had to find a silver dollar from the tooth fairy. Finally got the guy at the corner bodega to call his wife. A lot of the whores Angel-Yu met over the years had kids. Occupational hazard. Woke you up in the middle of the night whining, always needed something. Angel-Yu never liked kids. The next morning she figured she'd just move on. But seven years later she hadn't left yet. The kid was part of the package. Maybe the whole thing had grown on her. The stupid things he did.

He'd find his way home. He knew the streets. She'd taught him the subways, the boroughs, how to tell east and west by the buildings' shapes against the sky. She and Ray weren't even ten years old the time

they got lost fishing. He was the sweet one, but she was supposed to be the smart one. Could have been the end of them both. Didn't note the landmarks. For hours they motored panicked through channels surrounded by trees, one lake to the other, every one exactly the same, an island here, a boulder there, an odd tree jutting up from the rest, everything a sign they'd seen before maybe, but from a different angle. No tent, no blanket, no matches, just a few raw pike on the stringer. A couple fishing rods. They were out of gas and drifting when they spotted the power lines. Those black skeletons against the purple evening sky. Monsters, her father called them. As if gutted bear and moose weren't scary enough for kids without a mom. Kids whose mom just up and left them.

—Come here, Jamilla says. She gets up but can barely walk. — You've stuck in there through it all with that kid, my kid. Me.

Jamilla is coming down; the high slipping away.

—You're so fucking strong . . . for a chick, Jamilla says.

O You! We know it's sentimental. But that's how people are in private. When they love each other.

—I'm a GodDamn Amazon, Angel-Yu says.

But she feels a hundred years old.

Jamilla hangs on like they're both on their way to the bottom. Dead weight. Angel-Yu wants to let go; but she just goes on holding her until Jamilla relaxes.

Then she grabs a fresh pack of smokes from the carton in the freezer, fills two glasses with ice; cracks a fresh bottle of whiskey.

—I don't care what you say about Cid, Jamilla says. —He's a dead man. He's fucking with the wrong whore.

Something about Jamilla's jealous love. She never gives up on the things she loves. Not ever. Even though she gives up on herself every day. She walks back to the front room and lays down on the futon. Glares at Angel-Yu over the rim of her glass, swears softly into the liquid.

It makes Angel-Yu relax. —I'm so damn tired, baby, she says.

Jamilla reaches out and play-yanks Angel-Yu down. Her brown mouth on her glass. She lets the liquor wet it, slip over her parted lips. Holds Angel-Yu flat with one hand, touches her forehead, rubs the stress

above her brows.

—I'm with you there, Jamilla says.

And suddenly she is really there, for the first time in months, come alive behind her eyes, in the blue light, like an ember, like a flicker, like a flame sprung up; and then she's inside, sliding her fingers through Angel-Yu's darkness. Biting her neck and shoulders. All the painful places are fixed, kissed.

O You! We know we should look away, leave the room, but . . .

Jamilla lifts her up, leans full against her, rocks, bites, takes things into her mouth that are sore and clamps down, overrides the unsupported memories. Angel-Yu watches the blue light on the ceiling fill the spaces between shadows, like waves from beneath; we can't leave now that we've felt it, now that we've seen it, what people do, how they open into something . . . she opens to Jamilla's salty scent, to Jamilla's open mouth, to the muscles in her shoulders as she holds her weight back. Angel-Yu wants a bright light to burst through her, a fierce shock to part her like the sea, then to hold her there, forcefully, as she pushes against it; the stillness is too much for her, no, a force that meets hers without overtaking, that builds and parts and builds.

—You come back, she says, like a funny command, maybe after the fact. Maybe that's not what she meant. She's not sure. So we're not sure. Only sure of wanting to push against the fullness.

This is where we meet, in the place at the bottom, sinking into the silt and sand, crawling forward, we rush now. Will pull each other forward while the walls of water pile up either side. This is what a butch does that no one else does. She says that in her mind. We feel it. No one can take from her what only she can give. Her pain is her own. Take what they may. Money, blood . . . no one can touch where the nails have driven in, put their hand in the lash, to believe, and make her feel like the soil at her roots, the spaces between, are full to teeming, are talking silently, nourished, that sweet taste of fruit on her tongue. This is what she told us later. When she finally could put it into words: No one else goes voluntarily into exile like this. No one else takes her hand in the dark as they go.

Moments. Hours. We all wake from sleep. Footsteps on the stairs. Too heavy for Manny. It's Cid. Dropping in like Satan.

Quand Tu Dors Près de Moi

Vesper to Amun; The Morning After the Masquerade Ball

—
Roberto Santiago

Sleepyhead, why should we fear the rain
or the sound it makes?

Rain fears nothing. Dives towards the earth
like the answer to a prayer.

It falls in love wherever it lands. Filling
up, wearing down, and taking shape.

Sleepyhead, rest your neck. There is no one
here to peer between the blinds.

Fallen behind the dawn, there is only day. There is no one
here to raise you from down and shuffled limbs.

There are no longer seasons, or clouds,
nor are there forecasts or weathermen.

There is no remorse or regret in certainty.
Here to me you are. Under the influence of rain.

The Cavalier Nature of Electricity

Vesper on Amun; the Morning Before the Wedding

Roberto Santiago

Sometimes he stands beside me until I notice
him the way one notices their daydreams
swelling above a professor as he lectures.

I notice everything about the way he touches my shoulder.
The way he grazes my arm and surrenders his hand. Static
jolts from his gaze whenever he laughs and reaches over

to rest his hand on my promise of skin, each time
a moment longer than the last, but never for too long.
Just long enough to prove he is there.

And I here. Amperes and atoms. Fleshy-meekness,
opposable thumbs and the current that flows between
us accountable-animals.

Two Terrible Ladies

Jenna Leigh Evans

They hadn't expected sleaze at their romantic getaway, but sleazy it was. The motel's parking lot was crazed with cracks, and loose tiles flapped from the carport roof. Huddled into the shelter of a payphone, a woman with fried blonde hair was cursing into the receiver and blowing jets of smoke out of her nose. Claudia and Leonie looked at her, and they looked at each other. "Well, this ought to be good," Leonie said.

The key to their room jammed in the lock at first; then they were greeted by an unpleasant smell wheezing out of a vent in the wall. Because they had been dating for a very short while, this was all tremendously funny. Leonie lay back on the bed, looking very sweet and winsome with her tawny hair fanned around her face, cheeks flushed, her blue eyes set off prettily by her blue dress. Claudia rested her head on Leonie's stomach and let the little wavelets of happiness come.

Leonie sighed. "I feel absolutely filthy."

"I don't mind at all," Claudia assured her.

When Leonie smiled, her pupils dilated like a cat's. While she repaired to the bathroom, Claudia burrowed with langour into the snarl of bedspread. Among the floral mayhem of its pattern, which looked like gigantic cabbage roses hurling themselves against smaller cabbage roses, she discerned a menstrual bloodstain, a labial Rorschach blot. She reflected that the pattern must have been chosen to mask just such stains.

Leonie emerged, mouth foaming with toothpaste. "I'm running us a bath," she said temptingly.

But the water was cold.

Some hours later they staggered out of a bar and into the thick seaside mist, drunk as lords. They could not really see where they were going and did not especially care, since they were getting excited by pointing out how dangerous a match they likely were for one another. They began a rapid exchange of the many awful things they had done to past lovers.

"Opened mail!" Leonie said.

“Cut up clothes!”

“Read diary!”

“Slashed tires!” Claudia said. She had been going to say something worse but changed it just in time.

“You realize if we stay together, we’ll both end up in prison!” Leonie said gaily. Which was not quite true; only one of them would. They came upon a pole festooned with streamers of yellow CAUTION tape, and Leonie tied one in a jaunty bow around her neck. Claudia bandaged her wrist with another. Joining hands, they stumbled off the curb.

When they rounded the next corner, their eyes were dazzled by klieg lights. A circus was packing up for the night behind the civic center, filling the loading docks with heaps of reeking sawdust. An ill-tempered-looking woman strode by them, flicking a whip against her boot. She was followed by a black terrier, who leapt expertly into the cab of a horse trailer bearing the legend THE SVITLANDERS. That must be Mrs. Svitlander, horsey people are always ill-tempered, thought Claudia.

The ladies peered into the windows of the Svitlander’s trailer. The horses’ eyes were pale blue, with a gaze that was eerily human. Their white manes crested stiffly over the white arches of their necks. One of them had a tidy little braid in its forelock. Claudia reached through the bars and tugged gently on that braid. The horse stayed still as a statue. The animal’s stillness made Claudia want to weep, though she didn’t know why.

Parked behind the horse trailer was a truck that seemed impossibly long. Claudia paused to press her ear against it and heard mysterious thumps inside. She was not embarrassed when a man in coveralls who was pushing a dolly with nothing on it asked her what she was doing.

“I want to know what’s in there,” she said.

“I got hyenas in the back, ponies in the front, and llamas in the middle,” he said.

She wondered what would happen if the barriers between the different kinds of animals should break. “Where are you taking them?”

In response he unfolded a piece of paper and stood very close so the women could read over his shoulder. The note was a nearly illegible scrawl of highway numbers and ended with the directive, “DON’T

STOP UNTIL YOU SEE ‘THE INDIAN.’”

What was ‘the Indian,’ they wanted to know. He pushed his empty dolly away as though he had not heard them.

They roved the unfamiliar streets with no special purpose; at times Claudia pushed Leonie against a wall and kissed her very hard.

“You’re pretty wild,” Leonie panted.

“You drive me crazy.”

“I bear no responsibility whatsoever,” Leonie objected.

It took them a long time to find the restaurant district because the close, zagging streets of the town were disorienting, cloaked in a fog so dense it obscured church steeples and even the cozy glowing windows of apartments. When at last they found a place that was still open for dinner, Leonie discovered her wallet was gone.

“The circus man stole my wallet,” she said, remembering how very close he had stood. She let out a hiss of air between her teeth. “Those motherfuckers should be lined up against a wall and shot between the eyes.”

Claudia put an arm around her. “I’ll take care of everything,” she vowed, unsure of what she was promising.

“That’s my girl,” Leonie said. She gulped from her flask of gin and then screwed the cap back on before proposing that they return to the motel.

Back in their room, Leonie took another nip of gin and put on a cheap red negligee. She shimmied and pranced. “Do I look like an old-time hootchy-cooch dancer?” she said. “Who! Hey, you’re stronger than you look.”

Soon Leonie’s negligee was torn and her moans, Claudia thought, were surely loud enough to disturb the people in the adjoining room. Claudia’s brain felt split in two: it was galloping with desire, and yet was fixed on the image of her fingers tugging on the white horse’s braid. No matter how roughly she handled Leonie’s body, she could not really touch her, any more than she could disturb the circus horse in its spooky calm. The room seemed to tilt and spin on its axis. I am mad with desire,

Claudia thought.

In the morning the water was still cold. They packed their bags into the car before visiting the concierge desk, where they huffily demanded of a man with tragic pockmarks that they not be charged for their stay. While he made calculations, they perused the leaflets advertising regional attractions, all of which seemed to feature Santa and his elves.

“We’re here in time for the county fair,” mused Claudia, flapping a leaflet.

Leonie’s eyes glittered. “Do you think those circus crooks will be there?”

The concierge produced a revised bill, which Leonie triumphantly seized from his hand; but he had given them a discount of only two dollars and twenty-eight cents. “Excuse me, I need to use the little girl’s room,” she said, and Claudia followed her out the back door. They drove out of the dismal parking lot very fast.

From a pump-before-you-pay gas station they plundered fuel and candy bars, and then drove a long way down a scenic back road, partly to lay low, partly because it gave them a pleasant feeling of being lost.

The sun was sinking when they came upon the county fair, its mechanical spires and spokes rotating against the blue October dusk. There was a Ferris wheel, a smell of burning sugar, shouts and screams.

“How heavenly,” Leonie said.

“Let’s find those horsey people,” said Claudia grimly. “I told you I would get your wallet back.”

“You don’t have to do that for me,” Leonie said. She smoothed down her skirt and wriggled her bare feet back into her shoes. “Really, you don’t *have* to.”

They roamed around the fairground, snuffing the aroma of carnival food. They found the equestrian show ring by following an irregular trail of clumped and grassy dung; but the Svitlanders’ snow-white horses were nowhere in evidence. Instead they watched Buckaroo Bob’s Wild West Revue, which luckily was just beginning.

Buckaroo Bob was a naturalist first and foremost, he made that very clear. He loved wild animals, and was emphatic that they should never be made into pets. His troupe consisted of his wife and three daughters,

one of whom was wearing a great feathered war bonnet that went all the way down her back.

He brought out a bear cub, which looked adorable drinking from a baby bottle. Then he draped a mountain lion across his shoulders, whereupon it bit one of his hands. Although it didn't draw blood, you could tell that it must have hurt. Claudia and Leonie stifled giggles. He kept up his stream of patter about the importance of wild animals having a natural habitat to roam in while his wife tugged the cat away on its chain.

The finale of the Wild West Revue was the daughters riding ponies around the ring, carrying American flags on long poles while Buckaroo Bob waxed patriotic from horseback off to the side. When the war-bonneted daughter galloped past him, she accidentally clocked her father on the skull with her flagpole, and he sagged forward in his saddle, face-down against his horse's neck. For some moments he was still, and two roadies rushed to his side.

"Is he dead?" Claudia whispered. But he roused himself and resumed his narration, except that his voice, which had been brisk and twangy, now sounded like a very old recording that was being played underwater. Then Leonie and Claudia had to leave, because they could not contain their laughter. They clutched at each other and wiped tears from their eyes.

Nightfall made the rides glitter irresistably with metallic-flake paint and multicolored lights. Leonie had her eye on a purple apparatus that lifted a little car slowly up and up and then pushed it directly off a sheer drop.

"Not worth the ticket," said Claudia, who was now the only one of them with cash. "Bang and it's over."

Leonie saw through this at once. "It's the money."

"No; but you shouldn't be taken advantage of," Claudia informed her. "And anyhow, let our pleasures be lasting ones, somebody said."

Leonie cuffed her, not hard. "Nobody said that," she said, but followed Claudia to the games of chance. They played the contest where you squirt water into a balloon clown's open mouth until its head explodes. It was them against three little children, and Leonie won. The

carny put the pistols back into their cradles and gave her a small stuffed animal.

“I could murder a hot dog right now,” Leonie said. She bopped Claudia on the shoulder with the stuffed animal. “Are you going to take care of me?”

Claudia drew her close, crooking a finger under the waistband of her skirt. “Don’t I always?”

“Oh, boy,” said Leonie, disengaging.

“Listen,” said Claudia. Her nostrils flared. “Listen. Nobody has to fend for themselves. Haven’t I been showing you a great time? I’ve got everything under control.”

“That’s a laugh,” Leonie said.

Claudia snatched the stuffed animal out of Leonie’s hand and flung it at her lover. It jabbed Leonie in the eye with its stiff little foreleg before it fell to the ground and was squashed by someone rolling by in a wheelchair. What was left of it was an eviscerated mess of pink fur and styrofoam BB’s.

“Tell you what,” the carnies told them. “You can get out of here, or you can get gotten out of here.”

Leonie linked her arm through Claudia’s and led her away. “To hell with everybody,” she said. “Let’s not fight, baby.”

Gently Claudia kissed her on the injured eyelid. “You’re right. As always. How about I take you on the Octopus?”

Swanning arm-in-arm along the Midway, they lifted their spirits by teasing other fairgoers.

“They’re all rigged, kids. You’ll never win, nobody does,” they said to a pair of teenagers at the Ring Toss. The teenagers looked at them with deflated, puzzled expressions. “Tell me,” Claudia sweetly inquired of one man, “Why does your child have such an enormous head?” He hastened away, frowning, the fat-headed child bobbing unhappily atop his shoulders.

There was nobody riding the Octopus, and nobody waiting on line either; and while two men were visible behind the scratched plastic of the ticket-taker’s window, they ducked down out of sight when Leonie rapped on it with her knuckles.

“Do you see that that?” Claudia said in a nervous voice.

“What, what.” Leonie rapped again, a lot harder.

“Over there,” Claudia said. She was squinting at a bouncy castle that was decorated in a spaghetti-Western theme. “Oh my god, it’s ‘the Indian!’”

Leonie rattled the doorknob. “Come on out and let us ride,” she bawled. “We could get you in a lot of trouble.”

The two young men pitched out of the booth as if onto the deck of a storm-tossed ship. “Thanks patience. Had to check some things,” said one. “We’re from Australia,” he added, and disappeared into the Octopus’s tangle of gears and metal tentacles.

“Now we can treat you like queens,” said the other. His eyes were the size of silver dollars. Grandly he ushered them to a car and bade them be seated.

“You don’t look right. I hope you can operate machinery,” Leonie said.

He brought down the safety bar, careful to tuck in the straps of Leonie’s empty purse. “Put you in a pumpkin shell,” he said tenderly, checking the latch, “and there we’ll keep you very well.”

The Octopus lifted them up and down in a wavelike motion as it spun in circles, which was both relaxing and exhilarating. Claudia leaned her head back with rapture. She squeezed Leonie’s hand and got a squeeze in return.

“Do you love me?” Claudia asked, never one to leave well enough alone.

“I’m starting to feel sick,” said Leonie.

Queasiness notwithstanding, it gave her the taste for a faster ride. The Wipeout, for instance, looked positively luscious, picked out in golden chaser lights against the night sky. They marched purposefully across the fairground, which was becoming seedier as the night wore on, strewn as it was with the accumulated debris of revelry.

The ticket-taker beckoned the ladies to the front of the line with a wink. Neglecting to ask for tickets he let them, only them, inside, and closed the barrier behind them.

The cars of the Wipe-Out were not upholstered in the plush vinyl of the Octopus; the seats were raw red metal and the safety bar was too.

With a hydraulic hiss, the car started to spin.

“Oh. Ha. *Oh*,” laughed Leonie.

“Yow,” laughed Claudia.

For the Wipeout whirled in much faster and harder circles than one would expect. In fact, Claudia felt like she was a test tube in a laboratory centrifuge, and that all the fluid in her brain was being forced against one side of her cranium. The weight of Leonie’s body pressing against her, usually her most coveted sensation, was crushing the air out of her lungs and cracking her ribcage like rotten floorboards.

Their heads bent to one side on their stalks and could not be raised upright. “Ow ow ow!” they yowled. They were not laughing anymore.

The ride went on for twenty minutes, the carny impervious to their pleading screams. When at last the Wipeout came to a standstill, he was long gone.

Claudia fell to the ground and rested her head on a discarded hot dog bun. Leonie vomited abundantly before crawling on her belly to lie beside Claudia.

A long time went by. First the lights of the Ferris Wheel went out, then other lights. A paper napkin blew into Claudia’s hair and lodged there.

“Nothing in the whole world,” said Leonie finally, “could ever feel as awful as that.”

“Nothing,” Claudia said.

But they were wrong.

Carol Lundgren

John Copenhaver

“A pansy has no iron in his bones, whatever he looks like.”

—Philip Marlowe

The Night Of

The door jangled, it was Agnes. She collapsed her umbrella, shook it out, and looked around. She was still done up for work in her tight black dress. Her ash blonde hair, despite the rain, was smooth and pushed back behind her ears, hung with large shiny jet black disks like twin mirrors. She honed in on me and crossed to my table.

I'd rung her up from a pay phone a few minutes ago. I told her to meet me at Ricky's, to come quick. Arty was dead, he'd been shot in our place on Laverne Terrace. I said it coolly, but that's not how I felt. Anything but.

“Jesus Christ, Carol,” she said, pulling a rickety chair out and folding herself gracefully onto it. “Arthur's really dead? What the hell happened?”

“I was out with the boys,” I explained. She wrinkled her nose when I said *the boys*. Although she worked as Arty's front man at his dirty bookstore and had flipped through his smut on a regular basis, she still had something against us, like queer boys were an insult to her delicate sensibilities.

I told her that when I stepped through our front door at the Terrace, I smelled ether and saw Arty lying near his faux totem pole. I ran to him, thinking he'd fainted. He was wearing his favorite gold-trimmed oriental coat, black silk pants, and slippers with the felt soles. He looked peaceful, save the three bullet holes in his chest.

The compartment at the top of the faux totem concealed a camera. It was ajar. He used it to capture his more bashful subjects on film, the ones he wanted dirt on. It's plateholder was missing. I couldn't tell who he'd been shooting last.

Agnes groaned softly and leveled her green eyes at me. “It was one of those rich tramps,” she said. “He's always luring them in to pose for

him. Or that baby-faced Sternwood bitch, Carmen. She was coming over to chat about a gambling debt.”

“He didn’t tell *me*.”

“Arthur didn’t tell you lots of things.”

That stung me. “You didn’t know him like I did. Show some respect. He put food on your table and you in that \$50 dress.”

About six months ago, Arty picked me up from the street, took me home, and fed me dinner. He gave me money, a car, and a room—and he never made a pass at me. Before long, we were in business together. I owed him everything.

“Listen—” Agnes said, then let it drop. Her eyes softened, and she placed her hand on my arm. I was still wearing my wet leather jerkin. It felt safer to have it on, like another layer of skin. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I know you cared for him.”

He told me he wanted me to start taking some pictures that other day, that I had a good eye. Now he’s gone. It didn’t seem possible. Sadness rose up in me. If my nerves got the better of me, it wouldn’t be pretty. I tamped it back down.

She removed her hand and wiped the dampness on a napkin. Her silvered fingernails flashed a little, like razorblades. “Who do you think did it?” she said coolly.

“I don’t know. You mentioned Carmen Sternwood. You really think that rich nitwit could’ve done such a thing? I mean, does she have enough sense to?”

Carmen’s pa was one of the richest men in town, an oil tycoon, but Carmen was a little blonde squirrel with sharp teeth and a brain the size of a nut.

“Well, she phoned yesterday,” she said. “Her daddy was going to pay the gambling debt she owed Arthur.”

“You really think she was meeting Arty tonight?”

“Perhaps.” She glanced out the window. I could hear a steady stream of rainwater from a broken gutter. “This goddamn rain,” she said. “LA isn’t made for it. It’s like the whole place is as thin as tissue paper.”

“The plateholder and negative *were* missing from the camera,” I said. “The room stank of ether when I got there. You think Arty drugged her

and was taking pictures of her? Birthday suit shots?”

“Perhaps.”

“You think he was going to blackmail her.”

“That’s what you think, honey.” She smiled.

A grim, sweat-stained waiter interrupted us. We ordered Scotches, neat.

I couldn’t see how a drugged twenty-year-old girl could blast three holes into Arty’s chest. Of course, she could’ve done it before he drugged her, but still. She was a handful, always burning through money, sucking on her thumb like a perverse baby, and drifting from man to man like life was a party game. I had my reasons for hating her, but she wasn’t a killer. She didn’t have that sort of resolve, that clarity.

“It’s not Carmen,” I said.

Agnes looked disappointed. “How’s that?”

“It’s not her.” I looked at Agnes. I wondered if *she* was capable of it or maybe that nosey boyfriend of hers, Joe Brody. He’d been showing up at the shop more often. I didn’t like his looks. If she was, if that’s what flickered behind those green-gold eyes of hers, I’d take her out to the boulevard and throw her in front of traffic. But I wasn’t sure.

“Maybe her would-be fiancé, Owen Taylor?” she said. “He had that killer leer to him.”

“No,” I snapped. My stomach went sour. I didn’t want to think about Owen right now. “He may be a son of a bitch and a shitty chauffeur, but he’s not killer.”

The Scotches came. I knocked mine back. Agnes sipped hers, dainty-like, then squinted at me. I knew what she was thinking. Owen was the Sternwood’s chauffeur. He and Carmen had a fling a little over a year ago. They even ran away together, down to Yuma, but Sternwood went after him. The cops threw him in the clink on a Mann Act rap, but Sternwood didn’t press charges. Owen, the shit heel, told them he was in love and was planning to marry her. Of course, he didn’t marry her, but I could never figure out why Sternwood kept him on after that. Maybe he knew the truth about him and thought having a strong, manly queer looking after his wild squirrel wasn’t such a bad idea. Or maybe, like me, he just liked the way he looked in his crisp

chauffeur's uniform.

"Honey," Agnes said, shaking her head and reaching out to touch me again. "Owen isn't interested in ... He's not—"

I pulled away. "He doesn't love me. What of it? Old news."

"He may have done this to Arthur," she said. "If it's not Carmen, then it must be Owen. Think clearly. Maybe he caught wind of Arthur's blackmail scheme."

I caught a glimmer in her eyes, a flash of worry. I thought again about what she was capable of, as well as that blockhead boyfriend of hers, Brody.

"Also," she said with a little wonder, "there was this strange fella who came in to the store today. He was snooping, asking about rare books, some edition of Ben Hur. I'd never seen him before, but he smelled like a cop."

"Hm."

"I told him to scram."

"Okay."

"We're going to have to move quick to protect ourselves."

I studied her face. In the dim yellow light from the bar, her black earrings caught and blurred my reflection like two pools of black water. Arty's dead face came to me. His good eye was closed, but his fake eye, replacing the one lost in the war, was open, somehow more alive, more real than the rest of him. My lips trembled. Hot-blooded sorrow began to push itself through me again. I wasn't sure I could contain it.

"Carol," she said in a whisper and leaned forward, hoping to catch a tear.

"I moved him," I said, forcing myself to switch off the plumbing. "I hid him, his body, to buy some time, to get my stuff out of my room."

"Good thinking," she said, but seemed not to mean it.

"I put him in the trunk of his car."

"Okay." She didn't seem bothered by this.

"I shouldn't have done it. It's just all I could think to do."

"You going to get out of town?" she said, craning in even closer. "You gonna run?"

I noticed she hadn't had another sip of Scotch. She'd just ordered

one because I'd ordered one. That didn't sit right, like her being here was all for my benefit, like it was all a show. I thought again of slinging her in front of traffic.

"No," I said. "I'm not running. I'm going to kill the guy who killed Arty."

A Year Before

Owen and I sat apart on the divan, its dark velvet marred by our sweat. His breathing was slowing. His curly black hair was plastered to his forehead. He was facing forward with his hands on his knees. I wanted to touch his knee or rub his shoulder. I wanted him to look at me.

Arty stepped out from behind his camera, his false eye twinkling in the bright artificial glow of the studio lights he'd swiped from the set of some B horror flick. "Good work," he said. "You're getting used to each other. The photos are going to tell a lovely little story. Romance. Tension. Release. *Lots* of release." He gestured with wide arms, like a ringmaster. "And, dears, I don't have to tell you you're both exquisite specimens of manhood. If only I were so young!"

Owen gave me a disgusted side-glance. "When are we getting paid?" he growled. "I need the cash." With his angular jaw, droopy lips, and lean pale body, he was a handsome guy, even when he was sulking.

"Yes yes," Arty said. "As soon as *I* get paid." He pulled the placeholder out of his camera and slipped it into a leather pouch. "A few clients have been holding out on me. They'll pay up, though. One way or another."

"I'm not going to fuck Carol again until I get paid," he said.

Anger flashed through me. I made fists. A few months ago, we were in love. We were fucking in the back of the Sternwood's Buick on Mulholland Drive, holding hands in the shadows, and dreaming about a future together: We'd become deckhands on a cruise ship and travel the world. I wanted to see Shanghai. Owen, Cairo and Athens. And he never wanted to go with a woman again, especially not Carmen.

"No need to be crass," Arty said, dropping his queeny pomp. "You'll get your precious money."

Owen stood up and padded across Arty's living room. I watched him pull on his shorts and trousers, his prick still a little hard. Even though I wanted to punch him, I would've let him have me again. Arty draped a red silk robe over my shoulders. On the back was a Chinese dragon embroidered in gold. I felt like a prizefighter. "There you go," he said softly and winked at me with his good eye. I got a whiff of his scent, a heavy mixture of sandalwood and incense. A familiar, soothing smell.

When Arty took me home that first night, instead of sex, which I was expecting, he asked about me. I was leery of him at first. He never looked straight at you. He had an odd, waxed Tojo master mustache, and his house was floor-to-ceiling oriental tapestries and trinkets, like Fu Manchu's lair. But he made me a sandwich and offered me a beer, and I warmed to him. I told him I graduated high school in '34, and my pa threw me out, because he'd have no queers under his roof, and I'd been hustling since. Arty asked if he could photograph me. He said he'd pay well, that he thought I might have talent. He also told me I reminded him of a young Cary Grant and touched the dimple in my chin. I told him that was funny. I have a girl's first name too. "Carol," I said. "Carol Lundgren."

"Lundgren. That's quite the masculine counterpart to Carol," he said. "Mine's Arthur Gwynn Geiger. Call me Arty."

Arty propped himself on the arm of the divan and rested his hand on my shoulder. The tension in my neck and gut began to ease. Owen was buttoning his starched chauffeur's shirt and looking at the corner of the room.

"You know, dear," Arty said to Owen in a syrupy voice. "If you *really* need a lot of money, you'll ask that rich girl of yours, Carmen, to join us for a shoot." He squeezed my shoulder. I knew not to react, but nothing repulsed me more than the thought of touching that silly blonde harpy.

Owen looked at us. His eyes blackened and the veins in his neck popped out as thick as vines. "Leave Carmen out of this! Leave her the fuck out of this, you hear." He pointed his finger at Arty. "Don't go anywhere near her."

Bile rose in my throat. I made to stand—I wanted to clock him

good—but Arty kept me in place.

“You,” he said to Arty, “You think I even like this? Fucking that scrawny ass of his in front of you, you old fag? Or wait, are you a chink? Jesus, what the fuck are you?” His body shook and spit coated his lips.

“Go then,” Arty said, standing. “And don’t come back.”

“Oh no, I want my money.”

Arty nodded slowly, almost theatrically, and walked across the room to a small lacquered box. He plucked a key from his pocket, opened the box, and calmly counted out bills. My blood was boiling, but I knew Arty would be unhappy if I broke Owen’s shapely jawline. He never wanted me to lose control. “It’s never lost,” he told me, “just handed over. Don’t give it away. It’s too precious.”

“This is all I can spare now,” Arty said as he handed the cash over. Owen flipped through it and stuffed it in his pocket. “Owen,” he said, “Carmen’s never going to marry you. Girls like her never marry men like you.”

At that, he shoved Arty back, and Arty tumbled over his low sofa and rolled to the floor in a heap, knocking a lamp over. I leapt to my feet. “Leave him,” Arty said. “Let the fool go.” I stopped. I didn’t really want to bolt outside in his flimsy dragon robe. “Help me to the divan,” he said.

Once we were sitting, Arty leaned on my shoulder and slipped his hand in mine. I could see faint age spots creeping across the veins on his skin. “I’m sorry, dear,” he said. “I shouldn’t have brought him into this. He’s not like us.”

“He’s a thug.”

Arty was quiet for some time, stroking my hand. “But you like him,” he said. “Thug or no.”

The Morning After

I parked on the boulevard a block down from Arty’s storefront and jogged around back. It was mid-morning. The day was cloudless and bright, and I didn’t want to be seen entering from the street. I was there to dig up any clues to his killer and grab any spare cash I could scare up.

The iron security gate to the rear entrance was propped open, and a small black truck half full of wooden crates was backed up to the door. In the storage room, two men in overalls were wrapping Arty's dirty books in newspaper and packing them in the crates. They had the dogged look of hired help. Had Agnes organized this? She didn't say a peep about it last night. Was she trying to pull a fast one?

But instead of going in throwing fists, I played it cool. Arty always told me: "You're a dragon, Carol. Mighty and lucky. But know when to use your fire, your yang, and when to wait and listen and think."

I walked in casual-like and nodded howdy-do to the workers. They glared at me, but figured I was none of their business.

The door to the front room was cracked a little, and I heard voices. It was Agnes and a man with a put-on fay voice.

"Back again," the man purred. "Mr. Geiger in today?"

"I'm—I'm afraid not," she said. "No—I'm afraid not. Let me see—you wanted ...?"

Agnes was either nervous or playing at being nervous. If she was acting, her performance was Oscar-worthy.

"That was just a stall about those first editions," he said and then whispered, "I have to be careful. I've got something he'll want. Something he's wanted for a long time."

I wondered if this was the strange guy Agnes had mentioned last night. He was doing a lousy impression of a fairy.

"Oh, a salesman," she said. "Well—you might come in tomorrow. I think he'll be here tomorrow."

"Drop the veil," he said, losing the fay. "I'm in the business too."

As they babbled on, I stepped forward and widened the crack in the door to peer in. He was a tall, wide shouldered man in his thirties with a thick, sinewy neck and a cheap brown suit. When he glanced at me suddenly, I shuddered. His expression was as blank as stone, and his eyes, penetrating and empty of desire, didn't even flicker. He was no fairy. No cop. He was a confidence man or worse a private dick. Before Mr. Mystery got a read on me, I kicked the door closed and dashed out the back.

I returned to my car and waited. I watched Mr. Mystery leave the shop and approach a taxi. He got in, and the cab pulled around the corner. I switched parking spots for a better view. Both Mystery and me, it seemed, wanted to know where those books were going.

After thirty minutes, the truck crept out from the alley, moving slowly with the weight of its cargo. I followed Mystery as he followed the truck. We turned east on Franklin and, after crossing over Vine and Western, north at Brittany Place and drove uphill several miles. I lost sight of the truck around a bend in the road, but I knew where it was headed—Joe Brody’s apartment building. Agnes had asked me to drop her off here several times to meet him, so it didn’t take a college degree to guess what had happened. The two had colluded to take over Arty’s business, and either she or her lunkhead had killed him for it. I parked a street over, found a bench, and waited for her to show up. I had a thing or two to say to her. Mystery and his taxi had vanished.

Around noon, she showed up in a cab. He let her out on the corner. She had on a tight gray suit, a bit ruffled and creased at the edges, and her little matching hat was pinned on crooked. As she walked, she fidgeted with her purse. I followed her to the back entrance of Brody’s building, a nondescript door shaded by a ratty, weathered awning and surrounded by overgrown bushes. Before she reached for the door handle, I called her name. She spun and dropped her purse.

“Jesus Christ, Carol. What are you—?”

I rushed her, grabbed her wrists, and pushed her deeper into the shadow of the awning. She cried out and began pleading with me. For a moment, I didn’t say a word. I just stared at the glimmering green in her eyes. I wanted to see the flaw that’d led her to kill a man. I wanted to understand.

“I know Arty’s books are here,” I said. “I know what you and that ape of yours did.”

“Let go!” she said, squirming against the stucco wall. “I—You—”

“You thought you could kill Arty and blame it on me. That’s why you were so keen on me running.”

“I’ll explain,” she said, turning on the waterworks.

“You didn’t give a fuck about me, did you?”

“I was going to tell you. I wanted to, but Joe thought you’d be angry. He said you had a short fuse.”

“Arty was my friend!” I said and slammed her against the wall, her little gray hat smashed to one side. She cried out and began sobbing and sagging to the ground. But I kept her on her feet.

“He was your friend. How could you do that to him?”

She whimpered.

“Tell me!”

“Brody,” she said. “He—he did it.” She sank back from me. “I’m sorry. So so sorry. I didn’t know what to do. He would’ve killed me too.” She was frightened, but I didn’t buy it as remorse.

I let go, but I put my forefinger under her chin, so she’d have to look at me. Her mascara bled like clown make-up. Her bottom lip was trembling.

“You telling the truth?” I said.

She shook her head.

“Were you really under his thumb?”

She nodded again and, after clearing her throat, said, “He killed Owen too.”

What was she talking about?

“You hadn’t heard?” she said.

My heart sank.

“You guessed right, Carol. Joe was with Arty when they drugged Carmen last night. It was a blackmail scheme, and they were working together, except Joe thought Arty was too soft—“

“Too faggy, you mean.”

“I—I suppose.” My finger was still on her chin. “And he wanted the business for himself, so once Carmen was blotto and her picture taken, he shot Arty. Originally he thought he could blame the murder on Carmen and use the photo as motivation. The story would go that somehow she got hold of the gun and let Arty have it for trying to blackmail her.”

“But Owen? Why Owen?” My mind was racing.

“Owen came in on it. He saw the murder. Brody chased him down and sapped him with one of Arty’s gaudy Chinese candleholders. He put him in the Sternwood’s car and drove him into the ocean off Lido

pier. The candleholder and the gun went in with him. Since it was a big mess, he wanted him and the weapons far from the crime scene. He kept the plateholder for insurance, so to speak.”

I took my finger away and stepped back. She stood straighter, but bit down on her bottom lip.

“Why was Owen there?” I said.

“I don’t know,” she said wearily. “Maybe he was rushing to protect Carmen’s honor. I don’t know.”

I hated Owen, but this news was an unfair blow. Although I’d never said it to myself, I thought he’d come around one day. He’d realize Carmen was a fool, and that he belonged with Arty and me. I thought of how his body felt against mine, and how his passion seemed like more than a performance for the camera, and how much I’d believed early on we were easing fuck by fuck into love. God, I was an idiot.

“Go,” I said. “Grab your stuff and leave town.”

“What are you going to do?”

I thought about having to drag Arty’s body to the garage, the weight of him, of doing something like that: “I’m going to kill Brody.”

The Night After

The door to the fire escape on the fourth floor of Brody’s building was open. A cool breeze tunneled through. All around were the muffled noises of radios and gramophones, of chatter and laughing, of families cooking. In the air, roast chicken and potatoes and cigarette smoke. It was dinnertime. No one was in sight.

I rang the buzzer on 405, Brody’s apartment. Arty’s automatic pistol he stored at the bottom of his lacquered box was tucked under my jerkin. It was loaded, my finger on the trigger.

My heart was pounding, not with fear, but with the desire to get this right. It was my time to breathe fire, to be a dragon. I wanted to make Arty proud, to show him that we weren’t helpless, that if bitten, we bite back.

The door opened a foot, and there was Brody. He was a lanky fellow with rough curly hair and a wide, shiny forehead. I hadn’t said

boo to him in the past, but before I smoked him, I had remarks. I wanted to let him know why this was his reckoning day, I wanted him to understand. But his dopey, puzzled expression threw me, and I said, “Brody?” even though I knew who the hell he was.

He said, “Lundgren?” and tried to close the door.

But I shoved the automatic’s muzzle into his chest and shot him twice. He fell back. The door slammed shut. I looked this way and that, heard commotion in the apartment, and began running. I hit the stairs fast, skipping steps and swinging around banisters. I flew through the lobby and, in the glass of the front door, saw someone coming after me. Maybe it was Brody, maybe I hadn’t shot him at all.

I dashed across the street, glanced back, and saw the shape of my pursuer against the building’s white stucco. I ducked behind a parked car, let a couple rounds go in his direction, and kept running, twisting my way through the neighborhood.

After awhile, I didn’t see him, so I slowed my pace. I could smell cordite from the pistol seeping out of my coat. I began whistling a little, like I was out for a stroll, so as not to alarm any passersby. I’d parked at the bottom of the hill, thinking it’d be more discreet to slip away on foot, but I had to walk a bit.

A voice behind me said, “Got a match, buddy?”

I swung around. There was Mr. Mystery, holding a little revolver at his side, giving me a smirk and his empty eyes.

“You must have thought a lot of that queen,” he said. He meant Arty.

“Go fuck yourself,” I said. I wanted to run, but there was a retaining wall to my left and a car to my right. I heard sirens wailing, closing in. I flinched, and he stepped forward and pressed the pistol against my stomach.

“Me or the cops?” he said.

“Who are you?” I said.

“Friend of Geiger’s.”

“Get away from me, you son of a bitch.” I backed up an inch, and he shoved it into me again. Rage surged through me. I wanted to break his wrist and turn his little lady’s pistol back on him.

“This is a small gun, kid,” he said, as if he’d read my mind. “I’ll give it to you through the navel and it will take three months to get you well enough to walk. But you’ll get well. So you can walk to the nice new gas chamber up in Quentin.”

“Go fuck yourself,” I said and reached for Arty’s gun—I wasn’t going to let Mystery do this to me—but he poked me with the gun again and leaned into me, his blank eyes roiled like a predator’s. Hope bled out of me. I wasn’t strong enough. I was disappointing Arty. “What do you want?” I said.

He fished Arty’s gun out of my pocket and said, “Get into my car, kid.” It was next to us. He’d parked and lay in wait, like he’d known where I’d be. “Under the wheel, kid. You drive.” He sat beside me and held the barrel of Arty’s gun against my ribs.

The sirens were getting louder, and he gave me instructions to lay low until the blaze of red and blue had passed.

Once I pulled out, he said, “Let’s go home. To Laverne Terrace.” Cheerfully he added, “You’re a simple-minded lad. What’s your name?”

I told him.

“You shot the wrong guy, Carol. Joe Brody didn’t kill your queen.”

On the ride, I thought of a story Arty told me once. He grew up in Mittenwald, a town in the German Alps. When he was a couple years younger than me, some hard illness got hold of his ma. He was an only child and his pa had died just years before. One day, he had to go through the snow to the market for dinner supplies and leave his sick ma alone. When he returned, his ma’s bedroom window was open and snow was blowing in and she was on the floor. He went to her, and she grabbed his hand and told him that a woman had appeared at her window and had pushed the panes open. This woman looked like her and talked like her and moved like her, but wasn’t her, and she knew she was going to die. A day later, she died. I wondered if Arty had had some similar harbinger. I wondered what it was like staring yourself in the face, seeing all your features, but twisted the opposite way. I wondered if that’s what it was like looking at Mr. Mystery.

When we got there, a thin mist was settling in the branches above

Arty's place and the moon glowed faintly behind them. Mystery forced me out of the car, and for a minute, we stood in front of the tall box hedges I'd trimmed for Arty last Saturday.

"All right," he said. "You have a key. Let's go on in."

I glared at him. "Who said I had a key?"

"Don't kid me, son. The fag gave you one. You've got a nice clean manly little room in there. He shoed you out and locked it up when he had lady visitors. He was like Caesar, a husband to women and a wife to men. Think I can't figure people like him and you out?"

I wanted to laugh. He was all bravado. He didn't know a damn thing about us. Not a damn thing. Despite his gun, or in spite of it, I threw a quick punch and hit him square in the chin. He stumbled back, dazed. Then he tossed the pistol at my feet and said, "Maybe you need this." When I jumped for it, he clocked me, and I went down. Before I could scramble to it, he snagged it and tossed it out of reach and said, "You don't want to fight. You're giving away too much weight."

I dove at him, throwing my full body into him, wanting to drive him back to whatever dark place he came from, but he sidestepped and locked me in a stranglehold. I struggled and gritted my teeth and, feeling helpless, socked his crotch. He grunted and twisted me up on his hip, and for a second, we hung in balance, panting into the fall night. His grip tightened and my breathing strained.

This was it, I thought. Mr. Mystery, Mr. Fucking Nobody, is going to do me in.

After Agnes and I parted at Ricky's that night, I returned to Arty's. It was disrespectful what I'd done, dragging him by his armpits and stuffing him in the trunk of his car. I needed to make it right, so I removed him and pulled him into my little room and, with some effort, laid him out on my bed, adjusting his clothes and slippers. I searched for anything that might explain who he was to whoever came upon him. He deserved to be known, to be offered that respect, if even by some dense police detective. I swiped two thin silk tapestries from his living room walls, each embroidered with dragons and Chinese characters, and laid them crosswise over him to cover up the blood stains, and I

crossed his wrists like I'd seen done in movies. I lit incense and all his candles, and knelt beside him. As the smoke filled my room, I said the Lord's Prayer (it's the only one I knew) and thought about Arty, about his peculiar sense of humor, his watchful and protective nature, his impatience with liars. When I opened my eyes, his false eye was staring back at me, half-closed. I gently pushed down its lid with my palm and turned away.

I surfaced to Mr. Mystery lecturing me about keeping quiet and a gas chamber and copping a plea. My hands were cuffed behind my back, and I was on the floor of Arty's living room, the thick pile of his oriental rug digging into my face. I was confused and annoyed, so I told Mystery to go fuck himself, even though my throat was swollen and raw. He looked pissed.

He left me for a few minutes, and I began to feel ache all through my body and, following it, the dull throb of shame. When he returned, he looked down at me, and his dead mask of a face had changed. His eyes were softer, even a little watery. His lips were open, like he was searching for words. He'd seen Arty's body.

"Want to sit up, son?" he said at last.

I pretended to sleep.

One Year Later

The mail inspectors had opened Agnes's envelope, the top edge carefully slit. I sat on my cot and slipped the page out. The paper was crisp, high quality. Why was she writing me? Didn't she hate me?

Carol, honey, it began. I imagined her sitting with ballpoint in hand, her lined red lips pursed, and her green eyes narrowed.

I'm sorry I didn't write sooner, but after that chump Marlowe paid me \$200 for information concerning the Sternwoods, I beat it out of town. I thought it best not to contact you.

Well, well, she got cash out of Mr. Mystery. Clever girl.

I hope San Quentin isn't the hell everyone says it is.

Of course it was hell, but not like she thought. The past returned

to you over and over in here. You became your own hell. That's what they didn't tell you.

I heard you pled guilty and dodged the chair, and that you'll be up for parole in 15 years. I'm thrilled. Does that surprise you? Brody had it coming, if you ask me.

It did surprise me. Again, why she was writing me? What did she want?

As for me, I'm legitimate now. I work in a real bookstore that sells books you read, not just look at. It's okay work. It doesn't pay what Arty paid, for sure. I could've been really good at Arty's line of work. Maybe better. I always thought a woman should've run his business. Certainly not Brody. A woman could've weeded out the clientele, made it more selective, more prestigious. Well, you know, if wishes were horses...

Write to me, Carol. I want to know you're okay. I'm thinking about you. —AL

PS: Did you hear about Carmen? She was sent to the loony bin. I knew that little twit was off her rocker, but she must've totally cracked. I don't see what Owen saw in her. She wasn't worth protecting. Arty, sure, but not her.

I paused and reread it. The edges of the letter crinkled under my thumbs. *I could've been really good at Arty's line of work. Maybe better.* She was gloating!

The official story was that Owen killed Arty, and Brody sapped Owen. Agnes and I knew Brody had done both. But had she played a bigger part than she let on? *A woman should've run his business.* Should've, or almost did? When I had her up against the wall at Brody's, had she lied? Was she the one who wanted Arty's business? Did she convince Brody to go through with it, to be the trigger guy? She had run things, hadn't she? Brody had wimped out, and she had to shoot Arty. That's why Brody had it coming. He didn't have the balls to be a killer.

I twisted the paper, wanting to rip it in two. Had I killed an innocent man? Had Marlowe been right about that, just not about who the killer was? I was such an idiot. Why did I believe Agnes? What has she made me do?

And what about Owen? Maybe he witnessed her, not Brody, kill Arty. Maybe he even tried to stop it. Whatever happened, he had to go. But they must've kept Carmen as their blackmail money tree, which bore no fruit as soon as she was locked up and out of reach. *She wasn't worth protecting.* Ha! She wasn't *worth* a penny now. Arty's still worth something to her. *Arty, sure.* I wonder if that's her real reason for writing me. He left everything to me in his will. Maybe she sees an angle.

The top edge of the letter began to tear. The muscles in my arms were tight, straining. I wanted to grab Agnes by the throat and squeeze. I wanted to scream and beat my head against the bars. But I remembered Arty's hand on my shoulder. I bit my lip, and I folded her letter over.

The first time Owen and I did it for the camera Arty talked me through it. He told me how to let Owen hold me, how to let him push into me, how even in the throes of it, to find the light, so the camera would catch the moment, so the love-making would look real. His voice was calm and soothing. I was never ashamed. He was always there.

Every night before falling a sleep, I read a personal note he included in his will: *Dearest Carol, If you've received this, I'm a memory—a lovely memory, I hope—and you are on your own. I'm giving you all my worldly possessions, not because I expect you to cherish them or hold on to them or to be maudlin or, God forbid, tragic, but as a gesture. In return, promise me you'll seek balance in your life and, from time to time, sit quietly and think fondly of me. Kisses, Arty.*

Tlaloc El Lloron

Baruch Porras-Hernandez

In 2011 about 40,000 people were killed in Mexico's drug war.

Most received a bullet to the back of the head.

Tlaloc was the Mexical/Aztec God of fertility, rain and water.

Things change.

When the men open their eyes
even the blood looks deep blue
against their shirts and coats.

Each man holds a bullet in his teeth. Their march,
in straight lines on either side of the road
at first seems endless but then they see the lights.

The last town, when the men reach it, their hair wet
bodies cold, still, they take off their clothes. Leave them
in neat piles in front of doorways, on windowsills.

They fall to the ground
miles and miles of moving backs
naked men, crawling towards the last river

where the weeping man waits. Once,
the god of fertility and rain, now El Lloron kneels
one leg in the mud, one in the water

a giant, the largest being the men of the earth
have ever seen. One by one, he picks up the dead men like cats
kisses them on the mouth, sucks the bullet that killed them out,

cradles each man in his arms
rocks them slowly into little sleeping balls
then gently places them on the last river to float downstream,

and into the next realm of the dead.

Chalchiuhtlicue

Baruch Porras-Hernandez

What happened to me?
I was in the ground for so long
It was dark for so long
I was so cold
You pulled me from the ground?
I was so thirsty
Am I dead?
Who are you?
Who did this to me?
Who did this to me?
I remember now...
I know who did this to me
Where is he? Where are they?

Close your eyes, I'm washing your face
I'm washing your hands
I'm going to pour water over your head now
You will never be cold again
Yes. But, I am not done, there are so many more.
That is why I'm here
You are free, you are truly free
I am going to wash your feet now
You may travel this road on my right, to the river.
There you can let the water carry you to the next realm
Or you can walk through this desert on my left,
in the center of the desert there is a ladder
You can climb it to the floating world above,
I'll give you a canteen full of water
it never goes empty
There is a diner on Tepeyac hill, where they beg for forgiveness
There you can tear off his eye lids, show him what he did
you can rip off his skin, show him who he is
or let Cuatlicue devour him, it is your choice.

back in 1531, you will dance a cumbia into the lobby,
see the rows of televisions bolted along the ceiling
play videos of women, ex telenovela stars, breasts upside down,
sand pouring out of their mouths, eyes are roses, fingers pointing
at the men, each singing songs about cities, towns, pueblos
whose ground is rich with dead women

Another man enters the room made of cigarette smoke
He is scared, she pulls back her hair

two snakes twist
they form a smile

she shows him her earrings
Made out of las manos de un hombre, she says
Aren't they adorable, te gustan?
Outside the temple made of cigarette smoke, on Tepeyac hill,
there are so many spirits of murderous men that they form a line
wrapping around the temple in circles

most of them wait patiently sitting on the ground
drops of rain begin to fall there is a great flood coming

the men, look up
open their mouths.

*Coatlicue, mother goddess of life and death, transformed into la Virgen de Guadalupe.
Now she eats.*

Que Digan Que Estoy Dormido

Baruch Porras-Hernandez

In the future

we are all ashes

lying still on the ocean floor

resting in the pockets of lungs

we live under finger nails

children try to brush us from their teeth

scientist perplexed

enormous black smoking mark on the earth

visible from space

let them say we're sleeping

cradling each other like brothers backs to guts guts to backs

bullets buried in the ground

still taste us in their blossoming mouths

we are all just sleeping

the women chased the men to the mountain tops, sacrificed

them, showed the sun the still beating muscles but the night

still came threw the bodies from the cliffs light torches and

knelt felt snow, slowly cover them with ice

became lumbering volcanoes

singing the belly of heaven

no gods fled, no deities hid behind virgin veils but drug lords

wept, their bellies grew so large, when they burst, rivers of

blood and gasoline

flooded every city

the spark from the last Mexican man to ever light a cigarette

set them aflame

the fire lasted 289 years

we don't disappear no Mexican ever does
let them say we're sleeping

we are all just sleeping
waiting to be buried
in a place no one
can ever
return to.

Afterlives

Annette Covrigaru

The book flashed its spine, mint green glossed by a plastic shield. It appeared in my grasp as it had projected itself in my view, effortlessly. Well, perhaps there had been more effort on my part – a trip to Austin, Texas to visit a girl with whom I had an undefined relationship, an intellectual interrogation about literature by her English major Williams alumni parents, a stroll down Congress Street, our hands held loosely, a vintage bookshop, her favorite, a discussion on George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, how her parents named her Thea after one of its characters. And *then* it appeared. *Aimée & Jaguar: A Love Story, Berlin 1943*. First edition, \$50. A jarring price, no doubt, but a necessary buy.

That summer, on trains to Manhattan, my eyes swayed along the pages, attempting to steady words that seeped into one another. The monotony of the morning and evening commutes was punctured by this antique tale of forbidden lesbian love. Felice Schragenheim and Elisabeth “Lilly” Wust, a Jew and a German, their romance backdropped by World War II and Nazism. A self-evident ending, yes. But people often forget that love has an afterlife.

A week after visiting Thea, we texted a mutual agreement of staying just friends.

Lilly and Felice couldn't use their names in letters. Well, maybe it wasn't a matter of what could and couldn't be, but of what *must* be. In a realm devoid of security and humanity, these women maintained authority over their words to one another. Poems hidden in coffee mugs, notes slipped between fingers, charged with love's omnipotence, that impulse to preserve what was, what is, and what could be. What *must* be. They signed Aimée and Jaguar, and soon their pen names became who they were.

It's magnetic, the way I am drawn to these stories. With a then girlfriend but now ex in Giovanni's Room in Philly's Gayborhood, I come across a book of Lesléa Newman short stories and a back-pocket-sized book of poetry entitled *Milk and Honey: A Celebration of Jewish*

Lesbian Poetry. Who knew Jewish Lesbians could be its own genre? And who knew it would be my favorite genre?

In the book, there are photos of Aimée and Jaguar, black and white prints of them with their parents as children, with their friends as adults, and with each other as lovers. There is one of Jaguar in a button-up polo, high-waisted khaki shorts, and an immaculately tied bowtie. Hand in pocket, gazing beyond the camera, she is dapper and pensive. I look at her looking away from me and I see myself. Her squinted eyes and stern expression suggest clairvoyance. “Felice, in a photo taken by Lilly, on the Havel River, August 21, 1944,” reads the caption. The Gestapo picked her up later that day.

In “Human Sexualities” senior year, Thea shot me a look when our professor informed us of the course’s P:drive password: “jaguar.” Her time abroad in South Africa, my time abroad in England, and the acquisition of another then girlfriend but now ex upon my return had kept us distanced. For class, we watched *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* together, holding hands under the shared blanket like we had freshman year watching *Hey Arnold!* in our dorm’s lounge. When the movie ended, I couldn’t believe I had gone that long without breathing. She asked if she could take pictures of me for a photography assignment, and I said yes. When I showed up to her room a week later, she asked if she could take photos of my back, bare. I took off my shirt and said yes. Even now, when we lie in bed, I can feel her fingers playing the keys of my spine like a saxophone. It’s been just about ten months. “Plus or minus three years,” we say, hoping to erase the absence of one another.

The Domino Murders

Garrett A. Foster

Chapter One

I'm a watcher. I hide in the shadows and observe what other people cannot see – what they are too terrified to see. I don't hide because I'm afraid of being caught – I'm much too clever for that. I hide because it allows me to get close enough to my subject to think like him, to predict his next move before he's even thought about making it ... to get so far under his skin it is nearly impossible to decipher where he ends and I begin.

I still remember the first time I set my precarious sights on him. He was seventeen and so wet behind the ears. Still I knew from the start that he was born from darkness, which is clearly why I was so drawn to him in the first place. *Some things never change.*

From the moment I first saw the look of death forming in his eyes I vowed to do whatever was necessary to follow him anywhere, and I have. The journey has taken me to some pretty horrific places, which has only made me want to follow him even closer.

Over the years I have become skilled at watching him from afar. I've learned what hiding places and methods work best to not blow my cover and how to distract him in the unlikely event that they fail. I watched with curious fascination one afternoon as he snuck off behind his family's barn where he tore his pet rabbit, Otis, limb from limb, and also how he cut into his own tender flesh with a hand that grew steadier by the year.

There have been many times I've thought about making my presence known to him, as if the two of us might somehow find a way to be friends in the darkness, but I know that we both need the searing detachment of loneliness to survive. So far he hasn't caught me stalking him, not even on those cold lonely nights when I sneak under his bed so that he is on top of me, so that I can smell his alcohol-laced breath and hear him snore through his murderous wet dreams, and in those rare moments we are loners together.

We all have our addictions, and my subject is definitely mine. One

day he will learn *exactly* who I am and why I am so wildly intent on swallowing every last delicious drop of him. When that inevitable time comes – when *I* determine it is time for me to step out of the shadows – I promise that we will both be putting down our respective highball glasses. But until then there will be no Twelve Steps in *this* particular relationship.

Some might argue I have a crush on him. How can someone follow a man this freakishly close for all these years and not be at least somewhat attracted to him? Despite his shortcomings, of which he has many, he also has his fair share of undeniable charms.

For example, I love it when he so carefully covers all traces of himself at the scenes of his crimes. Sheets of plastic, rubber gloves, even a mask when necessary – all tools of his trade that he so confidently believes will make him immune to capture.

What a card! I could pull the trigger on him at any time, but that is not what I'm after – at least not until I absolutely have to at which point I can assure you *no one* will be watching *me*. For now, I like things precisely the way they are, thank you very much.

It is pure unadulterated fun to watch him think he is in control, but that is only because I am so adept at letting him get away with murder.

Just look at the arrogant smugness, creeping across his rabid face right now like a rash of invasive and nasty vines. His cheeks are flushed with excitement, and there is just the tiniest bead of sweat forming along the top crease on his forehead. He wrinkles his eyebrows, like caterpillars on command, clearly anticipating what is about to happen – what he is about to do next without any chance of recourse. He places his hands on his sturdy hips, his feet planted as firmly in the ground as the vines that are spreading further.

So confident is he that he will not be chopped down.

Like all of the other unsuspecting victims who came before him, the one he is following now obviously cannot feel death breathing down his neck. If he could, he'd be running for cover. Instead, he wanders clueless into the dingy, smoke-filled gay bar just off Sunrise Boulevard in Fort Lauderdale, while my subject lies in wait for him to leave.

The boy, who is actually twenty-four and a vagabond hustler of sorts, should stay right where he is. I have a good mind to tell him

myself, but that would ruin all the fun.

Watching someone watch someone else, knowing what is to come and knowing you alone have the power to stop it, is a rather dizzying feeling. I suppose it makes me as much of a murderer as he is, but I prefer to view it as merely supporting the survival of the fittest – letting the strong set standards of justice to the detriment of the weak.

Who hasn't watched with just a bit of primal fascination as one wild animal ravages another? Or when a defense lawyer chews up and spits out the prosecution? Then again maybe it's just me who finds the silver lining in such atrocities. Either way there's almost always a winner and loser in every situation, no matter how morally correct we want to be to the contrary, and seeing who is going to finish on top is jolly good sport.

This particular victim is definitely not going to be a true match for my subject. First, he's had way too much to drink – just look at how he stumbles aimlessly out of the bar before wandering off in search of his wreck of a car. Second, he is clearly not the kind of boy who lifts weights, or who has the good sense to run in the face of danger. If he did, he would not be getting behind the wheel when he is well beyond the legal limit.

With binoculars firmly in hand, I crouch behind a nearby dumpster, craning my ears so I don't miss a single word. I stifle a shriek as a hungry rat crosses over my feet.

"Excuse me," his attacker says with a real sense of authority. He is close enough to smell the liquor on the boy's breath and seeping out of every imaginable pore – Jack and Diet I would venture to guess from the look of him. "I'm afraid I can't let you drive."

"Fuck you," the boy says, with the kind of snarl that is fortified by so much liquid courage. Even then, it sounds more desperate than defiant.

His attacker flashes a badge he recently purchased at Spencer's Gifts. If the boy wasn't seeing double times two, he would be able to read the official-looking inscription, "Chief of Toking," with the imprint of a cannabis leaf emblazoned clearly on the front.

Instead, he takes the pseudo symbol of authority at face value and starts to surrender until his attacker grabs him roughly by the arm and

attempts to plunge a syringe into the side of his neck. *I just love it when he goes all Dexter-ish on me!*

“What the fuck, dude!” the boy slurs loudly, as he knees his attacker in the crotch and digs his nails into his left cheek before darting off into a nearby park.

You go, girl!

But he loses his footing in such an inebriated state, and his relentless attacker is on him in a flash. One prick with the syringe (definitely *not* purchased at Spencer’s) and the poor boy’s taut body goes immediately limp.

His attacker makes sure no one is looking – of course, he isn’t smart enough to see me tracking him like a human GPS – as he drags the drugged body (*say that one ten times fast!*) to his jet black Chrysler sedan parked near an abandoned tire warehouse.

The sedan’s trunk is huge, with more than enough room for a wisp of a boy like this who will surely pee himself silly when he finally opens his panic-stricken eyes to discover his prickly predicament. *Try to hustle your way out of this one, kid.*

Ah, yes, my subject definitely keeps me on my toes with his wild shenanigans – I can hardly wait to see what else he has in store for the precious cargo in his trunk when they get to their final destination. If that pair of vise grips I see clutched in his hand is any indication, it is going to be well worth the effort it will take to escape his notice.

Of course, keeping a keen eye on him is surely to my advantage because after he has his twisted way with his latest victim, I will be able to have *my* way with one of mine.

Chapter Two

The rain pelted Mark’s front windshield with a vengeance as he headed home for lunch to wait out the storm. If it didn’t let up soon, he’d have to pull over. The blinding, torrential downpour was a common late-summer occurrence in South Florida, but Mark had never been a big fan. Despite living in the area for close to a decade and visiting for years before that, he still considered the Nevada desert near Las Vegas his true home.

Of course, having a man in his life – someone who would finally give him a reason to come out at the precinct where he'd been a homicide detective since moving to the greater Fort Lauderdale area – could definitely change the way he felt about the place. But that seemed about as likely to happen as the rain suddenly stopping.

He was close to downtown Wilton Manors where he owned a cool mid-century modern that he had been painstakingly renovating for the five years since purchasing it during the height of the foreclosure crisis. He could never afford it now – not with his barely-above-blue-collar salary or the current improving market – but timing was everything. Despite doing most of the work himself and being resourceful enough to find all of his materials at a bargain he liked to complain that the house was a money pit.

However, his work on it ceased the day he learned exactly what happened when you foolishly let down your guard with someone who didn't love you back the same way. Being fatally wounded with an assassin's bullet wouldn't have hurt any less.

That particular thought would have to wait. He was more preoccupied with the side door leading into his house being slightly ajar. As he pulled into the carport off his tropically landscaped horseshoe driveway, he could have sworn he'd shut and locked the door before leaving the day before. Maybe the fierce wind had blown it open.

He got out of his car, with his hand firmly hugging his Glock 17. Something seemed amiss, but the downpour was clouding his perspective. It was raining too hard for him to see straight, to hear straight. But something was off. He could just *feel* it.

He swung open the side door and was relieved to find Juno, his tortie-colored cat with eyes the color of kiwis, waiting anxiously near the doorway for him, the way she always did when she heard him pull in the driveway. She had spent the night alone, left to her own devices, while he was detained at a stakeout that hadn't panned out.

"Hey, baby," he said, as Juno meowed loudly.

Normally, he would have gotten on all fours and rubbed the back of her neck, waiting for her to roll over and demand the same attention paid to her soft, furry belly. But he couldn't shake the feeling that things

were not as they should be.

With his gun at his side, he surveyed the TV room. He was a bit obsessive compulsive – well, okay more than just a bit. Whenever the housekeeper had been there, he could walk in and immediately notice which of his belongings had been shifted ever so slightly – and he just couldn't rest until order had been restored.

If only he had been able to put things right with his former partner, Ryan, as easily as he could move a quartz figurine to where it belonged. *Stop thinking about him!*

He crept along the wall, slowly, like paint being dragged across the surface by a roller. When he reached the opening to his kitchen, he raised his gun high, ready to shoot. But the room was empty, quiet, everything in its place, except for a bowl of McIntosh apples lying on the floor. The color of wine, or blood, and Mark had seen his fair share of both. Juno must have knocked them over to get back at him for leaving her alone.

Still he moved ever so cautiously as he explored the rest of the house. Living room. Sun porch. Home office. Guest bedroom. Guest bath. Pulling back the Vienna cotton shower curtain, he expected someone to lunge at him from behind it.

But all was clear except for the persistent drip from the faucet he'd been planning to fix for weeks. And then he heard music coming from his master-bedroom walk-in.

As he grew closer, he could almost place the tune. It sounded like something he might have heard in a Broadway show, or on his grandmother's stereo. Cole Porter or George Gershwin. *Yes, Gershwin!* "Someone to Watch Over Me."

Jazzy. Haunting. Filled with a kind of regret. The way he felt about Ryan at the end – after both of their worlds blew apart. The way he still felt as he glanced around his bedroom for any clue that someone was there to hurt him again.

His crisp, white duvet cover was as smooth as he had left it. The three throw pillows, in various geometric patterns, were all in place. His custom-made window treatments were hanging perfectly, with the faux wood blinds precisely at the height they always were, three inches below the sash – pulled up just enough for Juno to sit on his glass-topped

nightstands to watch the world outside.

He took aim as he swung open the closet door. In an instant, he was ready to see the color of apples, or wine – *or blood* – all over his polished terrazzo floors. But the music was gone. And so was the blinding rain just as suddenly. In fact, all Mark could hear was Juno's meowing – and the voice in his head telling him *he really was losing it*.

He let out a long sigh as he finally got down on hands and knees to tend to a very needy and perplexed Juno. They had been bonded since Mark rescued her from her cage at the animal shelter four years earlier and had grown even closer after things with Ryan came to such an abrupt and ugly end.

Juno was declawed in the front, and while she never seemed all that interested in wandering outdoors, Mark was always paranoid that she would somehow slip out and be left defenseless. He didn't know what he would do if he lost her, too.

He logged onto his computer to see if there were any pressing matters that required him to return to the precinct after lunch, or if he should just continue working in the field. His boss, Eli Anderson, had been a real bear, coming down on his direct reports because he didn't have the balls to confront his socialite wife instead.

His partner – his *new* partner, the one he was assigned to after the Ryan debacle – was a loose canon bigoted sexist from Okeechobee. Mark tried to avoid him as much as possible. *Dwayne Cooter*. He was a definite *redneck*, just like the color of the wine Mark drank way too much after losing Ryan so violently, and the apples that were still scattered on his kitchen floor. If he made yet another outrageous racist or homophobic slur, Ryan honestly didn't know if he could be held responsible for his actions.

Maybe it was time for him to finally do something else – but what? This was all he knew ... all he'd ever aspired to, being the third generation of Walker men who had served to protect the law in one way or another.

After what happened with Ryan he considered walking into his chief and giving notice anyway, even if it meant waiting tables, or combing the beach for aluminum to trade in for cash. Somehow he could make ends meet. After what happened with Ryan he considered putting his

Glock 17 to his head to stop the pain.

But he didn't. He didn't even swear off all men after that. But he did start looking for them in places that were far more dubious, like Grindr and gloryholenow.com, places where he knew he would never really find the kind of guy he deserved.

Maybe he was punishing himself for pushing Ryan too hard, or maybe he was just living up to Dwayne Cooter's idea that all homosexuals were deviants – perverts who should burn in hell for their abominations. Either way, he was on gloryholenow.com right now, responding to the ping of the incoming chat request like one of Pavlov's dogs.

It was "MuscleGuy4U." They had been chatting back and forth for a few days with their banter taking on more provocative twists at every turn.

Within hours, they had exchanged the kind of photos that would have had both of their mothers ready for early graves, their blood-engorged penises waving at full mast. Just like his name indicated, MuscleGuy4U was broad and rugged and able to leap tall buildings in a single bound – the type of guy Mark went for every time.

They had covered just about everything, from who would be on top (chalk one up for the more mild-mannered Mark), to what fantasies both still had yet to fulfill. For Mark, it was to be the one in handcuffs for a change; for MuscleGuy4U, it was to have someone catch him while he was jacking off and then pee all over him. Now all they had to do was actually meet and let the water sports begin.

MuscleGuy4U: So, what's the verdict, stud? I want to c u in the flesh!

NSA Fun: I should be working.

MuscleGuy4U: U know what they say about all work & no play...

NSA Fun: LOL. I can assure you I am NOT dull.

MuscleGuy4U: Let's do it. Meet me at 6. I'm dripping for you.

NSA Fun: I don't know.

MuscleGuy4U: U gonna make me beg?

NSA Fun: YES!

MuscleGuy4U: Please, please, please, please—

NSA Fun: Okay, that's enough. I can't stand to see a grown man

embarrass himself!

MuscleGuy4U: Is that a yes?????????

NSA Fun: Yes! Where?

MuscleGuy4U: 11220 SW 19th Street. Apt. 208. I'll leave the door unlocked. Drink plenty of water. :)

Mark glanced at his watch. Two o'clock. That only left him four hours to check on a lead on one of his cases and then swing by the precinct and return home to shower and shave – his face, which was covered with three day's worth of stubble he'd been lazily neglecting, and also down below since he definitely wanted to make a good first impression. He wouldn't even have time to grab something for dinner before having to head out to meet MuscleGuy, although he'd probably be too anxious to eat anyway.

NSA Fun: Tomorrow night's better.

MuscleGuy4U: I guess I can wait 1 more day. But you're going to take the blame for what I do tonight instead! LOL

NSA Fun: Now that sounds interesting. So tomorrow night?

MuscleGuy4U: Perfect, stud. I can HARD-ly wait!

Even as they disconnected, Mark could feel his own hard-on growing larger. He could already feel MuscleGuy's brawn wrapped around his own lean, sinewy body. There was a definite danger to meeting men he didn't know for no-strings-attached "fun," men he wouldn't *want* to know under any other circumstances, that pumped him up with a kind of lustful recklessness that just could not be satiated, no matter how much he tried. It was definitely his penance for that last horrific night with Ryan.

He felt grimy. He hadn't taken a shower since leaving the house yesterday. He considered stripping down and taking one now, but he really needed to pick up those apples. As he returned them one by one to their vintage silver bowl, he was butchering the lyrics to "Someone To Watch Over Me," which had become a definite worm in his ear. He considered logging back on to gloryholenow.com to say he'd changed his mind. The old Mark would have done that. Then again the old Mark had so much more to lose.

Chapter Three

Because my subject has a particular penchant for this abandoned warehouse, I have taken it upon myself to become intimately familiar with its layout, as if infiltrating the framework of his brain. The knowledge comes in handy for times like this. Needing to get as close as possible to not miss a single minute of the madness, I crawled through a grate I left unhinged near the back of the building and then secured a spot in a tiny crawl space above the ceiling where I am able to peak through an air vent to the scene below.

When he attacked and drugged that poor defenseless hustler coming out of the bar, I just knew it wasn't going to end well. To be honest, I nearly intervened as he pulled him from the trunk of his sedan and dragged him in here like a rotting carcass, having a pretty good idea of what was likely to follow. But I'd have blown my cover straight to hell, and I'm not about to do that – not even to save a fellow fag. Don't get me wrong, I'm all for queer solidarity, but I'm about self-preservation even more.

He is stroking himself into a fury as he waits for the boy to awaken from his syringe-induced sleep. Watching him get aroused like that sets off a chain reaction, and before long I'm stroking myself right along with him. It's really too bad he's so freaking straight and so homophobic; we could probably have a lot of fun together otherwise.

He really has amassed quite a collection of goodies in his cozy chamber of torture – a list so long it would make most so-called sadists gasp in horror. Branding irons he heats in a nearby furnace, glass jars filled with live scorpions (I can only imagine what he plans to do with *those*), Nazi gas masks, sets of razor-sharp knives he had imported from a Japanese maker he met in a bar on the outskirts of Tokyo, and the specially designed and rigged cage his latest victim finds himself trapped in when he finally opens his eyes.

“*What the fuck!?*” the boy yells out, blinded by the darkness of the leather hood that covers his ears, his eyes, his brain, with just the tiniest slit of an opening at his mouth to speak and barely breathe. His hands are restrained so he cannot pull off the hood. The pungent odor of formaldehyde is all around him – I can even smell it from here.

“Where am I?” he cries.

“I wouldn’t move if I were you,” his attacker warns, even though I know that’s *exactly* what he wants the boy to do.

And the boy blindly does, screaming in agony as his foot is impaled by one of a series of nails sticking out of the cage floor to keep him even more tightly bound in place.

“I warned you,” his attacker says, with what can only be described as gleeful pride. I know him well enough by now to realize that he is *extremely* proud of the way he has put this wayward homosexual squarely in his place, boxed into the corner of a cage that would make even a Vegas contortionist feel more than a little claustrophobic. “Move another muscle, and I can assure you it will be a bloodbath.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” the boy cries out from under the hood, his voice as muffled as if he were drowning in quicksand.

“I think you know the answer to that.”

“*I swear I don’t.*”

“Maybe I should pull down my pants and see where your deviant instincts lie.”

“Holy fuck, dude! Is this because I’m *gay*? Don’t you know it’s 2014?”

My subject rattles his cage. “The thirteenth book of the twentieth chapter of the book of Leviticus says, ‘If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them.’”

“*Christ!* Please don’t kill me,” the boy begs, his voice quivering under the hood.

“Such a drama queen!” his attacker snickers. “I can’t kill you while you still have a chance to redeem yourself. *Be still.*”

Despite the boy’s wracking sobs, he is *not* moving a muscle. He flinches but still does not move, even when his attacker opens the cage door and reaches inside to finally pull the leather hood up over his head and loosen his restraints. If he already knew he was in trouble before, now he must have no doubt he will never get out of here alive. As he looks around, it is a scene from a horror movie – only there is no director to yell, “Cut!”

“Go ahead. You’re free to leave. The door is open.”

And it is. But to get out he must cross over nails and razors and broken glass lining the bottom of the cage – traps in a minefield my subject has rigged to make things more interesting. He remains crouched in the corner of the cage, even as his attacker begins to demand that he try to extricate himself from his deadly dilemma.

“If I have to reach in there and pull you out, you’ll be very sorry. I can assure you of that, *kiddo*.”

As my subject sits perched on the edge of his seat just in front of the opening of the human-size cage, his right foot is tapping on the damp concrete floor a mile a minute. I’ve seen that tapping before, and it is never a good sign. His fury is mounting.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

“Come on, boy. NOW!”

As the boy inches his way toward the opening, there is one puncture and then another. His foot. His calf. On his ass when he tumbles backward. He cries out in a way that sounds like a wolf howling, and I silently gasp. But finally he is close to the opening and somehow dives through it, landing at his attacker’s tapping foot with a thud.

“Get up!” he commands, and the boy jumps to his feet, as if a marionette whose strings have been yanked. Blood is everywhere.

“Please, let me go. I swear I won’t tell anyone.” When his attacker doesn’t say a word, he adds desperately, “People are looking for me.”

“No one is looking for you, kiddo. Trust me, I’ve done my research. Your family disowned you because you like to be fucked up the ass. You got fired from your last job for being a drunk and stealing from the till. And now you’re surviving by hustling your body. *No one is looking for you.*”

It is true, and yet the boy must clearly be holding out hope that *someone* saw what happened behind the bar – that someone is nearby, trying to figure out a way to rescue him. Alas, there is just me, and I am not about to do a thing to stop his certain execution.

His attacker hits play on a nearby recorder and music fills the cavernous space.

“Name that tune, kid. It’s your only chance of getting out of here alive.”

But the kid cannot. He has obviously never heard of Gershwin, let alone any of his songs.

“If you don’t figure it out soon, there are consequences.” He holds up a vise grip. “See these? I’m going to use them to crush your nuts. A nutcracker!” And then he laughs, as if he’s made the funniest joke in the world. *What a comedian my subject can be!*

“Fuck NO!” the boy yells, covering his crotch with his shaking hands. Tears are streaming down his porcelain face.

“Surely a faggot like you has cried over more than a few men, haven’t you?” The boy’s teeth are chattering too violently to respond. “HAVEN’T YOU?”

“Y-y-es, s-s-sir.”

Suddenly the boy manages to make a run for it, dashing for an exit at the opposite end of the space. It is at least fifty feet away. I don’t know whether to root for him or pray for his delicious demise as he topples over a rolling cart to stop my subject from reaching him. He is just inches away from the door – freedom is written all over his panicked face – when his attacker dives and grabs his ankles, sending him tumbling to the ground.

He yanks him back toward the cage by his shoulder-length chestnut hair and onto a nearby surgical table. He is fast and furious, as always, restraining one wrist and then the other, and then both ankles, until the boy is laying spread eagle, naked, with only the two of us watching over him.

“You better start guessing, kid, if you hope to come out of this with your family jewels intact.” As he says it, he closes in with the vise grip, which is as menacing as the maniacal smile plastered all over his smarmy face.

The boy latches onto any lyric as if it’s a lifeline being tossed into this ocean of terror. “A Love For Me?” he asks, his voice rattling like a jar of nails.

His attacker applauds. “Good guess. But *wrong!*” And without warning, he crushes testicle No. 1. The boy’s cry is so guttural, so helpless. It brings tears to *my* eyes.

I watched through the window with great curiosity as my subject

broke into Det. Walker's house earlier this morning. I watched as he hid spy cameras everywhere and played this same tune through a speaker he installed in the good detective's closet. But I never saw this twist coming, even knowing why the song is so important to him.

"One more testicle, kid. And you're just about out of guesses."

"I don't know! Please, *please*, let me go!"

But my subject does not let him go. Instead he crushes the kid's other testicle and then his kneecaps with a sledgehammer. He immediately passes out in a downpour of sweat so violent and churning it would suck him under if he weren't already a goner.

My subject leers at his questionable handiwork, his lifeless victim, with a kind of propriety condescension that implies this person was his to do with as he saw fit. He could as easily be a plantation owner beating his "property" to a definite pulp, or an unrelenting Master who breaks his sex slave into total submission because he is in a position to do so. This kind of power allows him to glide through the rest of his life with the confidence he would be sorely lacking otherwise.

Lying on the surgical table with his skin ashen and his arms outstretched like wings, this victim will clearly never fly again. He is/was a little too pretty for my taste, with his eyelashes as long as cat whiskers, and a delicate thinness about him that made him an easy mark for his more muscular attacker. His limbs are/were long and lean, as if he might have one day pulled himself together and enjoyed life as a primo danseur if only his kneecaps hadn't been unceremoniously crushed along the way. *Poor boy!*

My subject loosens his restraints and rolls him over without a hint of remorse, concealing what looks like an explosive device deep in his rectum. I watch with ghoulish fascination as he reaches for a surgical needle and thread. I observe the way his right hand trembles ever so slightly with pent-up excitement as he stitches shut the boy's pink and puckered anus, tightly, precisely, as if he's done this more than once or twice, and the way the front of his pleated trousers grows heavy with the thrill of his actions and what is still to come. If he could see me studying him like that, he would not feel in control at all.

Then, for the first time since I have been watching my subject, I

suddenly break into a sweat of my own so profuse I'm afraid it will drip from my hiding place in the crawl space above the ceiling to the cold hard floor below. What if I have underestimated him and he has been watching *me* this entire time? What if *he* really is the one in control?

Chapter Four

11220 SW 19th Street was definitely not in the best part of town. Mark was aware of that as soon as MuscleGuy4U typed it in the chat room window of gloryholenow.com – and yet he had agreed to meet him there anyway.

As a veteran homicide detective, he had been to all kinds of neighborhoods – including this one. He had investigated everything from high-stake heroin deals gone terribly wrong, to vicious knife stabbings over who had control of the TV remote, to domestic disturbances so wildly explosive they made him truly wonder why so many people hurt the ones they loved – just like Ryan hurt him, he supposed.

As a veteran detective, he was trained to sniff out danger, and yet here he was potentially walking straight into it.

If he was on duty he would have approached the group of hoodlum teenage boys suspiciously huddled near a dumpster at Paradise Grove, the name of the complex where MuscleGuy4U lived. Paradise Grove? It was actually more like Slumlord Village – and yet he still wasn't turning around. That's how incredibly hot he was for this guy he so far only knew in cyber space – hot enough to take his stupid chances.

He had convinced himself, though, that he really didn't have anything to be worried about, that he was way too sharp and capable to end up as one of the statistics he wrote about in one tedious report after another. He loved what he did, but his heart just wasn't in it any longer, saving people who didn't always want saving. He really needed to find something else to do – something that would get him out of this terrible funk.

Or maybe, deep down, he was hoping there *would* be something to worry about – that someone would finally teach him a serious lesson about meeting guys who lived in hellholes like this. It started after things ended with Ryan, and there was no relief in sight.

He climbed the stairs to the catwalk, which stretched across the second floor like an exterior hall of shame. A rickety metal railing was the only thing preventing a fall to the cracked sidewalk with its patchwork of weeds below. He looked down and saw a middle-aged woman with a faded tattoo of a sunburst smack dab on her fleshy belly.

She was floating on her back in the lagoon-shaped pool, reading a magazine and smoking a cigarette she nonchalantly flicked into the algae-filled water. Her hot pink raft was as inflated as the chest she'd clearly purchased. She looked more desperate than inviting, and he wondered if *she* ever had anonymous sex with anyone *she* met online.

Apartment 208. Maybe MuscleGuy4U lived nicer on the inside than he did on the outside. Not likely. But he didn't have to have a Roche Bobois sofa or 400-thread-count satin sheets or even a clean toilet seat to make this work. He just had to have his own impressive billy club and the wherewithal to know what to do with it, so that Mark could be on his way back to gloryholenow.com. Another notch in his belt of penance.

His hand was firm on the trigger guard of his Glock 17 – obviously a pack of Trojans wasn't the *only* protection he thought he might need. He turned the knob on the scratched door with its double dead bolts. As MuscleGuy4U promised, it was unlocked. He didn't say a word as he pushed open the door and stepped inside the galley kitchen.

Pew! It stank like dead fish, or maybe it was just the year-old layer of congealed grease on the rusty electric stove. His role was to catch MuscleGuy in the act and pee on him. From the stench in this place, disinfecting him would be a much better idea.

He had made sure not to urinate for the last two hours, despite two bottles of water and an Arizona Peach Iced Tea. His bladder was about to burst. Thankfully, his very enthusiastic hard-on was preventing him from wetting the front of his khaki shorts. MuscleGuy wouldn't be very turned on by *that!* Then again, maybe he would.

He moved through the living room with all the nervous energy of a performer about to go on stage. The apartment really was a mess. He thought he saw a rat, which turned out to just be a fuzzy black sock sticking out from under the broken futon.

Piles of empty pizza boxes and Chinese take-out containers had become playgrounds for the roaches that scurried to and fro. Fortunately, what the guy lacked in the decorating and cleaning department, he more than made up for with a hairy, rock-hard body that Mark had already jacked off to enough times to have it etched into his brain.

When he approached the doorway of the bedroom, he saw the naked body lying on a stained mattress on the floor. It certainly wasn't the one he had memorized, inch by tantalizing inch. This one was ashen, and smooth, with long hair and there wasn't a single muscle to be found. His limbs were reed-like and delicate. *Fucking catfisher!* Other guys had duped him with pics that didn't look anything like them, but this one took the cake.

He was horny enough to have sex with him anyway, but the fantasy was ruined way beyond repair. This guy didn't look even remotely like Ryan, which made the entire charade suddenly futile. Ryan was not coming back to him. That was clear. Not even with all the promiscuous smoke and mirrors in the world to make it otherwise.

"Hey, dude," he said, ready for this particular game to be over. "False advertising is definitely not cool."

The guy didn't respond, which made him even angrier. Then he noticed he wasn't moving a single muscle. As he got closer, he saw he didn't appear to be breathing either. He immediately went into detective mode and reached for his cell to call for backup. This didn't look good. This didn't look good at all. If anyone asked what he was doing there, he'd say he'd been driving by when he saw someone with a gun approach the place.

Without thinking twice, he reached for a pulse before dialing. And that's when his entire world went black.

Ordinary Happiness (after Agnes Martin)

Timothy Carrier

There are two fields.

In the first field, a white field, six stripes, in pale blue. Or, a sky field with five stripes, white. All of the stripes are lines. The painting hangs in a small gallery, hexagonal, in Taos, New Mexico, with six other paintings of white and blue stripes, also sometimes pale yellow pink and pale pink. All of the stripes, in all of the paintings, are lines. Agnes' friend Donald Judd has built four yellow-wood cubes, as benches, set in the center of the hexagon, under a skylight. Because this is a small museum, no heavy traffic, I can sit there sometimes all on my own for an hour. The last time, a gallery attendant came through with a wide broom, dusting around the cubes.

Did you know Agnes? he asked.

No I say. (Yes!)

Agnes insisted that her work—mostly what I would describe as lines, or grids, was not that of a minimalist, but an abstract expressionist. Because she came from the Saskatchewan plains—you could wake up in the morning and see the train beginning to cross on the horizon and at dusk it would still crossing, that's how far you could see on the plain, she said—and then because she lived in northern New Mexico, some people said the lines were literal horizons and plains. Agnes acknowledged the plain but insisted that the paintings were something else.

One time, she said, I was coming out of the mountains, and having painted the mountains, I came out on this plain, and I thought, Ah! What a relief! I thought, This is for me! The expansiveness of it. I sort of surrendered. This plain...it was just like a straight line. A horizontal line. And I thought there wasn't a line that affected me like a horizontal line. Then, I found that the more I drew that line, the happier I got.

The artist lives by perception, she said. So that what we make is what we feel.

I don't get up in the morning until I know exactly what I'm going to do, she said. Sometimes, I stay in bed until about three in the afternoon, without any breakfast. You see, I have a visual image. But then to

actually accurately put it down is a long, long way from just knowing what you're going to do. Because the image comes into your mind after what it is. You're really feeling what your real response is. And so, if you put down this image, you know it's going to remind other people of the same experience.

First, she said, I have the experience of happiness & innocence. Then, if I can keep from being distracted, I will have an image to paint.¹

Last night, I said, I had the experience of happiness & innocence.

This occurred above the second field, which is a bright green field, very long, balanced in the night by industrial lights, cypress trees, & mist. Deer have been seen in this field. Also small boys running drill around a set of traffic cones, in little red-striped shirts. Last night, nothing in the field. Above the field, on a concrete terrace, eight friends in a circle of ordinary happiness. One of the aspects that makes this happiness possible is the 405 freeway, also below the terrace, beyond the bright green field, dark with a mist of headlights. On the downward slope, the Valley, also misted, lit by houses, like little rabbits, I mean, little jewels, I mean, little houses, like regular people houses—this also makes possible the happiness.

The waxing moon high up through the mist is also part of the possibility of happiness—the other white concrete buildings, the small whoosh of each car on the highway.

But ordinary happiness—different from ordinary beauty—requires persons, with soul-body combinations—not just souls, not just bodies. This is because of the special alchemy, which combination engenders feeling, which is the only gender and the experience of each human person and then all human people. I don't mean that ordinary happiness is the feeling always of all human people—I mean that feeling is always the experience. Ordinary happiness is the gold on the other side of the alchemy.

Late into the night, after I'd stepped away from my friends, & around the bending terrace, I stopped to see if the deer were coming out into the bright green field, which was empty. While I waited, where

¹ Quotes by Agnes Martin are drawn from: Gruen, John. *The Artist Observed: 28 Interviews with Contemporary Artists*. Chicago, IL: Cappella, 1991. Print.

I couldn't see my eight friends, in a circle, down the terrace, but I could hear them—the freeway, the Valley, the tiny speaker music, the magic bottle—I could hear their voices, talking & laughing—some of them were listening & laughing. There was the sound of the bottle on the concrete terrace, the cypress trees.

There must be other souls trapped for some time outside their bodies—waiting to feel—and I wonder for these souls.

The bodies I could hear were eight bodies filled with their souls, to the point of feeling. They were together in perfect happiness, which is at once a white field. Below—a green field—and then the middle field—gold.

The Moving City

Alex Grandstaff

The sidewalk of the shifting city gives out under Cas's feet like an automatic walkway heading the wrong direction. Cas holds onto a streetlamp, as if it will anchor her and watches her apartment building move farther and farther away, until it's a distant buoy in the night. The building turns abruptly, switching places with a glass front office complex and she is alone. Cas won't be able to find her way home until morning when the city settles. Cas looks straight up to the night sky and feels like she is sinking down through the earth as she watches the building tops shift in all directions, the clouds drifting like schools of fish far above. The current of the city's tide sweeps Cas along its concrete bottom. Her lungs go tight and Cas's stomach twists. She sags against the lamppost, fighting to remember there's air. Cas pushes away the thought that she might vanish never to be seen again, or be crushed and smeared away by the buildings.

Cas cannot be the only one to lie staring at the ceiling, drifting in a half sleep serenaded by the grinding song of phantom whale pods reflected in dark windows. Cas cannot be the only one to feel their body rearrange, shifting with the city, forgetting if they are him or her. Cas cannot be the only one who's stayed awake all night, unable to sleep as his apartment presses in on him with the heat and the grinding song of the moving buildings, staring at the city's Google map, searching for a pattern. Cas cannot be the only one to wonder why only the fountain in the center of the park remains unmoved on that map. The immobile locus of a wagon wheel on a broken axle, turning through the air. Everything else, the trees, buildings and streets all shuffle through the dark.

They say it's a tectonic rift, like the center of the Bermuda triangle that causes the shift. The fountain at the center is the only thing in city limits that's still. He wonders if it's quiet there, if the water still pours from its founts cooling the muggy night with spray. Those stonemason whales flying up from it every night to dance through the wheel spokes before floating away. Cas cannot be the only one to toss and turn and try

ear plugs and pillows and reading dull books and turning on the radio to cover the sound of the city just so he can sleep. Only to have the city sounds still pierce through the windows, through the pillows and the earplugs and the words sloshing around on the page because Cas is too tired to read. Cas knows he isn't the only one, has to believe he isn't the only one who wants to know.

The sun will rise soon and the buildings will settle. Google is already trying to put a mark on how things have changed. Cas watches her building inch its way on the map for hours, marking its progress with little stickers. It moves randomly, forward and back, left, right. At one point it squeezes through an alleyway to appear on a new street that she's never heard of. Its speed is indeterminable. She remembers math class, *if two trains are moving toward each other at 2:45 and they meet at 3:16 what is the rate at which they are traveling?* She holds a ruler up to the screen. Tries to find how long it takes her building to travel the map's little miles. But Google's footage isn't smooth enough and the building jerks along. She tries to calculate it by hand and by dawn has pages of numbers without meaning. Three nights trying this way and Cas gives up.

Cas's insomnia is seasonal, heralding the beginning of Summer's humidity when it first swells the buildings, turning the nightly shift into a grinding groaning symphony. As a child, she sat up through the summer nights while her parents slept, watching as their neighbors' homes sailed away like ships in the dark night, wondering if she was changing along with the city. If she would fall asleep and wake up different inside, original shape still remaining. One morning when Cas was ten, the family woke to find a massive oak tree with a tire swing in their backyard. Too tired to swing, Cas spent the day lying in that tire staring up through the tree branches. Cas would have ridden through night in that swing, sailing through the suburban homes and skyscrapers and schools, but her father caught her sneaking out. He said it was too dangerous to be out at night and to get back in bed. So Cas lay awake watching the oak tree sail off without her.

Humidity infests every inch of the city's brick and mortar buildings, their bloated bodies grind against one another in the night. A low steady groan like whale song interpreted by jack hammers. Cas's walls

and windows shut tight, with the curtains drawn against them muffle none of the sound. Cas drifts in his bed as the buildings float past his windows. By midsummer, sleep usually reclaims his nights. But for now, he lies awake, cursing, watching his fan swirl the sticky air around his bedroom.

His ceiling fan is suddenly eclipsed by a pod of whales, their bellies are brick their bodies grain spackle. Cas floats in a sea of humid air as the whales swim past, out his window, through the shifting cityscape. He imagines them like kites with their strings cut, floating over the skyscrapers and brownstones up through the clouds. They scatter the foam of the clouds, grazing the stars. Their song crescendos and Cas leans in trying to catch its meaning. A horrible shrieking interrupts the song and Cas's body becomes a cannonball plunging through the sea. He tries to free himself. Rise up from his bed out of the water. His lungs shrivel and he cannot cry out. Heaving his body, Cas breaks free into the waking world of his whaleless apartment. On the streets below a car alarm screams. Some out of towners probably parked on the street, expecting their hotel to still be there in the morning. Sleep does not come again. He sits up against the headboard and listens until the song fades into the dawn.

Chewing ice, she paces from window to window, watching countless buildings slide past hers. Everyone is asleep in the heat, asleep through the whales singing and the swelter. They dream of being ankle deep in the ocean and wind on their cheeks and freedom and things she's wanted to dream of all week. She leans out the window and tries to breathe the wet air. Chokes as it drips in her lungs. Cas wonders if she will ever be able to speak again. To breathe. She wonders if there is anyone awake or alive in this night. Is she alone in this shifting city, the sole vigil to this bizarre patternless movement? Has the city has overtaken her to be remade nightly along with it, only clear in the bright of day?

Cas's clothes do not fit in the cover of night. Cas tries on and discards every article in their closet, shedding a layer of themselves with each attempt, tearing each item away as if it is the final curtain before the reveal. The mirror is irresolute under their scrutiny. His dresses stretch too tight across the shoulders. Her suits bulge across the chest,

pucker as they strain across hips too wide for their accommodations. Their reflection cannot remember the answer to Cas's question. Cas cannot decide what they are asking. Every sock and shirt and slip lies strewn across Cas's floor before dawn halts the buildings.

The first summer Cas lived alone was the worst. As a child, Cas roamed the house at night, his parents snoring drifting through the empty halls, a comforting reminder of other life. In college, the campus was connected by a series of arches, each building linked to the next keeping them from splitting. Students roamed the campus freely at night, watching as it shifted through town, feeling the dizzying inertia of the campus' spinning weight. Living alone, Cas had no other life to connect with, to remind him of the larger world. He moved out in the fall, when the shift was a low quiet hum. He slept and woke with the rest of the world, the rest of the city, unfazed through fall, winter, and spring. Then summer came with its muggy heat and noise.

In the apartment Cas had no one to talk to in the night. No one's snoring drifting through darkened halls, no fellow wanderers on a cloistered campus, just the walls of her apartment and the muffled thrum of neighbor's televisions. The muffled footsteps and voices of warm conversations. Internal sounds of the building, but as the night wore on these sounds faded, leaving Cas alone through the thin hours of the morning. Cas's parent's worried when they came over.

"Maybe you should see a doctor? Or get a roommate?" Cas's mother suggested.

"You can always come stay with us a couple weeks, have a staycation.." Cas's father put in.

"Or maybe you should move, dear. There's plenty of opportunities outside of Bode, where cities don't move. You're so bright you'll find a great job." Cas's mother said, "Not that we want you to leave of course."

"We just want you to be happy, Casper." Said Cas's father.

"My friends have their own places. I wouldn't want to live with a stranger. Besides I prefer living alone right now." Cas smiled at them over lunch, "The doctor says it's just an acclimation period, and to try earplugs if it lasts more than two weeks. It's nothing for me to leave town over. Don't worry, it's just an adjustment."

Cas did not want to give in to the city's groaning, that first summer. She built up distractions, went through Sudoku books, puzzle games, learned guitar, joined a book club then dropped it, tried sculpting, did aerobics until the neighbors complained, then took up crochet and painting. Quieter hobbies worked better to pass the time without becoming a nuisance. Initially, Cas wandered the halls at night, jogging the stairwells in hopes of wearing herself out. When a notice about residents roaming the halls and noise complaints came in the mail, Cas stopped.

Cas digs through his books. Pulling them blindly off the shelves, but reading less and less each time. The song outside blocks the words' meanings, muffles them, a voice over the din of a crowd. He can see the form, but cannot understand. He becomes trapped in sentences as the letters on the page scuttle off like ants before his aching eyes. He looks out the window, trying to focus, staring at the dark silhouettes shifting past. Looking back at the book, he shrieks watching a hundred ants marching up his arms from blank pages. He flings the book across the room and sprints to the bathroom. Only standing over the sink, scrubbing away at invisible insects does he realize the ants as an illusion. He slumps against the bathroom tile crying for sleep, crying to drown out the sound of the city grinding, grinding, grinding outside.

Cas sprawls over the living room couch, hunting for sleep as the buzz of traffic and glaring heat of the afternoon sun forces its way past her window shade. Daylight brings stability. The groan of drifting pavements replaced with the incessant hum of an endless river of cars. People flitting through the afternoon sun on their way to wherever they're heading, without questioning where they've been. Daylight invites no questions. The phone rings and Cas answers it, less conscious of someone's desire to speak to her and more to silence the sudden eruption of sound in the muffled apartment. Only when the buzzing continues does Cas realize it's the doorbell and not the phone. Cas lies there a moment, considers pretending not to be home.

Cas pulls back the door, revealing Kit's grinning face.

"Hey Cassiopia, how you doing?" He asks, leaning in the doorway.

His grin retreats at the sight of the heavy bags under Cas's eyes,

the dulled bronze of her skin, the rumpled work clothes, and Cas's apartment over her shoulder. Cas follows Kit's gaze, reevaluating the state of her home. Dozens of books unshelved, stacked around her worn easy chair. Glasses, plates and bowls litter the room, shallow puddles of water in them from melted ice. Her iPod in its speaker dock peeks out from a mound of newspapers. The coffee table, eclipsed by a map of the city assembled from Google earth print outs, each street and building its own separate piece scotch taped together, arrows drawn in bright red searching for a pattern in the movement. An ashtray, a previously useless white elephant gift from an office party, sits in the center, marking the fountain.

"This again?" Kit asks, clearing a seat on the couch as Cas shuts the door.

Cas sweeps around the room scooping up bowls and glasses, attempting to remove the evidence.

"It is that time of year." Cas replies, smiling, voice strained.

Kit shakes his head, standing and taking up a stack of glasses, trailing Cas into the kitchen.

"It isn't like the city doesn't move the other 365 days a year Cas. I don't get why summer is such a problem." Kit says, setting the cups in the sink where Cas begins rinsing them, "Maybe try ambien?" He asks.

"Kit, last time I took ambien, I thought I was the mountain king and tried to fly off my parents' roof." Cas says, keeping her head bowed to the sink.

"That was over a decade ago and is why teenagers shouldn't be given prescription level narcotics." Kit rearranges the glasses Cas set on the dish rack. His mouth drawn as he watches the water run off the cups.

"It's like construction in summer, noisy and annoying, but you get used to it eventually. Everyone else does." Kit says quietly, leaning against the countertop.

Cas shuts off the water, the bowl she was scrubbing left hanging in her hands.

"It isn't like construction. People control construction. Construction ends." Cas says voice thick. "We have no control over this, it has no reason."

"Neither do earthquakes or monsoons, but people still live with

them.” Kit answers, frustrated. “I don’t know how you can be so hung up on this.”

Cas laughs, “I don’t know how you can’t be.”

Cas sighs and sets the bowl down on the drying rack, Kit gives her shoulder a squeeze.

“Come on, me and Carlie are meeting Tony and Frank for dinner. Wanted to see if you were up for it. If you’re not sleeping you may as well eat.”

Cas lays a hand over Kit’s, squeezing his fingers. His warmth seeps through her shirt to her skin.

“Lemme change clothes and grab my keys and wallet. I don’t need to dress like I’m crazy too.” Cas says, walking to her bedroom, leaving Kit on her living room sofa, staring at the map set out on the coffee table.

Now, it is three am. Now, no friend is at his door. Kit is gone hours ago, vanished into the dusk, towards a night spent in a soft bed dreaming deeply. No one is there to define Cas and no sun shines to freeze the city in clarity. Now, he has slept no more than twelve hours in seven days. Now the whirring of the fan and the hum of the television accompany the lowing of the streets. Cas paces his apartment, running a strand of beads through his fingers, a well-meaning gift from Tony. The click of the beads barely registers over the endless cadence of the city. His friends and loved ones sleep. They do not dream of Rubiks cubes and picture puzzles spinning on lazy susans whenever their eyes drift shut.

Cas stares out the window of his tiny living room. His apartment littered with a new layer of splayed books, papers torn and crumpled, half-completed crosswords and DVD cases and pens. The corpses of failed distractions. Cas watches the windows across the street roll by in an endless wave of shining black mirrors. A bright rectangle catches his attention. Across the street, a silhouette framed in an orange rectangle, slides closer and closer. A mirage. It must be. After seven nights of swelter and sound Cas must be dreaming. After so many summers adjusting to the sound alone in this mad darkness to see someone awake in this heat. He must have fallen asleep on the couch. A car alarm will soon wake him. He raises a hand to the window to shut it and walk away, when

voice calls out.

“Hey, can’t sleep?”

“No. You either?” Cas shouts across the void.

“Not for a week. This city makes some noise.” The stranger shouts back, their building approaching Cas’s.

“It drives me nuts! Are you from here?” Cas replies, leaning further out the window.

“Just moved here six months ago. Slept fine until the noise started. Now I’m trapped in this sweatbox all night.”

Their windows line up and they stare directly at each other, two specks of light in the sea of darkness. Cas can make out their silhouette, their hair is pulled back from their face, they hold a glass in their hand. The light of the apartment reflects on their teeth as they smile.

“I’ve been thinking of taking a walk.” Cas says, realizing the words are true as they escape his mouth.

“Me too. I’ve heard it’s dangerous though.” The stranger replies, leaning out their window to look back at Cas as their buildings pass one another.

“So have I! I don’t think I care anymore!” Cas shouts, cupping one hand around his mouth, in hopes of carrying the sound.

The stranger shouts a reply, but their words are cut away on the wind as Cas’s building and theirs turn sharply from each other.

Cas stands at his window until the dawn, watching for a small rectangle of light, but it never passes again.

The next night Cas stands in the lobby of his building, hands shaking as he stares at the front door. On the street level, everything seems to sail by so much faster, the countryside zipping away on a cross state train ride. Studies estimate at maximum velocity the city moves at thirty miles per hour. A speed theorized to last only for brief periods. A person can survive jumping from a vehicle moving at thirty miles per hour if they roll right. Cas reaches for the door handle as the crack of a turning doorknob breaks through the empty hall.

“Who’s there?” A voice calls out into the hallway.

But Cas has already retreated up the stairs, up towards the dim light of her little apartment.

Cas spends the rest of that night perched on the windowsill, watching the windows sail by. All are dark.

The night after Cas creeps down the winding staircase to the first floor of her complex. Palms sweating, she listens over the muffled rumble of the city and her own footsteps for any sign of other life. Nothing but the staccato of her feet accompanies the city's performance. Cas does not hesitate tonight, wrenching open the front door. The humid night air washes over her as she steps onto the stoop, buildings sailing by. A lamppost glides by and Cas jumps palms outstretched. Cas's fingers wrap around sweating metal as her knees buckle. She watches her apartment drift away, disappearing from view.

Cas runs against the streets as if going upstream, searching for something. He stumbles, without direction, unsure of how to get anywhere in a city on the move. Cas remembers the fountain in the center of the city, spinning slowly in place. He can't believe he is the first to try this. Cas stares at his reflection in the store window, watching mannequins in gowns and suits slide beneath her face, watching as storefront gives way to rundown apartment building and rundown apartment building to post office, its windows grated. Every building rich and poor, old and new runs past each other one after the other. She knows she can't be the first to feel this dizzying exhilaration of moving through the city, shifting with everything.

Cas stumbles from streetlamp to streetlamp, making his way, moving faster and faster as he gets his legs for the motion. It's like walking against an escalator. Back in middle school kids swore people disappeared. Sometimes whole streets vanish off the map, taking bystanders with them, reappearing days or even years later with their passengers dazed and unchanged. Teachers called it nonsense, but when pressed they could never say how the city worked, only how it didn't. Did they ever sit up late, in their apartments, their homes and watch the city crawl by them? Or did they roll over, huddle into their beds with their lovers or alone in their sheets and pretend not to see, not to hear? Did any of them ever dare to walk outside? Did they feel this vertigo as the street and the sidewalk tug in separate directions and frantically try to fight the current?

Cas had not expected to find anything open in the middle of the night. But a greasy diner slides its way in between a Texaco and a laundromat, its neon sign burning 'op n' the 'e' flickering like a bug zapper. She sprints in order to make it before the building rounds a corner, jumping into the doorway right before the sidewalk veers away.

Inside, the diner is empty save for an old man sitting at the bar and a woman in a checked apron behind the counter. Both turn and look up at Cas when she stumbles through the door. The old man waves like he expected her, the counterwoman sets a menu down two seats away from him. Cas smiles cautiously, breaking into a sweat, wondering what kind of people come out at night during the move. People like Cas.

The shadow of the old man's hat runs down his face like ink, drawing deep, black lines down into the wrinkles of his sallow skin. Cas takes the proffered seat at the counter, stumbling as the ground remains still underfoot.

"What are you looking for, kid?" The old man says, stirring creamer into his coffee.

He stops and takes a sip from his coffee, considers it and adds more creamer. Cas shifts restlessly in his seat, half looking at the man and half staring at the reflection of them both in the mirror behind the bar. The counterwoman reads the newspaper, cleaning glasses at the end of the counter as if she's alone.

"I'm not looking for anything." Cas says.

The old man glances at him from under his hat, his dark eyes catching the light reflecting from the counter.

"Then why can't you sleep?" He asks and Cas feels a chill.

"H-how did you know?" Cas asks and the old man laughs like creaking wood.

"No one runs in front of a moving car for no reason." The old man says, "Likewise, no one comes out here if something didn't drive them to."

The waitress comes by and sets a cup of coffee in front of Cas. Cas stirs creamer into it, less to drink it and more to occupy his shaking hands. Cas opens his mouth, then shuts it again.

On his third attempt he says, "It's the sound of the city."

The old man grunts, shoveling a bite of eggs into his mouth with a

triangle of toast. He chases it with a swig of coffee.

“Ear plugs, or pills, or booze would have taken care of that problem long ago.” He says.

Cas shifts in his seat, absently picking at a crack in the Formica countertop, “Nothing stops the sound, it still comes through.”

The old man fixes Cas with a sidelong glance, “The sound is just a sound. It’s what you hear in it that’s getting to you.”

“What’s in the sound?” Cas asks, leaning closer.

The old man laughs, “You tell me. You’re the one who can’t sleep.”

“It’s deafening. Like the city’s cracking apart around my head.”

“How bout now?” The old man asks.

“What?” Cas asks.

“Are you deafened?”

Cas stills for a moment, listening. Realizing everything but the city fills his ears. He listens past the hum of the florescent lights, past the flip of the woman’s newspaper, past the hiss of the coffee machine, out onto the street. The sound of the city still churns past, but it becomes the rasp of the tide in a storm. A baseline instead of a symphony.

“It’s more, bearable.” Cas says, staring into his coffee.

“Figure out why that is, you may figure out what you’re looking for.” The old man replies.

“Has anyone ever disappeared? At night?” Cas asks, stirring a whirlpool into his coffee.

The old man laughs again, “Wives’ tales. No one I ever heard of.”

“Why so many stories about it then?” Cas persists, “Why is it dangerous to come out at night?”

“Same reason for any urban legend, kid. To keep noses out of business.” The old man replies.

He drains his coffee in one shot before Cas can ask anything more. He pulls out a ten dollar bill smoothing it flat, dropping two quarters on top of it on the counter. He signals the woman behind the counter before tapping the bill.

“For me and the kid. Feed ‘em something, they may fall over soon.” The old man says, ignoring the woman’s hand gesture.

The old man smiles and pats Cas on the back. “Figure out where

you're going kid, it'll make the trip a lot easier."

He turns to leave, but Cas's voice stops him at the door.

"What are you looking for?"

"I'll know it when I see it." He says, adjusting his hat as he jumps out onto the sidewalk and whisks away into the night.

As the door chimes behind the old man, the woman behind the counter comes up to Cas.

"Don't mind the codger. He's full of shit half the time." She says, setting a plate of hash browns in front of Cas. "Potatoes can't go wrong."

"Is he full of shit about this?" Cas asks.

The woman shrugs, leaning on the counter. "Does it matter if you like the shit you hear?"

Cas shrugs, taking a bite of the hashbrowns. The woman is right, you can't go wrong with potatoes.

"Why are you out here at night?" Cas asks, swallowing.

The woman behind the counter smiles down at the salt shakers she's filling.

"Well I need to get paid."

Cas studies her hash browns, "But you could have a day job."

The woman nods her head noncommittally, "I could, but there will always be night work to do and night workers to feed. Night work is easier to get, because no one wants it and usually pays more."

"How is this place even operating at night? Most businesses lose electricity during the shift. Why keep it open?" Cas asks.

The woman smirks at her, eyes crinkling, "Nosy aren't you?" Cas begins to apologize and she holds up a hand, "Teasing, calm down. The building has its own generator, collects solar power during the day and stores it for night. Like I said, there are night workers to feed who otherwise may not get to eat until dawn. The owner also just likes the night crowd."

Cas smudges a stray bit of potato with her fork, peering through the window into the kitchen beyond the counter, "Where's the owner then?"

The woman behind the counter laughs, holding out her hand.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Delana."

Cas stutters, grasping Delana's calloused brown hand in her own, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize."

Delana waves off her apology, lining up the salt shakers like sentinels, "How could you? I didn't tell you—"

She looks up expectantly at him and Cas apologizes again.

"Cas, I'm Cas."

"Well nice to meet you Cas."

They lapse into silence, Cas staring at his plate making idle circles with his fork and Delana moving on to fill the pepper shakers.

"Are you gonna map the whole city on that plate, or can I take that from you?" Delana asks after a moment.

"Sure, sorry." Cas says, setting down their fork.

"Save sorry for things that really need fixing, hon. I'm not going to stab you, relax." Delana says, handing the plate through the window to an olive skinned woman whose grey streaked hair was piled high in a net upon her head.

The woman signed something to Delana with her free hand, lips moving silently; Delana nodded back.

"I'm sor—Er, may I ask you something?" Cas asks.

"Did I say my name was Britannica? You're just full of questions." Delana says, and the woman in the kitchen swats at her through the window, "Oh I'm just teasing the kid, Janet."

Janet waves to Cas, before disappearing from the window, only to emerge from the door behind the counter, signing to Delana.

"She says you can ask her whatever you want. Her voice doesn't work but her hands never stop." Delana said to Cas, "Oh I am not, don't even." She says to Janet, waving her hand.

Janet rolls her eyes before turning to Cas expectantly.

"How do people find you here at night?" Cas asks.

"They think of it." Delana translates as Janet signs and mouths the words.

"You mean they wish this place to them?"

Delana and Janet look at each other, sharing an exchange which Cas can't understand before turning back to Cas.

"More like, they think of coming to us." Delana says.

“Their feet lead them here.” Janet adds.

Behind Cas, the door chimes and a crowd of five comes through, in overalls, polos, and security uniforms, all looking tired and talking amongst each other.

“And there is my night crowd.” Delana says, “Showtime.”

Janet waves goodbye to Cas and ducks back into the kitchen as the group settles into a corner booth. Cas stands, adding a few dollars to the money left by the old man as Delana pulls a stack of menus up from behind the counter.

“Thanks for talking to me Delana, it was good to meet you.” Cas says as Delana steps from behind the counter.

“It was good meeting you too, Cas. Don’t be a stranger.” Delana says.

“Are you open during the day?” Cas asks, pausing with his hand on the door.

Delana smiles, “We’re open, but you’ll find me best at night.”

Cas smiles back, “I’ll just have to come again then.”

Cas steps out onto the sidewalk and the diner whirls a corner, blinking sign slipping from sight.

Finding the fountain feels like walking upstream. The street under Cas’s feet propelling her forward and left and right, sending her down alleyways and slipping between buildings. There is a tug deep in Cas’s gut as though someone hooked a string through her belly button and now is reeling her in. Cas runs toward the reeling, runs like gravity has taken a holiday, slipping like an eel between the buildings, becoming a part of their migration. The fear that the string will snap taught, lead her astray and she will be crushed flies through her head. But Cas does not stop. The tugging leads Cas down an alley growing narrower and narrower. Cas’s feet hesitate, trip at the thought of being ground away in the narrow space. But down the alley she catches a glimpse of green. The park. She thinks of the fountain, mermaid cherubs’ arms raised as a stone globe spins, balancing in their raised hands. Remembers that oak tree with the tire swing, the one she almost sailed into the night on.

Cas darts into the alley, outstretched palms grazing the buildings on either side. The hub of the turning wheel. He keeps running, each

step sticks, that sinking sucking feeling of drowning in his dreams as the brick whales sing all around him. The end of the alley is fifty feet away. The sound tries to drag Cas down. As if the streets want to suck Cas in and make him a part of it all, change him outside and in. Forty feet. Away from the fountain sputtering in his memory. Thirty feet. Away from the heart of the city. Twenty. Away from the old oak tree as his father catches him. Cas has to see it. Ten, the alley's as wide as his shoulders. The string becomes a slingshot, launching him through the alley. Must See It. The alley shuts and the buildings grind together. Cas stumbles in the hot night air, sweat soaked shirt and jeans plastered to his body.

The park is just across the street, its trees creeping slowly past in search of somewhere to plant their roots. From here Cas can see the glimmering edge of the fountain in the distant center, the smooth globe spinning slowly, dwarfed to a baseball's stature by distance. A stitch in her side, Cas stumbles forward struggling to catch their breath for the final sprint.

A strip mall sails in front of the park, eclipsing it from view. Cursing, Cas tries to run against it, hurrying before the city carries them away from the park's lush green, from the hiss of the fountain slowly spinning. Their lungs burn and sides pinch, but Cas runs against the mall, trying to catch a small glimpse of the park in the gaps between the shops. The mall passes and Cas, stumbles, leaning against a mailbox. The park is gone.

The next day, a Saturday, a storm front blankets the city in the white noise of rain, the sounds of traffic muffled by the distant rolls of thunder and the rain's steady hiss. The clouds insulate the city and water steams steadily off the pavement. Through the heat and the damp and the hissing, Cas sleeps, blind and deaf to the daylight, hidden from the sun. In dreams Cas runs through the night, banging on doors flying past as the sidewalk tears from under their feet. Above, the whales groan and croon, a song almost decipherable. They wake with the death of the storm at dusk.

As night cloaks the city, Cas waits for the sounds of passing cars and pedestrians to fade outside their window, for the click of neighbors'

locks and the muffled drone of televisions. As everyone settles in for the night's voyage, Cas pulls on their shoes. In the doorway, they look back at the map in their living room, in the center, sits the ashtray a single marble in the middle.

Pause

Ed Moreno

They say a man's heart is as big as his fist. In Ben's case, then, his heart must be the size of a bucket. I met him on the leafy banks of the Yarra, Melbourne's liquid heart.

When I got home later, I mentioned nothing about Ben to Ivan, just squeezed a cuddle out of him before heading down for a swim.

In the pool everything liquefies, myself included. In the pool everything collapses and I whirl through the water, digging the sound it makes as it percolates through my head. I take pleasure in stretching time and space: I'm infinite when I extend my arm again and again.

That night I swam for over an hour, watching the navy-blue tile floor revolve below me and around me like a marble globe, while outside the sky darkened above the city and the clouds moved through me, inside and outside the building. It was good to be in the water, with everything mixing together, with all the lines blurred, the tiles and the city rolling past without end, and me thinking of the giant, Ben, with his giants hands, his bucket-sized heart.

My body was rubber when I pulled myself out of the pool.

Ivan was doing push-ups at the foot of our bed when I walked in. He finished and looked at me, chest and face flamingo pink. I smiled and said "Have you always been this sexy?"

Don't tell me you're only just working that out," he said.

There's something that separates us, and it's not just the jokes, or the length of the hall, or even where I end and he begins. Sometimes I'll be inside him, or him inside me, we'll be fucking—and I'll realise I'm alone.

I sat in front of the TV with the sound turned down. Ivan was in bed. Watching porn in darkness is like moving through water: time stretches and nearly slows to a stop; my right fist becomes the universe; boundaries blur.

I'm interested only in the beginning of the encounter: the first flicker of possibility when one man begins to lean his head toward

another's. I watched the men onscreen as they caught each other's eyes. I rocked my cock in my fist while I worked the remote, rewinding, pausing, replaying in my mind the moment earlier in the day when I first caught sight of Ben sprawled across the bluestone promenade on the water's edge—his long leg stretched out, the river at his back.

In the morning, Ivan woke me. he grinned, nodding toward my right arm, which was still shoved inside my track pants, and asked, "How you going there?"

I said, "I could use a hand."

Ivan said, "I reckon you're got everything firmly in hand, champ."

The rain that morning was heavy—it darkened the apartment, the sky and the rest of the world—and since I never liked working in other people's gardens in this kind of rain, I rescheduled all my work, and rang big Ben.

Later, I stood next to him while he watched me, cigarette between his thumb and forefinger. The smoke hung in the air far above my head, I watched it circle and storm like the clouds, then saw the big fella begin to lean his face toward mine. I looked at his thick lips, breathed in rainfall, jasmine, cigarette smoke, sleep and sweat, saw him flick his cigarette off the balcony, saw his lips opening, the tip of his tongue, and I wished just then that I could pause, rewind, replay, pause.

The Currawong

Ed Moreno

Oscar woke up scratching.

He'd thrown his bed frame out because the bedbugs were nesting there, but a new string of bites on the inside of his wrist indicated that he'd be throwing out his mattress and bedding as well. His head kerchunked just thinking about it and his legs liquefied and his breath turned to blood but he talked himself back from the edge by tuning his ears to the whirr in the walls. He convinced himself it was organic and not mechanical and he synched his heartbeat to it. Soon he was inside the walls but before he knew it he woke up scratching again.

He reached for his notebook and flicked past 200 pages of dates phone numbers and lists until he reached a blank page, which he dated before he wrote mattress on it. He squeezed get rid of into the margin next to it.

He was pretty sure he'd fractured his essential me into two distinct hims; one did all the movement and the other did all the worrying. They shared a mattress on the floor, a continuity of thin and scabby limbs and a stack of fears and resentments. It wasn't comfortable, but the whirr in the walls eased things, until his neighbour started moving on the other side of the wall. And then the currawongs called outside and the busses passed and the bilious light of day starting creeping into the room, then along the floor. Then up the wall.

No whirring hum now just kookaburras and kids cackling, and the light was walking across his room and up his walls so he reached for his notebook and scribbled visit andy now. His hand shook as he wrote move house today on another part of the page. Then he crossed that out and wrote pay rent???

He crawled the metre and a half to the bathroom and in the shower stall watched himself retch while both head and stomach cartwheeled between the yellow tile walls.

He dressed between making lists, combing hairs, scratching, staring out the window, and making lists stop scratching!!! haircut go back to school gym? It was two hours before he got out the door. He was

in the doorway of his building when the fluoro lime green shadow of the plane tree and the faces on the footpath reminded him he needed sunnies. He ducked inside, climbed into his hovel, grabbed his sunnies off the floor and then closed and locked the door behind him and slid onto his mattress.

The hum in the walls kept him company for another quarter of an hour or so until the 311 came past again, prompting him to reach for his notebook to write sunnies then cross it off. He circled get rid of mattress and pay rent? before crossing them both off and writing move out now!!!

It was easier than dragging the mattress out the door.

He dragged a suitcase and a bin liner behind him, arguing with himself behind a pair of sunglasses while second-, third and fourth- guessing every movement he made, cross now no wait no cross now no WAIT. Cross. Now! Most times he made enough false starts that by the time he did cross, horns honked and traffic stopped and he was forced to run, suitcase rattling, bin liner threatening to bust.

He tried to vanish as he curved up the hill along Elizabeth Bay Road, starting and stopping. He doubted and undecided his way conspicuously the full length of Ward Avenue, hugging the kerb at the back end of the Cross with all the other conspicuous vanishers until he reached William Street, where he stopped to scratch his wrists and ankles.

Trying to decide what to do from there took several minutes. In the end there was only one thing for it—make the break and take the hill; if he took it with enough speed now, he could make it past the Coca-Cola sign through the light at Darlinghurst Road and all the way to Andy's door without getting snatched.

Andy buzzed him in straightaway. The lift took forever though, and since the foyer was ridiculously shiny Oscar turned up the volume on his sunnies and cast his eyes toward the floor, but even the floor reflected himself back to him. He focussed on the buzz in his head which became the thrum of the lift and at last a door opened in front of him. The lift was brighter than the foyer even and the mechanical hum got stuck behind his eyes.

Andy was bright red from hair to toe, a ginger galah in a maroon

tracksuit and bright red Air Max sneakers. He waved Oscar in with a feathery sweep.

Oscar loved this room because of all the cacti. Pincushions, prickly pears, old man cactus, aloes, stone plants, hens-and-chicks and agaves with rosettes of sword-shaped leaves spiked every surface of the room, but there was nowhere to sit – with everything was covered in spines, swords and hooks – except for a chaise lounge covered in cow hide in the middle of the room. Oscar dropped his bags and tiptoed through, settling in the cow hide lounge. This was the moment he lived for, right before a shot, there in the desert. He relaxed for a moment and breathed; he was still disconnected, from his own body and from Andy, but he could relate to the weird cacti in the room.

In the corner, Andy pulled his lock box out of the bottom drawer and shuffled stacks of pineapple-yellow fifties and watermelon-pink twenties, then dug out a handful of plastic baggies full of methamphetamine crystals and ecstasy tablets.

Andy flicked his finger against a plastic baggie, holding it up toward the light. The crystals inside it looked like rock salt. Oscar's skin flushed.

"Settle," Andy said, pulling the baggie back to his lap, then added "Think fast," and tossed it to Oscar.

He was so high when he left there that he had to leave twice. The first time, he left through the window, off the balcony on big black wings, like a big black currawong winging up the shit-filled laneway. He was well out past the Coca-Cola sign and sky-scraping above the plane trees and halfway to Surry Hills before he remembered his suitcase.

Fonie had told him about the bird. There's a bird, she'd said, living in the studio, but he looks after himself. He didn't know what that meant; except that, except for the bird he'd have the place to himself.

His bags were still at the door, but he sat at the long wooden table in the middle of the long room watching Fonie's portraits disappear as night came up in the room.

In here, high above a secret Surry Hills laneway crowded with frangipanis, above Fonie's sex dungeon on the ground floor, behind a tagged corrugated tin sheeting wall away from it all at the top of these

stairs and ladders, he felt liked he'd climbed up from his hole in the Cross—from all the faces and bugs—crawled up from his body into his own dark head.

He heard the bird while the room was filling up with dark, the fluttering of wings in the corner, a little scratching. Then he heard it moving across the floor, out of the corner and into the room.

It was a pied currawong; he could see the faintest bit of white at the back of its wings. Its bill was massive, a black bullet. The bird's bright yellow eye fixed on him in the semi-darkness and Oscar looked back at it, trying to synch his own living energy with the bird's, but the bird was in constant mechanical motion, clicking and whirring and humming, and Oscar was unable to stick him into place. He heard the snap of its camera eye, and heard it snap another picture, and then another, and then another.

Lurleen

Regina Jamison

Chapter One

The cigarette was perched on my lip, angled, like a humble peacock's tail; the glowing orange circle at its tip – an eye. I exhaled, and smoke swirled and dipped into the breeze.

We were sitting on the roof of a house I had been scouting for weeks. Our feet pressed to burning against the pristine tiles to counteract the slant. Lurleen sat beside me with her mouth hung open – *catchin' flies* – as the folks in Mississippi would say.

Lurleen shifted her hips to the right and her feet slid. I quickly leaned over to grab the tail end of her shirt but she pulled away, stood up, leaned into the motion, and careened off the side of the roof. She spread her arms out like the horizontal bar of a kite caught in a breeze. A few seconds later I heard it...splash! "HOT DAMN!" Lurleen whooped. It was a good thing the house was basically in the middle of nowhere 'cause Lurleen has a big mouth. I heard her splashing around from where I sat. The sun was hot on my head and my cigarette was nearly gone.

"Come on down here now, Smiddy. It's your turn!" I had dared Lurleen; said she wouldn't jump off this here roof but, as usual, she done it. That's how she is. Ask her to do any crazy damn thing and eventually she'd do it. We been coming to this house and sitting on this roof everyday now for a week when, finally, Lurleen said she'd do it on Sunday – the day of the Lord. Not that she's religious or nothin' but she said, and I quote, "Just in case." Well, today is Sunday, and Lurleen done careened off the roof. I like that word – *careened*. I'm working on improving my vocabulary 'cause I think people respect you when you can rattle off a few grade A words. I never finished high school but I figure folks don't have to know that 'specially if I build up my vocabulary. So *careened* is my word for today. Lurleen gets mad 'cause she says she don't know what I'm talking about half the time, so now I have a big chart on the wall with alla the words I've studied on it. It's big but it ain't nearly filled so Lurleen can study right along with me if

she wants, but I know she don't. She just likes to complain.

"Smiddy! Get your narrow behind down here girl! You missing all this beautiful chlorine." We been coming here for a week but we only got as far as the roof. We ain't never been in the house or the pool on account of Lurleen's promise to jump off the roof first. Once she done that, we'd be free to roam.

I flicked my cigarette butt to the side and watched as it slowly tumbled to the roof's edge. I stood up slowly. There wasn't no breeze so nothing was pushing against me. I looked out over the edge onto an enormous swatch of green that hugged a slight border of blue and thought briefly about buying a house for me and Lurleen someday. A two or three story fairytale house with a large pool, like the one Lurleen jumped into, in the backyard.

"SMIDDY!" Lurleen, God bless her, act like she don't know nothin' about privacy and keeping quiet. Like I said, this house is basically in the middle of nowhere but sometimes *nowhere* can be found.

"I'm coming, dammit! Stop alla that yelling!"

"Well get your ass down here then!" I crouched down then sprang up like a bobble-head and jumped into the air. I spread my arms out like Lurleen did and felt the warm air cradle me before letting me fall.

Chapter Two

We splashed around in the pool for a while; Lurleen more so than me. I had to take time out to get my equipment from the truck. I parked on the circular drive near a bunch of thick old oaks so we wouldn't be too obvious. It's a company truck with a logo and everything. I thought it wise to bring the company truck just in case we got spotted. I could say I was out on assignment or double checking the system or got the wrong address – something, anything, just to bide me some time if needed. But I really brought it 'cause alla my tools of the trade are in that truck – pick guns, torque wrenches, bump keys, fingerprint powders, various brushes and the list goes on. You name it and it's in there which makes my job a lot easier.

I gathered everything and headed for the house that had become my pet when I installed the security system weeks ago. The mom was

on her cell phone the whole time I was working bragging to someone about how the family was taking a trip to the South of France for three weeks and how someone named Pierre just *adored* her and the girls. She wanted a system installed so she'd feel safe while she was away. That's what she told me, so she'd "feel safe". I just nodded my head and offered up a, "Yes, ma'am" to her face, but I was laughing silently to myself. Maybe I just don't understand rich folks or maybe my lack of schooling is to blame, but it tickles me when I think about someone living *inside* a big fancy house without a security system – and it didn't look like she had just moved in either – but then having one installed when they're *not gonna* be there. Crazy! I guess her things are worth more than her life. But not much more 'cause the system she picked was just one step up from a combination lock. I don't know if it's all of the trees surrounding this place or the money that seems to grow on them but these people have a strong illusion of safety.

I got out my bump keys, pick gun, and torque wrench and set them down near my knees which pressed into a large, braided welcome mat below the door. The porch was shaded and cool. I checked my tool belt for the items I'd need as soon as I cracked open the front door and stepped inside the house. Everything was in place. I went to work picking the lock while a lone cricket in the grass rubbed and rubbed complaining about the heat.

Lurleen fell into the house spilling chlorinated water deep into the roots of a big, shaggy, white carpet. Then she got down on her hands and knees and pretended she was eating grass.

"Look at me, Smiddy. I'm like a big, wet bear." She turned her head toward me and smiled creating the cutest, deepest dimples this side of Louisiana. I kicked her in the butt and she fell over.

"Quit fooling around. These people gonna come back and find their stuff all wet up 'cause of you."

"We'll be long gone by then, Smiddy."

"I know...but still."

"Oh, you worry too much. Come on, let's go look upstairs. This is definitely *the* fanciest house you done broke into by far!" She scrambled from the rug and made for the stairs, leaving a wet footprints trail

behind.

“*WE*, Lurleen! *WE* done broke into!” I yelled up the winding staircase and shook my head at her eagerness. She had left the little footsies I told her to put over her feet by the front door. I had mine on. She was leaving fingerprints all over the banister and was probably shedding hair and skin all over the place. I had on gloves and had put on my work overalls before entering. But I was keen on forensics from watching CSI. Lurleen was more of a *Jersey Shore* girl. I’d have to really clean up when we finally left this place. But for now, I just shook my head again and followed.

Upstairs was massive and all white. I felt like I should’ve bought a ticket to enter. The house was unusually modern for Louisiana which touted or should I say, promoted, shotgun houses, alligator houses, old-timey Spanish and French designs or some intricate Creole creation; but not this house. It was Louisiana on the outside with its wide upper and lower level porches and massive columns – very plantation like. But inside was pure New York City. I had been to the Museum of Modern Art once when I was a little girl and I felt like I was there now with all the stark white walls and humungous art pieces and all of the light pouring in from the big, big windows. It was gorgeous.

“Come on, Smiddy. I wanna check out the bedroom.” Lurleen grabbed my hand and pulled me. She had stripped out of her wet clothes and left them in a big heap at the top of the stairs. She pulled me some more and I had a nice view of her fat ass jiggling as we walked toward the bedroom. Seeing her ass always makes me horny. I felt the warmth of desire spread from my belly down to my thighs. I slapped her bare bottom with my free hand which left a print that slowly faded and formed a kaleidoscope of red.

“Oow! Damn, Smiddy!” Lurleen held her ass. “Now is not the time.”

“Couldn’t help it girl; couldn’t help it.” I grinned and Lurleen ran into the master bedroom. I followed.

My eyes went immediately to the ceiling where large beams of dark, polished mahogany were spread across it as if the roof would cave in without them and at the center several ceiling fans twirled lazily around

and around again. I stood there looking at those fans with such intent you'd of thought they were talking to me. I was so still it made Lurleen pause and stare right along with me. I was glad for that 'cause I wasn't seeing nothin' but I was listening to everything and as my heart pounded in my chest every sound was magnified to about one hundred times its original pitch. I heard the blades of the fans slicing through the air, the hum of the grandfather clock in the hallway, hell I even heard that damn cricket with its damn rubbing! But I didn't hear nothin' else which was fantastic and I was able to move again.

"What the hell was that about?" Lurleen asked while doing a belly flop onto the plumped up mattress.

"Just making sure we're alone," I said.

"Of course we are silly. What makes you think otherwise?" Lurleen's not as observant as me. Sometimes I have to break things down to her.

"The fan, Lurleen, it's moving. Now either them rich folks was in a rush and forgot to check to make sure things were off or someone done been here before us. I just wanted to be sure they weren't *still* here. That would not be good."

"Oh, Smiddy, you worry too much!"

"Well, somebody's got to." I shoved my hands in my pockets and looked around some more. The floor-to-ceiling windows left little room for privacy but not much was needed, I guess, when the Atlantic Ocean was your neighbor. Miles and miles of water was on display and standing in that room, in that space, I felt it was all for me, for us. I turned back to look at Lurleen. She was laid out on the bed with her hands behind her head and her legs spread eagle – giving me the VIP view of downtown. I'm not sure if she was aware of her position or not but she was smiling at me real sexy-like and that shit always turns me on! I gave her my own sexy stare with the narrowed eyes and shit then I licked my lips and smiled.

"What your smiling for gal?" I asked.

"I'm smiling at you; always looking out for me and taking care of me; bringing me to this fancy house so we can have a good time and see things different." I smiled wider since I couldn't blush, and I lowered my head a little. It was nice for Lurleen to say these things.

“Come on over here, Smiddy. Come on, sit right here beside me.” I walked over to Lurleen and stood beside the bed. Before I could sit down she snatched me by the straps of my overalls and kissed me long and hard. Well, I ain’t no slouch when it comes to loving Lurleen. I pressed her pretty head into the soft bed, kissed her some more, nibbled at her neck – which I know turns her on immensely – then pressed into all of them soft parts – the dry and the wet. Lurleen rocked and shook like a kayak on a rough sea then she let out a moan like boats do when they rub against the wood of the dock – pressing their sea soaked parts into the dry, hardness of the wood. I had forgotten all about would-be intruders and CSI forensics as we both collapsed into the memory foam mattress and drifted to sleep in each other’s arms.

Chapter Three

We’d slept for a while in that firm, but soft, bed with Lurleen’s leg holding mine captive, her arm around my neck like a warm noose. I managed to extract myself from Lurleen’s holding pen, climbed down from the bed – which was only something I did in rich folk’s homes – and opened the French doors that led out to the balcony on the second story landing or the *verandah* as we liked to say in the South.

A sweet olive smell mixed with sea salt filled the air. I looked around for the olive tree but couldn’t catch a glimpse of it full on so I assumed it was around the side of the house, stationed somewhere upwind. I looked at the ocean again. No big waves, but there was constant movement as the sun slide off it in spots and slammed into it in other places. I felt relaxed looking out over the water. It was peaceful here and these folks were lucky to be living life like they was. I wanted the same for me and Lurleen but I didn’t know how to go about it; unless buying up lottery tickets is considered a way. Other than that, I was clueless. I worked. Lurleen worked. How many jobs did we need? And more jobs meant less time spent together then, after a while, we wouldn’t even know one another and all the money in the world wasn’t worth forgetting about Lurleen. She’s my life and I suspect I’m hers. At least I’m hoping. Anyway, that’s the road my daddy and momma took – the more jobs more money road – and it went straight into a dead end.

I'm not fixin' to travel down that path. Not me and Lurleen, no way.

All my daydreaming stopped when I felt two arms wrapped around my waist and soft lips pressed against my ear.

"Whatcha doin' out here?" Lurleen whispered. I reached behind me to touch her hips. I felt strength and softness. She was still in her birthday suit which was just like her – hating clothes, saying they is too constricting. Well, really, *constricting* is my word. Lurleen would just say they was too tight.

"I'm just standing here looking at the water, smelling the ocean air, and thinking."

"About what?"

"About you, Sugar, about you." I turned to face her, pulled her into me, and held her face gently in my hands.

"What about me?" Her eyes were wide and wet and wonderful.

"I was thinking about how much I love you. And I hope you feel the same way about me."

"Why, you know I do, Smiddy."

"I know you do, baby, but it's nice to hear it."

"I love you, Smiddy Boisson. I love you with alla my heart."

"Thank you, Lurleen." I kissed her softly on her sweet lips then a little harder. My desire was growing and I could feel Lurleen heating up too. I wanted to make love to her out on the verandah – mix her scent in with the sweet olives and sea salt and call it home, but time was passing and we needed to move on.

"Mmm...ok girl, that's enough for now. Don't you want to explore the rest of the house before we got to call it a day?" Lurleen leaned into me one last time and trembled. She is so sensitive.

"Yeah, I guess so." Suddenly, her eyes lit up. "Oh, I want to check out the other bedrooms and the bathrooms!" I betcha the bathrooms are enormous!" She turned and trotted off. I called out after her.

"Well, I'm gonna try to find where they keep the beer. Maybe look for some steaks to take with us. Place like this oughta have steaks." I stepped inside and closed the French doors. I looked at the ocean one last time before moving on.

Chapter Four

I heard Lurleen oowing and ahhing in the bathroom as I made my way downstairs. My mission – to find a frosty, tall one although, this seemed like a wine and champagne house to me, but I was hoping.

I made a wrong turn while searching for the kitchen which left me in a huge room filled with books, a large circular table that seemed to be the focal point of the room, so some really old tree musta died so it could sit here taking up space; and a large, flat screen computer sat on top. There was a large, flat screen TV on the wall with replicas of Marlins and other tropical fish swimming beside and around it. I mean, I hope they were replicas. Can a fish be stuffed? And why would anyone stick fish up on the wall? I figured this room belonged to a male ‘cause a woman wouldn’t do such a dumb thing but, then again, the lady of the house didn’t seem too bright. I did, however, crave deeply for the computer and the TV.

I walked into another room filled mostly with one of them classy pianos that you see on the tube; all black and shiny like someone loved it a lot and pressed that love into it daily. A baby grand. I think that’s what they call it. I sat down on the stool and lifted the cover to expose the keys. I had played the trumpet in junior high school. I was pretty good but that was just to impress the girls. It wasn’t a passion of mine or nothing like that.

I smashed down on some white keys and poked at some of the black ones for a bit before I recalled the beer I was searching for. I ran a quick hand across the piano’s entire face like I was back-handing it for the obscene sounds it made then I was off searching for the kitchen again.

Damn this house is big! That was my main thought during my journey through it. Maybe it was once one of those grand plantation homes with slaves and shit doing voodoo spells over the Massa’s food. I laughed to myself picturing the whole scene, but when I thought about it, I realized it *really* could have been. There were a lot of old plantation homes in Louisiana where tours were given and people learned about the state’s sordid history. But there were also many plantation homes that were converted into “regular” homes for the rich. Hell, I wanted to

be regular. I decided right there and then that I needed to dream bigger 'cause I was fantasizing about one day owning crumbs while these folks had the whole pie! Make that two whole pies and the damn recipe!

Finally, a refrigerator. I wanted to kiss it. I threw the door open wide in search of a beer with my name on it but the doggone frig was nearly empty. Not a beer in sight just salad stuff and a quart of skim milk. Skinny folks who dieted in hopes of becoming even thinner lived here. Either that or they dumped the food before they left. Three weeks was plenty of time for shit to spoil. Just my luck. But, then, like a mirage in heat, from the corner of my eye, I spotted a long, steel looking freezer in the corner of the room. I walked over to it and before I opened it I made the sign of the cross and said a little prayer 'cause that's how we do it in Nawlins.

The freezer was long, wide, and deep and, at first, I had some trouble lifting the handle. But then I wrapped my hands under it like I was fixin' to do a bicep curl and I pulled. Slowly, the lid creaked open and a storm of clouds came pouring out. They rose up into my eyes, my face, and then they surrounded my head like some crazy cold front that done come down from Canada. I fanned and fanned at it thinking that someone musta put the freezer on super, super cold or these people had a huge store of dry ice. I fanned at it a bit more. The clouds began to clear little by little; one gaseous drop followed gently by another; and just like the magic vapor that slowly disappears before the outline of the magician can be seen, a face appeared out of the clouds beneath me. The eyes – open, green, and glassy – the lips – thin and blue – except on the right side where they was puffed up and blood had dried and crystalized over them. There was blood on the forehead too. It had frozen into a jagged, diagonally shaped, zigzag which made me think of Frankenstein's monster. It might seem like I was standing there studying the body and all, but I wasn't. My mind soaked up all this information real quick-like and then I slammed the freezer shut. I just stood there; handle still in my hand, dazed. I lifted the lid again, looked at the corpse then slammed the freezer shut once more. This time I noticed the blonde hair frozen and fanned out around the face. I saw a string of bruises strung around the neck and one, decent sized, diamond earring

in the right ear. This is how I knew it was the mother. She had been talking on the phone, twirlin' that mop of blonde tresses of hers, when the light from overhead jumped down into the diamond, making it sparkle and shine. That totally captured my attention and solidified my mark on this here place. But I wasn't fixin' on killing anyone. Lurleen and I like to break into rich folks homes just to get a glimpse of how the other half lives. We just look around at their fancy stuff, swim in their humungous pools, make love in their super high beds; nothing much really. No harm, no foul, as I heard it said and I'm thinking it applies in this case, hell, in alla our "break ins" 'cause we ain't never done nothing to nobody. And that's the God's honest truth. But, now, we got a dead body on our hands.

I pulled the lid up again and looked at the dead woman, eye-to-eye. I poked around at her blonde hair with the very tip of my pinky – scared to touch it and not wanting to leave any sizeable amount of evidence. I poked at her gently, here and there, and that's when I saw it...a frozen nose behind her hair. It was considerably smaller than momma's but frozen just the same. I slammed the lid down again and booked it outta that room.

"Lurleen! Lurleen!" I shouted trying to keep the panic outta my voice but it kept showing up in my movements. I was banging into things, almost knocking things over, tripping over my own two feet. Shit! I couldn't get outta there fast enough. "Lurleen! Where the hell you at girl? Answer me now, Lurleen!" I had stopped at the foot of the staircase landing with my hands on my hips and my ears standing taller than a clown's hat at Mardi Gras.

"Whatcha want, Smiddy?" I started up the stairs two at a time.

"Where you girl?"

"In the master bath," Lurleen said in a terribly poor British accent. I walked from room to room until I found her. She was in the Jacuzzi bath, bubbles up to her neck, and her all tucked down into them looking sexy as hell.

"Oh, Lurleen, why you in the bathtub?" I rolled my eyes a bit and gave a little stomp with my right foot which, when put together, meant that I was either hungry or exasperated or both. I hoped Lurleen knew which.

“I decided that there was too much chlorine on me to do any good so I decided I needed a bath. I wanna be sweet and silky for my baby.” With this, Lurleen scooped up a hefty load of bubbles into her hand and blew them across the room at me. I just looked at her for about a minute deciding whether to yank her out by her hair or by her neck.

“Lurleen, you gotta get outta that bath right now. We need to leave, right now, pronto!” Lurleen smiled then let out a short laugh.

“What are you talking about, Smiddy? We just got here, practically.”

“And we’s going!” I didn’t have time to explain what I had found to Lurleen right then ‘cause I knew she’d want to see the bodies and cry over them, and maybe even consider calling the police. I couldn’t, didn’t, want to deal with alla that so, instead, I pushed back as much bubbles as I could until I found her hands then I pulled her outta that tub.

“Smiddy, what has gotten into you? You pulling me outta my hot bath, got me slip-sliding on this here cold floor.” I was pulling Lurleen out of the bathroom toward the stairs and her wet pile of clothes. “Slow down, Smiddy!” I stopped short. Lurleen nearly bumped into me but I put my hands heavy on her wet shoulders. I needed to make her understand that I was not fooling around and that the situation was serious. I gripped her shoulders a little tighter and looked her dead in her eyes.

“Lurleen, baby, there is no time to explain but you need to believe me; we need to leave right now. Right now, okay? Do you hear me? Do you understand?” Lurleen looked at me, but, then, her eyes shifted and she went deeper. When she came back from her soul search she said, “Okay, Smiddy, I’m ready. Let’s go.” And that was all it took because that’s all it ever takes with me and Lurleen.

Chapter Five

I put on my old, worn, grey sweatshirt that said “Hassle” in big red letters across the front. I’d gotten it around seven years ago when I used to live with my granddaddy in Hassle, Mississippi. In one big red word it summed up what findin’ them dead bodies in that freezer was gonna

be. Lurleen, ever the optimist, put on her pink sweatshirt that had “Eulogy” spelled out in big black letters across her ample breasts. But, whatever the word, it didn’t matter ‘cause we knew we was in a pickle.

I held onto Lurleen and she held onto me as we both sat quiet in the crappy apartment we rented from Mrs. Turner. We was both silent. Lurleen’s arms were holdin’ me but her mind was fastened on them dead bodies I found in the freezer. I knew I shouldn’a showed her those frozen, bruised and bloodied, crystallized faces but there was something deep inside me, what they call, the subconscious, that wanted me to share that horrid scene with someone so, I did. Now, we both sat on the makeshift pallet of a bed we had on the floor with those deadly images continually streaming through our minds; like someone kept hittin’ “replay”. I’m not sure if it was me who shivered or if it was Lurleen, but it didn’t matter none ‘cause we both held onto each other a little tighter. I pulled Lurleen deeper into my side and it felt good to be lying in each other’s arms. I felt...safe, like I was far away from the bad stuff; like the day had never happened; like just being near her was an automatic do-over.

“Hold me tighter, Smiddy,” Lurleen said her voice small and cracked. I pulled her in deeper still. Her head was heavy on top of my tiny breasts and I didn’t know if it was a comfort to her or not but I hoped it was.

“It’s okay, Lurleen, everything is gonna be okay.” I whispered these words above her ear hoping they’d fall and bounce gently like cotton around her head softening the vision that was on her mind.

“I keep seeing them faces all swollen and purple and...oh, God, I wish I could wipe it from my brain; just erase it clean.” Lurleen’s hand dug into my stomach.

“I know baby, I know.” The guilt I had for showing them bodies to Lurleen deepened and I knew I should have followed my first mind by walking right by that deep, gleaming casket of a freezer but I slowed my pace and now my baby was suffering.

“You think somebody gonna find them soon or should we call the police?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been thinking on it but I haven’t come up with

an answer yet. I do know that we ain't fixin' to make no hasty decisions about alla this. Nobody knows nothin' about them bodies yet so that gives us some time; time we can use to try to think this thing through. Now I done forgot all about fingerprints, and skin cells, and all kinds of evidence we most likely left back there after I got an eyeful of them bodies so, I'm sure the cops will come visiting us eventually. We just need to have a plan and show some consistency with it." I knew from alla them *Law & Order* shows that I watched that cops looked for inconsistency in your alibi which is why they asked you over and over again to tell them what happened. I figured consistency was the key.

"Maybe we could save up some bucks and book it back to Mississippi again? You think your granddaddy would have us?"

"He might, but he's too old to be handlin' all this, Lurleen. Besides, if we run it'll just make us look guilty."

Chapter Six

Several weeks went by slow as winter. Nobody said nothin' to us and we didn't say nothin' to nobody. Lurleen still wanted to go to the police but I reminded her that we were trespassing and that that would not help our case none. I told her again that if things got heated and the cops were insistent on making a bee line for us as the killers, she was to tell them, when they got around to interviewing her, that she did indeed come to work at the house with me but, it was a few weeks earlier when I *really did* have a legitimate reason for being at the house. I was inputting the security system. I reckoned it would be smarter to say the earlier date on account of there'd be a work order for it at my job – evidence, that I prayed, if needed, could save our hides.

It was a nice day – sunny and warm. In the mirror I caught a glimpse of my forehead and it was shining like a lighthouse beacon. I wiped at it with my bare arm as I came down offa the step stool. My vocabulary list had gotten longer than I ever expected so I had to move it up the wall a notch to make room for more paper. The word of the day was "*gormless*", which was just a fancy word for "*stupid*". I liked the fact that even stupid could be dressed up and made to sound like

something else. I threw on my sneakers and decided to head on over to the Peek-or-Two – a strip joint over on Mayflower Avenue in Baton Rouge where Lurleen worked. I had the day off and figured I'd surprise her while making sure the cops weren't trying to surprise her too. I knew that I needed to be her backbone right now; not that she'd cave, no, but because them dead bodies still played on her mind. I knew they did 'cause they played on mine.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon by the time I got over there. The place was practically empty except for the die-hard pervs. Lurleen was working the pole but she probably wasn't making no money. Randy, her asshole boss, who liked to be called, Touissant on account of he wanted desperately to be Cajun, refused to give her a better shift 'cause she wouldn't sleep with him. Major asshole! But a lot of the strippers there hated Randy so they often switched shifts with Lurleen which helped money-wise. However, that was not the case today.

I grabbed a stool at the bar and ordered vodka with orange juice from Pearl who had been tending bar forever. Her hair was super dirty blond and very fried so that it resembled old, picked at hay more so than hair. She was also very lean and hard with a leathery, drawn up face and she reminded me of my granddaddy's favorite drink – a whiskey sour.

"Thanks, Pearl," I said, as I palmed my drink and spun around on my stool so is I could watch Lurleen perform. I must say that when Lurleen first came to me with the idea of stripping for a living, I said, "NO!" and I was...adamant about it. I took on extra shifts at this little Mom and Pop store I was working at back then, trying to make ends meet and, somehow, we survived. But then Walmart moved in and Mom and Pop faded out along with my income. I took a stock job at Walmart but they didn't pay much so, stripping it was. But I hated the idea of Lurleen wiggling her ass up there on that stage while men sat there watching and raping her with their eyes; sitting in front of the stage with a Jack Daniels in one hand and their pecker in the other; sitting there daydreaming about *my girl*. And I knew they were cooking up fantasies 'cause the swell of Lurleen's ass and the way she can move her hips is like peanut butter – you're stuck looking, wishing, and wanting more. I worked at the club as a bouncer for a while in order

to come to terms with Lurleen's new profession but I got into too many fights with the pervs and eventually, Toussaint threw me out on my ass. I gave Lurleen a switchblade and taught her how to use it since I couldn't always be around to protect her. She caught on fast and, luckily, hasn't had to use her blade a'tall.

"She's somethin', ain't she? Learned the ropes pretty fast in the short time she's been here. Probably making more money than 'lotta the veterans," Pearl said. She was passing a dirty rag over the dirty bar.

"Well, Lurleen always loved dancin' but she don't really work the good shifts to be bringing in more than the vets. Why, some jealous bitty thinkin' on starting trouble with Lurleen? I know how these girls can be." I kept my eyes on Lurleen while I was talking to Pearl, watching as a fat guy in overalls with sweat stains marking up his armpits threw some money on the stage. Pearl knew everything that happened, was happening, or was about to happen in this place so she was a good source of information but, she wouldn't tell you nothing straight out, you had to prod her and hit at her like an old piñata or something.

"No, I ain't saying that, Smiddy. I'm just saying she's a good dancer is all, a natural."

"Well, it don't take much to make the peckers around here hard, Pearl. Not much a'tall. Hell, that fan blowing around over there probably got most of the men in here aroused."

"F'true, f'true," Pearl said. I got up and found myself a seat closer to the stage but not right up on it. I liked to block out alla the riff-raff and pretend that Lurleen was only dancing for me – which I'm sure she was. The stage was lit with soft, pink lights that made Lurleen's skin look supple and sumptuous. She had on a black, fringed bikini bottom that swayed when she did and those high, high, patent leather pumps that she stole from PayLess. I remember we had spent all night with her practicing to dance in those monster heels. But now they seemed like just a natural extension of her foot; not even a wobble. Diana Ross's, *Sweetest Hangover*, was just about to wind down when a slim sliver of sun hit my eyes along the sides. The door had opened and in walked two men – both tall but one of 'em was thin as thread and the other wide as a whale. Both men had on dark suits and dark sunglasses. The

wide one was in the lead. He waddled his way toward the bar. I knew from the way that they kept on their sunglasses inside the strip joint and because Mack Truck didn't so much as look at them – just let them slip on in – well, I knew from these observations that they were cops.

Some Measure of Grace

Theodosia Henney

At the grocery I wander the seafood section.
A tuna -fourty, fifty pounds- is cut open, a man
efficient in white apron & plastic gloves
cleaving out scapula-sized chunks with a broad knife.
The body is what interests me.
Steely blue skin, fine-scaled as oil canvas;
solid, vinous flesh, so raw & glossy I want
to rub my hands over it, drop silky cuts
into my mouth & maul slowly with every muscle
of tongue & cheeks until dissolved
(that's not about going down
on a woman). The bared animal
insides are simply beautiful.
I press my nose to the display glass, forget
depths of ocean that side of meat has seen,
when it was a tuna, how in death
it is fresh & perfect & fat with color, a mystery
despite satellite tracking tags & diagrams
of migratory patterns, a diligent knowledge of food
sources & predators (then again, maybe it is about going
down on a woman). I helped to kill
dorados, years ago on a boat with my father.
We dragged a line off the stern, saw shine & flip as it pulled,
hailed in & used the gaff.
My father filleted them on the steps
after dumping whiskey over the gills
because we heard it was the most humane way,
faster & more numbing than a bludgeon
to the head (I don't know why
I have to talk about the bodies
I have seen inside, except it fills me
with some measure of grace).

Looking back I don't know
this was true. With dorados, the motion
(when she thrusts with her back,
her hips) from alive to dead
is spectacular- skin flashes: blue
green yellow blue, & once I saw a fish drain,
watched the spirit go right out of it
with the color & become grey all over,
grey of old dogs & tarnished silver
as though sluiced in thin, colorless paint.
The eyes skyward, perfect marbles;
gills flared, slats of strange red fungus
or Chinese fans, a firework display
of breath, (all the times she was a twist of flame,
snaking pelvis to throat). After
my father cut away the parts he deemed useful
(before I learned to eat the cheeks, eyes)
he slipped the body (just a spine & head, tail
a stiff spread hand) into the stern wake.
We watched it sink slowly, hover
long bright ghost, just beyond the surface
(if you ever watched her fall
asleep next to you)- the feel of meat
in hand, heavy as sodden cloth,
sound on the cutting board: bare feet
slapping wet tile, a smell like salt & metal,
taste all leather, butter, & dark water.
At last, I am able to return
to the helm of the shopping cart, roll away.

Gesture

Theodosia Henney

First we open the skull,
preserved overnight in the stream.

When I pull it out the paleness
of horns, wool, timid skin

of the ears and muzzle
feel perfectly animal,

but cold, nerveless- my fingers
gasp but hold.

The group takes turns billeting, bring
down a thick piece of oak

on the handle of the knife,
sink metal through bone

tracing horns, the eyes turned
cloudy glass of bottles resealed.

Yesterday, the sockets were hoofprints
filled with bright water, red dust

lupine, cheatgrass, twelve pairs of human
hands gripping forgiveness as we laid the ram down

and I rowed my small blade
across both shining arteries.

Inside the skull; silence
of bone and unhatched egg

veins rooted into the unlit clod of brain,
scooped out bare-handed to tan the hide

wet, butter white and pliant. Last night we cooked and ate
organs, soil dark blood, the silver-sinewed meat.

What remains: the head and its empty fist, twenty-four hands
learning the gesture for holy.

Mating Dance for Thunderstorms

Theodosia Henney

When my knees are sound
again, grafted
tendon sure
as horn or waking
I will ride them

into you and strike
the bright ground, arms
feathered, hips
bolted, flowering.

For now I listen
to your rough canyon
call, walk jagged to the narrow
drive & fin my lungs

to your black
furred breath, turn
my face to catch fingers
of rain, your two-handed
drum of wind.

When I dance in you
again, I will have bare
feet & wear red

or dress myself in scales
of midnight
hair a long plume down
my back or short
as raised hackles.

I will stamp the ground
with hooves, unshod, pouring

from the legs of a stampede-
a thousand hammers
ringing over stone.

This is how
I tell you what I know:
that you are
inside me always,
teeth, legs, spine.

When I take someone
to my bed they will
meet you, know

with their hands
your dark, burning face.

Cardium: An Entymology

Theodosia Henney

Ventricles

the flexing arms of a squid,
tangled highway intersections knotting
folded corners of magnet

Aorta

fat open of a bullfrog's mouth,
its rock-tumble bark

Coronary

cormorants, oil dark seabirds
suspended, silken as kites, plunge javelin-tight
into water that breaks open like stone

Pulmonary

the movement of palm to fist and back again

Atrium

sunlight streaming through glass,
the shuffle of sparrow wings

Valve

the clasp, unclasp of blue-black mussels,
byssal threads starred to rock tight as lifelines

Chambers

filled with echo, inhabited by inky creatures
of hollowness and space

Artery

red cave with a dark river for its tongue
-the rush of syllables in a letter read
aloud

also:

the moment the archer knows
her arrow will strike true

Clover *(excerpt)*

Corey Saucier

Chapter One.

Once upon a time, Justin Michael Clover was a demon.

They call it a Relapse when a person loses their way. When they delve back into the darkness that was the gore-colored madness of their lives, once upon a time...

Once upon a time I was a demon.

Justin Michael Clover is not a demon. Well not anymore. Abomination, yes. Sinner, yes. Fairy, yes. Faggot, obviously! But demon? Absolutely not.

I am not a demon.

There is a huge difference between a demon and a faggot. Okay, maybe not a huge difference. There is a tiny difference between a demon and a faggot.

A hundred million years ago, before the Earth was fully formed and before beautiful green-eyed black boys had sex in seedy bathhouses in Hollywood, angels were cast down from heaven. These angels were lovely, and winged, and black eyed; like the darkness that was before the light. And they roamed the earth like great feline creatures in a dank and lush forest. And they found women to know... And these women bore babies that men called beasts. And these beasts were abominations. And these abominations were beautiful. Beautiful abominations born of magic and spirit and God and man. This was in a time before black boys with blond hair and broad shoulders leaned naked against brick walls in dimly lit hallways that smelled of sex and cleaning supplies and the subtle sweet smell of shame.

There once was a time before Cain went east of Eden, when monsters were pleasing to the eye; like poisonous fruit in a garden of dry summer flowers - when horrors were breathtaking magical half-breed children with the powers of their heavenly fathers, and the love and blood of their earthly mothers.

“Once upon a time,” they called it.

“When He was the word, and the word was with Him,” they said.

A hundred million years ago, (before science and logic and digital data nets of ether) people knew the names of beasts that walked in human form. We called them giants and witches and demons and fairies... But now fairies are called faggots, and witches are called bitches, and giants are just tall. Oh, but demons... Demons are still demons. Blood is still blood. Sex is still sex. Death is still death; and it's the seventh day of the seventh month in the middle of the seventh year, and Justin Michael Clover is on the verge of a Relapse.

I am on the verge of a relapse.

The Relapse: Magic works in cycles of three and seven; it is a principle of legerdemain: A rule of reality as certain as gravity or the relativity of time. But unlike science, magic never changes its mind. It is never disproved. And it does not care if you disagree. Pluto may no longer be a planet, but the dark part of the universe still remembers that time you asked it for a favor.

What is done cannot be undone. And what begins will always come to an end.

This is the beginning of the end.

I promise this will be the last time.

Justin Michael Clover is a princess: *A Fairy Princess*. -High maintenance, selfish, superficial, and a liar, but born with the purest blood of his generation. And in the end that's all that really matters, because this is about blood. Some will tell you that this is about love or magic or the damnation of a single soul... but this is about blood. Well, blood and God. But then again, everything is about God. *He's such a petty little jealous thing.*

They circled Justin in packs of threes and sevens. Ugly (and not so ugly) white toweled (and un-toweled) men in baseballs caps, leather arm bands, and weighted stainless steel cockrings that shimmered and sparkled in the narrow red-lit hallways. This was an ancient bacchanal: Created by the Greeks, stolen by the Romans, elevated by the Japanese, and finally infected by the sodomites in the 70's and the deadly 80's. This is a place of history, mystery, death, and tremendous grace - a place of power and prayer made only for those with magic in their blood.

Welcome to the Sunset Baths on McKinley and 3rd. Death Dancers are welcomed here.

Music blared in the background. Beyonce, Brittany, Madonna, and Christina were doing their thing. Giving the boys something to move and fuck to. The halls, stairwells, and communal areas were packed: There are over six hundred and sixty-six sinners here - Hundreds of half naked homosexual men practicing sex and “free love.” Well, not exactly free. Love is never free; there is a \$15 dollar entrance fee.

\$15 is the basic package. It pays for a four hour shift, a locker, and a towel. It also grants you access to the communal areas, the showers, the sauna, the Jacuzzi and the sun-roof on the second floor; and of course the ability to roam from room to room. There are adjoining tiny little sex rooms where nasty little men have the privacy to do whatever their dirty little hearts desire. These four cubits by four cubits windowless rooms are more expensive: \$35 to \$45 for an eight hour shift. Still not a bad deal, but not everyone can afford to drop fifty bucks on the counter every time they want to get their dick tickled. So these rooms are usually paid for by older gentlemen; tops who need to feel dominant in their domain; or tweaked out power-bottoms who keep the door open, lie on their stomachs, and arch their asses for every big-dicked guy that walks by. These rooms are located throughout. Hallway after hallway of cracked open doors scattered around a full-gym, a high-end newly remodeled “coffee shop” with a 24 hour on-call “chef”, and a grand winding staircase with a mid-century crystal-teardrop-chandelier that descends down the middle of the club.

Faggots never do anything half assed.

It is fabulous and well lit; and aside from all the sex and degradation the two main floors strive for some semblance of respectability! (P.s. As a standard policy, eighteen year olds get in for only \$5; because Fairies love to play with children. In fact, faggots call children chicken: “Because everyone likes the taste of chicken.”)

But then there is the basement. In the basement is where darkness lives. The difference between the upper levels and basement is the difference between the playboy mansion and the hustler hotel - or the difference between worms writhing in the mud and maggots feasting

on a piece of rotting flesh. This is where inhibitions and self-respect go to die. There are no rules down here. No order, just pockets of empty spaces large enough for souls to lose themselves in the anonymity. The corridors are serpentine, the walls are breathing, and the floors are cold and covered in cum. The basement is where the hardcore boys play the night away in a pitch-black living abyss of groping arms, bent knees, and nameless wet mouths on hard dicks searching for eager open holes.

Justin Michael Clover is in the basement.

Hunger is everywhere. There is wailing, moaning, and gnashing of teeth. The stench of need, loneliness, and sweat pressed down on naked skin like expensive name-brand cologne. “Pheromones” they call it. Pheromones like gasoline waiting to be ignited. And they circled him in packs of three and seven until the herd thinned and there was only one...

Cue music. Enter boy number one.

“What’s your name?” asked boy number one.

“Clover.”

Justin Michael Clover is beautiful - Really beautiful. Beautiful the way they are in magazine: All bright green eyes, dark chestnut skin, and sharply cut angular features softened by a wilderness of curly blond hair. Like some descendant from a forgotten tribe in Africa where light hair and light eyes on dark skin was proof that blue-eyed demons have always loved the curve of black women’s hips... But there were no demons here; just faggots, and fairies, and one Fairy Princess with broad shoulders, green eyes, blond hair, and dark tattooed skin.

This is what death looks like.

Justin Michael Clover was posing against a concrete wall far enough to the back for their eyes to have adjusted to the dark. He wore a white towel slung low around his waist, and a smile. A smile that said, “I am just as amazing as I look.”

I am just as amazing as I look.

“What are you into?” The white boy with the blue backward baseball cap continued.

“I like to get fucked,” Justin finished.

Bathhouses aren’t known for lengthy conversations.

Michael Clover was a bottom: A ravenous fisting cum dump bottom; a beautiful nasty no boundaries pig - A wondrous pureblood Fairy Princess full of light and magic and invisible wings the color of crème rose and lavender... But Relapse happens every seven years, and this was the first Sunday of the seventh day of the seventh month of the seventh year, and Justin Michael Clover was in the midst of the fall.

All fairies are addicts. It is the way that the magic is balanced. Not all fairies are magic, but one drop of fairy blood makes you “different”: Cuts you from the masses and makes gender and sexuality a fluid malleable thing like being able to create gold from stone - to make bread from bone. This anomaly is an abomination. Like a witch eating crawfish on her period at midnight. It is a queer little bit of alchemy that confuses and confounds the masses. It makes fairy love punishable by death. It causes them to create brilliant art, adopt flamboyant personalities, and gentrify neighborhoods into high-end architecturally chic areas that suddenly everyone wants to live in.

It is all to hide their hunger; and to feed their need. This is the basic gift of the ten percent, or that thing we now call “Gay.” This is not magic but an evolutionary byproduct of surviving: Like Niggers being able to sing, dance, and slam dunk a ball through a hoop.

Nobody wants to kill a slave that can entertain the master’s Mrs. So over time niggers and faggots have learned to perform.

Niggers?! Now that’s just awful. Blacks. Let’s use “Blacks.” Black: Loosely translated from the Aramaic to mean “Chalice.”

On the third day: 2.6 billion years before the sixth day (where God considered the experiment of Adam), if you looked up into the mind maddening thing we now call the sky, there were these swirling pinpoints of nothing that absorbed all the pain, hurt, and chaos of the universe into a lightless uniformity that on the backs of which was built our orbits, planets, stars, and counter-stars. They were the lowest – basest - by definition the “nothings” of the universe; but also the most powerful, darkly beautiful, and innately dangerous component of creation. These black holes were called “Chalices”: loosely translated from the Aramaic to mean Blacks, and where “niggers” get their names. So let’s use Blacks. Black is beautiful. Black is fitting.

But let's get back to the faggots.

All fairies are faggots but some fairies are also magic. There are seven billion people on this planet. About three billion of them are human. About 500 million of them are faggots. Only about half of that demographic has enough fairy blood to actually give them power, and about half again of that have enough power to call it magic. And only half again still will ever know they have it. But Justin Michael Clover has known for a while.

Fairy magic has nothing to do with science and everything to do with God. And of course blood...

Justin Michael Clover gives the best blood in town.

Justin was a nasty little cock whore who was getting his hole pounded just the way he liked it. Justin Michael was getting fucked.

I'm getting fucked. Hard.

The white guy with the blue backwards baseball cap had just gotten dumped by his girlfriend the day before, and he was fucking Justin Michael Clover in Room 213 with a singular angry focus that bordered on the maddening cadence of ritual, like the Shi'ite prayer of Matam; as if *this* would somehow bring her back. As if fucking a beautiful black boy in a bathhouse in Hollywood would make his girlfriend love him again.

He and Justin were kissing and spitting and biting at each other's faces like wild coyotes in a fight for scraps. Their dicks were hard and their hearts were empty and they both were yearning for some kind of release. This was the third Sunday in the middle of the seventh month of the seventh year; and little did they know, they were both in the midst of a fall. Justin Michael Clover was about to fall. And the magic was building. And God was listening. And The Relapse was imminent. And the poor sad sexy boy in the baseball cap would not be the only sacrifice to die tonight.

"Fuck me." Justin moaned: His face forced down into the pillow.

"Fuck me." Clover screamed: his body writhing, pulsing, glistening-glowing - just right there on the verge... So much hunger... so much pain... So much loss... So much of so much he had no words for. But he wanted to replace it. He wanted to feel something else. He wanted

that thing that we all need, but never seem to be able to get; and so he did that thing he came here to do... he took it. And fell...

Love me.

"Love me," Clover whispered.

He turned around to face the white boy in the blue backwards baseball cap whose body was there fucking the shit out of him, but whose soul was so far away, and who's heart was bleeding for a girl who no longer knew his name; and Justin Michael Clover called to it. HIM: Them.

And like a Greek chorus from a Homeric tragedy it answered. HE answered. THEY answered.

Like lambs led to slaughter, every broken heart; hungry body; and shattered soul lost in the darkness responded to Clover in kind, as if they had just been waiting for someone or something to want them - To need them - To love them.

"Love Me," Clover said: his eyes like the bright shimmering green of an infinite ocean, or like the first kindling flare of an emerald fire. And something leaped from the darkest part of him. Something that was sick and dying and dripping with sticky thick hunger and shame. Something that had been hidden away for the last seven years... Something that had been denied substance, and form, and that thing we call love.

Shame and self-hate is a dangerous monster. And suddenly it was free and burning and roaring like a lion.

Suddenly there were demons here.

There are demons here.

And a switch flipped and Justin began to cum and the boy in blue backward baseball cap began to kiss him, and caress him, and hold him as if he loved him. Because rightnowthisverysecond he *did* love him; and he said so.

"I love you," he said.

And it was perfect, and beautiful, and nothing hurt. And pink and green fire like fairy magic was pouring through the halls like water and brimstone and wine. And the seventh seal was broken. And the beast with the two backs was dancing in the next room. And the creature with the seven horns and the ten crowns that walks on many waters was

being born in room 213. And God was watching. And everything was catching aflame. And it was perfect, and beautiful, and nothing hurt.

And everyone was dying.

Chapter Two.

“I love you.”

Richard Ryan was in the next room. Room 210: Across the hall and a door up from Room 213. Richard Ryan was smart, successful, articulate, generous, kind to strangers, and fat. Fat trumped all. He was a medium height with an average face. A brown-haired, brown-eyed, 436-pound fat guy with a six thousand dollar suit, and a car that cost enough to feed a small developing country; but when he was walking around naked with a towel that barely covered the blubber rolling off of his left thigh, none of his totems to success mattered to all the beautiful boys in the bathhouse. Not that they really mattered to anyone else either. Richard had been fat since 3rd grade and it dwarfed everything else he would ever be. And he hated it. So he ate; which made him feel better - until the fries and chocolate shakes were gone. And then he hated himself for eating. So he ate more, to feel better. Until he was forty years old, pushing four hundred and fifty pounds, and coming to seedy bathhouses in Hollywood to pay lonely addicted bi-boys to blow him.

But rightnowthisverysecond Richard feels beautiful. He feels perfect and connected and the soft fleshy curve of his stomach reminds him of the milky dimpled strokes of a Botticelli painting. And his heart leaps at knowing that once upon a time size was sexy. Rightnowthisverysecond he was sexy. And his soul began to dance in a pink and green fire. And he was cumming.

And the skinny pockmarked white boy with a shaved head and prison tattoos - who Richard had convinced to come into his room with the promise of forty bucks and a hit off of a meth-pipe; looked up from gobbling on his little pudgy dick. And the guy was smiling from ear to ear, like he had just drank a pitcher of Kool-aid; and his eyes were that twinkling cornsilk blue that only crack addicts and congressmen seem to have. And his face was covered in creamy white spatters of cum and

spit and joy. And he started to giggle: The cutest little bubbly giggle that proved that once upon a time he wasn't a felon; wasn't a crack addict; and probably had a name like Cody, or Tyler.

"Damn man, I love sucking your dick!" he said grinning. Then something complex and layered ran across his face and he tried to giggle it away.

"Wow!" he finally said, "That was some good shit you gave me. I feel amazing! And you know - fuck it - I feel like I might love you right now!" Then he laughed again: full voiced and melodic, like some long lost piece of music.

And he began to crawl up Richard's body. Giggling and kissing every inch of every inch of everything that Richard had ever hated about himself, until they were face to face. And their lips were barely touching. And Richard was holding his breath... And Cody or Tyler or Ayden was staring into Richard's eyes, and his heart was beating and his soul was singing in a pink and green fire; and his hands wouldn't stop shaking and he couldn't stop laughing.

"Holy shit! I really love you right now!" And it sounded ridiculous coming out of his mouth, but he knew it was true.

And the amazing thing is that Richard believed him. He had never ever believed those words coming from anyone else, but from the meth-addict with the pockmarks and the criminal record, and a bubbly giggle that he wanted to listen to forever? Rightnowthisverysecond he believed it.

And Richard loved him too.

"I love you too," Richard breathed.

And it was magical and beautiful and perfect and pure. And the fire was burning them alive.

And everyone was dying.

"I Love You."

On the second floor near the caged DJ booth next to where the multi-TV video-wall plays bareback porn and old Colt videos from the 70's full of dead men in thick mustaches showing their assholes and winking at the camera, is Room 226. Kevin and Carl are in Room 226.

It's their two year anniversary and they are the cutest little couple you ever did see. Kevin is from the south. Mississippi. He has that stereotypical southern drawl that reminds you of gentlemen and sweet-tea and warm summer rain. He is 42 and tanned and ruggedly handsome, with sexy salt and pepper hair. He's a top with a big dick, and he is really looking forward to enjoying his forties, because well, forties are the new twenties right? Now, Carl is actually twenty: Twenty-one to be exact. He is a city girl with manicured hands and a Coach bag that he wears in the bend of his elbow. He is a little short and a little fem, but he is cute and it works for her. She is mature for her age, a traditional "good girl," and she is head over heels in love with Kevin. This was Kevin's idea. Kevin's idea was to go to a bathhouse in Hollywood. Get a room on the second floor where the highest traffic is, and invite guys in to fuck his fair haired, fair eyed, fair skinned, blindfolded, twenty-one year old boyfriend while he watched.

Brick Mathews has been HIV positive for three years. He is not yet on anti-retroviral medications, but his t-cells are good, and he still really hasn't wrapped his head around the idea that he is sick. He was infected by his boyfriend Michael who was a cheater: One of those guys who don't really see blowjobs as cheating, and thinks that if the partner doesn't ever find out, then no one really gets hurt. But fuck that guy, because the day that Brick became HIV positive it shattered him into a million little pieces of concrete indecision and fear. And today is the first day he thought he would try to "get out there again." He hasn't had sex in three years because he couldn't imagine that anyone would want him.

For the past few years Brick has been spoiled merchandise: A good looking black guy with a classic football build and thick-rimmed glasses that make him look like a nerdy version of Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson - but with a deadly little secret, that in his mind, pretty much made him fundamentally unlovable. "Deadly" was a word that often came to mind when he looked himself in the mirror. But rightnowthisverysecond he was Beautiful. And the boy underneath him was small framed and fem and blindfolded. And the man that had invited him in was handsome and tanned with a molasses-rich accent that reminded Brick of his ex; and no one asked him to use a condom. And he felt loved, and welcomed, and safe, and healthy, and whole, and perfect, and pure. And

he was cumming into Carl's ass. And Carl was moaning "Baby I love you." And Kevin was kissing Brick lightly on the back of the neck and chanting "Fuck my baby. Fuck my baby. Fuck my baby." over and over again. And the palpable love that radiated in the room had their souls burning together in a pink and green fire. And everything was lovely and nothing hurt; and HIV was the furthest thing from their minds.

And everyone was dying.

Julio Rodriguez was in Room 142. Room 142 is on the first floor near the private single-stall restrooms on the southeast corner of the building; where the water-boys go to play with piss. Julio Rodriguez is a 32-year-old sandy-haired Mexican with a well trimmed goatee from San Diego, who was visiting LA on business. He is a regular here at the Sunset Baths. He usually checks in on the last day of his trips, just after he drops off the convention keys and sends the sales team home. He hangs out for a couple of hours, takes a soak in the Jacuzzi, chats on the sunroof with a couple of the other regulars he's gotten to know over the years, and he never goes into the basement. He mostly just likes to watch and be watched. And an hour ago he masturbated while a bashful knocked-kneed Asian guy snuck peeks at him from around the corner.

Julio loved that part of the game. The push and pull of pretending not to notice that he was being watched, while performing all the harder for the attention that he was pretending not to want. And of course it was always over far too quickly.

Julio was a preemie. He was one of those sexy little fuckers who could cum in less than a minute if all the components were in the right place. And this little knocked-kneed Korean with those sexy slanted eyes, who kept peeking and smiling and biting his lips at all the right places, was pushing his buttons; and it made Julio cum like a broken New York fire hydrant in the middle of summer.

He cleaned himself up, gave the Asian guy a wink, and closed his door for a nap. Julio has been gay and out of the closet since he was sixteen. He met his first boyfriend at eighteen. They went to college together - One studying economics and the other a community studies major. They dated on and off for about four years, until their different

life choices naturally moved them in different directions. They still think of each other fondly and even have lunch every couple of years or so. Julio isn't dating right now, but he is not opposed to the idea; he just hasn't met the right guy yet. So for now he has two cats: Cleo and Patra, who give him more love than he would ever need. He is not broken, or lost, or hurting, or needing anything more than what life is offering him right now this very second.

Julio is already whole.

And so when Clover's power called to him like a Siren across a ragged ocean, and the pink and green flame broke free through the halls like a raging river of fire and brimstone and wine - engulfing everything and everyone in a maddening blossom of passion and magic and love, Julio napped gently in his room. And like in the days of sand and stone on that night of Moses and The Pharaoh and the first borns, death passed over his door.

It also passed-over the next door, and the next door, and four more other rooms.

But in Room 239 and Room 181 and Room 217 they burned. And Mitchell and Corey, and Graiden, and Mark with his gym-bag full of fifteen inch dildoes and his three inch little micro-penis - they all fell in love with strangers; and screamed; and danced in the fire. And Jacob Madison whose sister had just died and who loved the smell of black men; and Mathieu Lewis who took pictures of little boys in their underwear and who hoped that someday his sin would leave him; and Igor Procovsky who liked it rough, and who lived at home with his grandmother and two sisters; and Paul Kennedy with the toupee and the sensitive nipples; and Kyle who was two years on "T" and who kept himself covered so that no one would know... And Jung-Hwa Nam who was shy and knock-kneed and loved to eat ass for hours, and Greg, and Thomas, and Anthony, and Rayshon, Luis, and Andrew, and Kirt, and Salvador, and Oren and Reverend Jacobson the bishop of St. Bethesda; and the two guys in Room 158; and the three guys in room 229; and the orgy in Room 204, and in Room 321, 322, and 323...

They were all dying and cumming and kissing and singing, and dancing in a pink and green flame. And it was perfect and sad and

horrifying. And the music was blasting some re-mix of Taylor Dayne's "Tell It To My Heart," and their dicks were hard and their hearts were bleeding "I love you" in every room. And everything was beautiful and nothing hurt; and the power was burning them alive. And God was among them – (Because HE is always there among the dying.) And he held his tongue and bowed his head; and walked quietly through the halls as the boys of the Sunset Baths were destroyed, and offered up; and burnt to black bone and ash.

Ashes to ashes; dust to dust. It was a burnt-sacrifice: an offering made of fire; a sweet savour unto The Lord.

And as always the case in times of famine, sacrifice, apocalypse, and plague; God wept.

Chapter 3.

God is like air, or the space where air resides. He is the space between: The substance of the universe that both *is* the universe, and *contains* the universe. He is that nebulous indescribable thing that is not a thing: That thing that forms the vacuum of space. He is the quark and the string theory: Infinitesimal components of matter and energy that may or may not exist. He is Love. He is dark matter. He is Schrodinger's cat: Both there and not there. Both dead and alive. He is the millisecond before the Big Bang explodes... That is what God is like. And today he is contained in the body of a redhead.

Abel Green is the assistant manager of the Sunset Baths on McKinley and third. He is a freckle-faced redhead with cheap baggy jeans, a bright blue pull-over sweater, and a nervous stutter that has always made him more of watcher than a doer. He's been working at the baths for six and half - Almost seven years: Checking in patrons, handing out extra towels, calling the ambulance for the rare overdose or suicide, and of course, regularly cleaning up the sticky sweet messes from off of the basement floor. But this was the first time he had ever smelled ozone and candy in the air.

Something had gone horribly wrong.

Abel was named after Seth who was named after Abel. Seth was

named after Abel, who was killed by his brother Cain. Abel was the son of Adam, who was the first-born son of God; who once ran naked and shameless in a garden. Cain was cursed, lost his mind, and then went East of Eden to find an unsuspecting girl to marry. Seth who was named after his brother Able, who was killed by his brother Cain, begat Enos, who begat Cainan, who begat Maleleel, who begat Jared, who begat Enoch who seventy and seven generations later begot Jesus: who because of his blood was called the son of Adam - who was the father of Abel - who was made in the image of God.

This is who Abel was named after.

Abel had always considered himself a “sensitive” person. He always just kind of “knew” things. His mother was what you would call a “praying woman,” so magic would not have been the word he used, but this was the third Sunday of the thirteenth day of the seventh month of the seventh year; and this was the beginning of the end of the fall. And something in his blood told him to check the rooms.

The Goblin

Seth Fischer

I'm housesitting for a mentor in her home in the Hollywood Hills, binge-watching dreamy David Tennant Dr. Who and fucking around with my OKCupid profile. I'm trying to decide whether to make two profiles: one that says straight and another that says gay. I'm only having modest luck with the honest one, the one that says bi.

The house has a clawfoot bathtub that overlooks the city. On clear days, which are admittedly rare, I can see all the way from the ocean to downtown, five million people waltzing around underneath me. I can't believe that this is where I am, that this has become my life. Just a month before, I'd been living in an apartment in San Francisco where we had to make a door out of cardboard when the landlord wouldn't replace it, where I'd learned to recognize the difference between blood stains and paint.

The mentor has loaned me this house to write a novel about goblins. It is more a gift than a job. She doesn't care if I finish, which is good, because I have little interest in writing that novel. I do have an interest in figuring out how not to feel like a fraud. I am so far up in the Hollywood Hills that I am afraid to drive into the city, afraid of the curving two-way streets, only wide enough for one car, crammed with coyotes and speeding Scientologists.

I am alone with a bottle of wine, and on the TV, The Doctor is on a spaceship talking to a heartbroken woman named Sky who had separated from her girlfriend. He connects with her, commiserates, maybe even seems interested. The host says "Ladies and gentlemen and variations thereof." I feel at more home in the spaceship on the TV than in the mansion.

Then an alien parasite takes over Sky's body. The parasite makes Sky repeat what's being said by other passengers, an eerie echo as everyone voices their fears, as they begin to panic. At one point, a passenger, scared shitless, quotes a poem.

"We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits:

Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their thirsty hungry routes?"

I turn off the TV, Google the poem. It's a Victorian-era near-pornographic poem by Christina Rossetti called "The Goblin Market," a poem that Rossetti's publisher claimed was for adults while Rossetti said it was for children. The lines make me hard. A poem's never made me hard. Does my boner make me pompous? "She sucked until her lips were sore." "Bloom-down peaked peaches." "Laura stretch'd her gleaming neck ... like a vessel at the launch, when it's last restraint was gone."

I'd moved to L.A. to start over. Before leaving San Francisco, I'd left a three-year relationship with a straight woman, with whom I'd lived an almost entirely straight life. Before that, I'd fled upstate New York after the end of a relationship with a gay man, with whom I'd lived an almost entirely gay life. Neither relationship felt right. Both relationships felt good.

In LA now, I go to a gay bar with my mentor's movie star brother and his friend, pinching myself, feeling out of my league, trying to get as many stories out of this city as I can. His friend makes his living on YouTube screaming in people's faces on the streets of New York about Madonna and politics.

In real life, he's understated, quiet, a stoner, has a thing for bears.

In "Midnight," the parasite in Sky eventually latches itself to The Doctor, though it stays living in Sky. Over time, as it learns, it begins to be able to say what the Doctor says before he says it, begins to control what he says, freezes his body, begins to convince everyone that he's the one infected, begins to try to convince everyone else to throw him off the spaceship instead of Sky.

Every muscle in David Tennant's face is tensed, his cheeks wet with tears, his eyes open wide as can be. The parasite has made him its puppet. I watched the episode three times in a row, drunkenly crying in my borrowed Hollywood mansion, putting his face on freeze-frame on their giant T.V.

When I watch The Doctor's face, I think about my only two successful OKCupid dates. How I had just limped my wrist, sing-songed my voice when I dated that hot Brazilian filmmaker boy; how I

straightened out and got firm and walked with more of a swagger when I met that cute kinky poly girl at PF Chang's; how neither of those things seemed dishonest, how neither seem honest, either. How I don't know to act like myself. How I sometimes wonder how not to be a puppet.

In Goblin Market, two sisters walk down a creek, and one of them, Laura, eats the fruit of goblins, fruit she can only have once, fruit so delicious it makes her suicidal when she can't get more, fruit that her sister Lizzie lets the goblins force onto her face and body, though she refuses to open her mouth.

When Lizzie returns to Laura, she says:

“Did you miss me?

Come and kiss me.

Never mind my bruises,

Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices

Squeez'd from goblin fruits for you,

Goblin pulp and goblin dew.

Eat me, drink me, love me;

Laura, make much of me.”

For a moment, I think I want to be Laura, or Lizzie. It doesn't matter which. I want to be them because it's clear what they want, because that gives them a script, because that script gives them the tension you need for love.

No one's made people like me a script. Or maybe I'm trying to follow too many. I delete my profile and don't make a new one.

At least for awhile.

I'm not the sort of goblin that's a monster or a brute, but I'm free, untamed and lonesome: I want the sisters and the fruit.

A Study of the World's Flesh

Marcos L. Martínez

Any study of the body of the world requires time,
distance, and the steady unflinch of somber gaze.

I. Water : Agua Bendita (1910 – 1954)

Esperanza portaged her pregnant belly from Laguna Madre on the Mexican coast of the Gulf of Mexico overland to the banks of the Delta del Río Bravo and nearly made it across the rank brown river into Piedras Prietas, Texas before the contractions kicked in.

Her husband, José—because all men in the borderlands are burdened with that name—borrowed a friend's motorcar, buckled Esperanza into the backseat, and made his way across the brand new puente until the traffic of people, carts, and celebration snarled the route midway. He'd opted for the bridge, thinking it faster than the ferry between Matamoros and Piedras Prietas. He'd imagined flat, sleek pathways, a smooth new road, an easier way. But what he drove into was a tangle. Callejeros, bicicletas de vendedores de antojitos, niños selling Chicle, viudas mestizas vendiendo cruces de Ojo de Dios all cluttered and crowded the bridge as the lent taxi stalled as wooden as the car's door panels.

"Ahí viene," Esperanza cried: the baby was coming.

Caught in that nebulous space where El Río Bravo transforms into the Rio Grande River, Esperanza's body bucked in the rearview mirror. The river swelled in time with her body.

Storm-surge without a hurricane, riverwaters cresting, a flash-flood on a clear day eroding banks on either side of the border, straining the bridge's pylons, cracking the cement walkway, wrenching the railings and shredding the razor-wire-fences: strange that water should cause such destruction.

"Bendíganos, nuestra Señora de Guadalupe," José prayed, his palms at the steering wheel. He wrenched the taxi doors open, eased his wife out of the backseat, slipped her into the water as the river parted open

like Esperanza's cervix, and waded her across to shore. There on the dank banks of Piedras Prietas, Esperanza gave one last empuje, her body burst into foam and silt, leaving nothing but a boy puckered on the river.

Strange that water should be the source of such desolation: José, a widower now, left alone to raise his son: José Guadalupe's first steps were finnings; he never learned to crawl.

Strange, that water.

José thought the birth a blessing. Named his son after La Virgincita. After all, he'd witnessed his wife transubstantiated, wafted bodily to heaven by way of the river.

The *Piedras Prietas Herald* dated 13 December 1910 recorded the event as the christening of a new world: "International Bridge Subsumes Flood." A lock in the port at Boca Chica hadn't been let out quite right, had gotten stuck during the washing out of the water and freeing up of riverbed as struts and foundations got laid into caliche; then as the river got let loose, the lock seized up and jammed; no one noticed until the St. Louis railway line buckled down through South Texas into Mexico, unrattled the earth, then released the lock just as the Piedras Prietas – Matamoros Bridge swung open. The rush of water was a mere consequence of pressure, a letting in of Atlantic Ocean into Rio Grande River, a valve-release, an equilibration.

El Nuevo Tiempo de Matamoros in Tamaulipas, Mexico transcribed a different articling of events. Page A3: "Niño Bendito: Madre de la Asunción [12 diciembre 1910]" got buried beneath articles about the coming Mexican Revolution. Pancho Villa, the Texan incursion, los gringos setting up camp all over Matamoros, the border all diluted and that was nothing for what was coming from the south and west and guerra.

Guadalupe Mar de Calletano never understood the fuss about his birth, his body, the tall pale lankiness of his flesh feathered in dark hair. Mi Lobito, his father often called him, My Little Wolf. Birthed from the

Virgin's holy waters: aguadalupe, agualupina, agualobo, Agua del Lobo, water-wolf. Eva-la-Curandera, the medicine woman who loved kitty-corner from them, simply told him he was blessed, "Tocado con agua bendita."

Still, he never understood why water beckoned him, what drew him to work on the Piedras Prietas – Matamoros ferry as a teenager, what kept him manning that ferry back and forth across the monotonous murky green riverwater until the ferry shut down in 1929. An unsupportable business: What with the uptick in automóviles y coches crossing the bridge, who needed a boat? ¿Quién quiere un barco? So he roamed along the docks at Boca Chica where the little mouth of the river met the Gulf and Guadalupe learned the fishing trade, meandered out to Port Queen Isabel and South Padre Island—worked as a deck hand on a fishing boat—then wended his way up to Corpus Christi where he landed a job on a shrimping boat. "Qué Dios te bendiga, mijo," were the last words he heard his father speak. "God be with you, Papá."

Wally (as the gringo shrimpers rechristened him) never understood what it was about the rollicking waves and briny air that seemed to quell his penchant for wandering ("Born with sealegs, that Wally," the shrimpers often said after the boat had a bout with a tropical storm). And Wally would never understand what made him start dreaming of giant dust clouds encroaching the horizon, like a hurricane of dry clouding the coast in blackened ash. He couldn't put a thumb on what drove him away again, just felt it—a reflex as natural as breathing—the pull to follow the contours of coasts, travel upwater, head north.

1938, just before the Dust Bowl's third wave, Wally followed the black blizzard to the East Coast, figured dirt that had kicked itself all up into a frenzy couldn't hurt him once it settled, drove his Chevy truck past Washington, DC, trekked over the Potomac into Maryland until he meandered onto the Chesapeake Bay, skidded roadside along the Wye River and felt his stirrings settle. He took a spell scraping the barnacled skins of flat-bottom boats, skiffs, crabber vessels. Soon enough, he landed jobs working the aquatic fields. Skiffs, nets, crab-pots, buoys, the sharp green scent of marshland. Not the raucous salty ocean he was used to, but a happy melding of water and work.

“I need a steady hand.”

Wally heard the low, gruff voice—more a grumble than speech—before he lifted his head from the engine of the boat he was working on, the sun blinding his view of the dock, a bright red corona of hair framing high cheekbones, a square jaw. “I hear you’re reliable. Hear you got steady sealegs and skin that won’t quit.” Funny thing about Wally’s skin, the way it didn’t pink, burn, or blister; just sort of shifted from white to a caramel glow. Made some watermen talk while others gawked in awe: a body built for the Bay.

“What all you have in mind?” The promise of a schedule of steady work coupled with the company: it all smelled like greener pastures. Though in truth Wally was sold once the sunglare got out of his eyes and he focused on Jonah’s pale blue irises. “I’m all yours.”

All went swimmingly. A few months out, meeting Jonah’s wife, Norah, for the first time—a stout firecracker of a woman heavy with child—and Jonah’s son Artemio, the bright flare of his freckles so much like his father’s. Weeks later, Norah’s miscarriage, the doctor saying it’s the end of the line. Norah’s silence, Jonah’s frustration. Grief looming like a tropical depression getting ready to swirl and get all flung out into a hurricane.

“I just want Norah to be happy,” Jonah telling Wally, “instead it’s like she’s empty inside.”

“What about you—are you happy?” Wally claspng Jonah’s shoulder, muscle firm as an unripe peach.

“I wanna punch a hole in the world.” Jonah clenching his fists, his body stiffening as Wally embraces him, the two men breathing in tandem, their lungs pumping in a steady rhythm as easily as their hands working the water in time to the visible pulse of tide.

Wally driving Jonah back home in his blue Chevy. Wally flicking the station away from Billie Holiday singing “Strange Fruit.”

“Dammit!” Jonah dialing the station back.

“What the hell?” Wally saying as his fingers spring back to the radio dial.

Jonah’s grip on his hand now, claspng tight. “I’m listening.”

“Damn mournful if you ask me.” Wally holding his gaze steady

on the road but out of the corner of his eye glinting the redfaced ire on Jonah's face. "Besides, it's my truck."

Jonah slamming his fist into the dashboard.

Wally swinging the wheel and wrenching the truck off road onto the gravel. "Let's have this out!"

The two of them, forms swaying among the cattails, the roadside ditch sloping their bodies down. Jonah swings a punch to Wally's ribs but Wally yanks away in time—a dance he learned many a time proving his manhood on the deck of a swaying ship. Wally pulls his punches, teases Jonah down into the marshy wet, then an embrace, a kiss, lips stunned by the prickle of sandpaper stubble.

"What the hell was that?" Jonah says, too winded to yell.

"Anything you want it to be," Wally says. For a moment neither flinches, forearm muscles taut beneath the rolled-up cuffs of their workshirts, the setting sun glinting copper and black off the thick hair on their wrists. Wally pulls Jonah back in close. Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade" playing on the drive back to Jonah's place, both men quiet, their hands occasionally knotting together on the truck's stick shift.

The rest is as easy as the diurnal undulations of tide: a back and forth, the steady increase of water levels followed by a letting go. Clench, release.

Months turned to years, Jonah and Wally composing a steady rhythm of work and touch, labor and affection. Artemio sprouting like a pole bean, learning a waterman's ways, the deft means of ropes, knots, and nets. Wally getting ready to purchase his own boat and expand their business into a partnership. But what neither Wally Calletano nor Jonah Bywater cared to notice was Norah hovering about the edges of their entanglement. Norah as she scrubbed and beat Wally's scent off Jonah's shirts—cotton smashed and grated against lava rocks. Norah neglected.

Wally driving back from Annapolis after seeing the perfect boat: he'd been ready to strike a deal but something at the back of his brain kept bugging him. Better have Jonah take a look. But what he met as pulled into the Bywater driveway was Norah sobbing into the deputy's

arms, Artemio steadying himself against the police car's trunk, Jonah's absence palpable as a cold front heavying the air, Artemio's blue eyes hard as steel catching Wally's gaze and saying, "The water's took him. Dad's gone."

Search parties, trawlers, nets: no body.

Launching the skiff out into the Chesapeake, circling the waters where Norah claimed she'd last seen Jonah, Wally came to know the truth of his existence: that everything he could have every truly loved was taken up all too soon by water.

Repelled by water or propelled? Wally could never quite tell. He'd avoided water since moving back to Texas. 1950, a year after Jonah's submergence, Wally met an oilman from Matamoros who promised him a steady, land-locked job so long as he managed his string of gas stations. He needed someone who could speak *la lengua de los gringos*, could move in their circles like a fish takes to water, a son-in-law to take good care of his *hija preciosa*, his lovely Lupita. Friendship, Wally figured at the first sight of Maria Guadalupe—her short curved frame, the strong gaze in her eyes that reminded him of Norah in her kinder days—made a pact and wed thinking ahead to a legacy all his own.

Wally remembered how it was between him and Jonah: as easy as touching his own body, the flat hard expanse of his chest, the tuft of fur at the small of his back a slight echo of the fur swirling around his navel, the heft of Jonah springing up in his hand in mutual arousal. Jonah had told him once how it was with Norah, how he'd learned to satisfy his wife, found joy in her pleasure. "It's different with you," Jonah had said once as he laid his head on Wally's shoulder, "I don't have to think, it all just comes natural." Calm and fierce all at once, Wally thought, like waves.

No more water, Wally promised himself. He was tired of all that welling up and drowning. He would learn to love Maria Guadalupe, build friendship, companionship, find joy in pleasing her. He would learn to work Lupita's body the way he'd learned to cast and tease a fishing line, would learn the murmur of her skin and know just when

to reel her in. A love quieter than Jonah's, like the Chesapeake Bay on a windless day.

"Nunca me llevas al mar," his darling wife Lupita said every summer. The sea, she wanted to see the sea.

"No tengo tiempo, mi amor," he always replied. Never enough time. Truth was, Wally avoided bodies of water the way a man avoids a good dream turned nightmare by bursting up from sleep (or the way a sane driver averts a low-slung road after a downpour because the fear of flash-flooding is too real). He'd heeded water's call once before and what had it got him? Just loss and wandering back.

His wife made her way to South Padre anyway, strolled along the seashore with her hermanas y comadres, but it wasn't the same without Wally.

Then one late spring in 1953, the curve of Lupita's waist swelling slightly, Wally got home from a day of breaking ground on a new gas station only to find his senses assaulted by a pound of Gulf shrimp his wife had brought home. At the whiff of that shrimp, as Lupita rinsed their curved little cold, pale bodies—the kitchen air heavy with the scent of brine and wet—Wally's pulse raced, his ears felt hot as the noontday Texas sun, his mouth watered as for a moment the salt-clean tang of Jonah's skin came flooding back to his lips, his tongue. He loped across the room, looped around the kitchen table, wrapped his arms about Lupita's belly, kissed her cheek and said, "Oh darling, mi amor." And if asked at that moment whether he murmured his love to Jonah, Lupita, or the fledgling kicking in Lupita's womb, he would've said there was no telling, no difference at all between the three.

The shrimp, breaded and fried, rich with butter and a light squeeze of lemon, was only the beginning. Shrimp dainty as earlobes cluttered their sink, kitchen counter, dinner table. Still, Lupita wasn't sated. Jumbo shrimp, big as Wally's thumb; crawdads, lobster, scallops, mussels, calamari: they sampled them all. Scampi, Fra Diavolo, Alfredo, Lemon-Garlic.

Lupita craved the sea. But more than that, it was as if she could hear the Gulf sloshing inside her, wave after wave ebbing. "Tiene que

ser el bebé,” she said.

Wally even borrowed one of the station attendant’s fishing rods, made a few fishing trips to Laguna Madre and brought home cleaned fillets of flounder, speckled trout, redbfish, king mackerel for his wife. (Though he kept away from casting nets: the memory of his motions with Jonah still gutted him at times. Some actions were best left undone.)

Still Lupita craved more. Then, mid-September, at El Origen restaurant in Matamoros, Lupita tried a soft shell crab and her hunger hit its mark.

The smell of the crab drenched in garlic and oil; the smile on his wife’s face: Wally loved her in that moment the way a man cherishes a memory just before he wakes—the way he felt some mornings after seeing Jonah’s bright blue eyes or hearing the rumble of his voice in a dream. Joy, pure joy. So he bought-up crabs from along the Gulf as his wife reveled in the taste: crab bisque; crab beer soup; crab miso; crab salad with mango y pepino; crab dip with pretzel; jumbo lump with Tabasco, cilantro, and lime. It tasted like home to Wally, like those blue crab dawns out on the Chesapeake. He even stockpiled cans of crab for winter, though something began to needle at him.

Wally worried his wife would turn into the Gulf stream, her body become ocean.

Eva-la-Curandera’s advice: Keep her grounded. Feed her rose petals folded into apple jam, a grating of thorns blended into corn and pine nuts, yerba buena chamomile tea with a hint of miel, mud thickened with mesquite ash mixed into oatmeal and lightened by hibiscus pollen, earth powdered into cake batter: feed her dirt.

When his wife entered labor, the contractions cresting like wave after wave crashing against the beach, he drove her as far upland as he could, up to la lomito a couple of miles away from their house, the little hill that overlooked the Texas – Mexico border.

“Hike her up as far from sea level as you can,” Eva had directed.

And when the baby came, the waters didn’t rise. Instead, Lupita lay spent on the cool winter earth, laughing at the brightness she’d brought into the world as the sun rose across the bare Texas brush and warmth

scraped up against mesquite branches to greet her, welcoming the beauty of their daughter, their perfect little dawn: Madrugada.

II. Earth : Terremoto (1972)

“In that field on the earth at dawn.” ~ Brian Henry, *Quarantine : Contagion*

Madrugada strolled la lomita overlooking the banks of the Rio Grande River, the January night air prickling the taut brown flesh of her distended belly as she scanned la frontera and waited. Would Dionisio come to her tonight? The question split her open, pounded like a nail in her chest. As the river sloshed below her, she caught the ripple of whirlpool glinting like ivory silk in the moonlight. The waters crested, parted open, Dionisio coming up for air from the swell of riverwater, lugging his pale reedy body up the muddy landing into Brownstones, Texas.

These evening visits, Madra didn't care how wet Dio's body was, the clammy pucker of gooseflesh that enveloped her. She marveled at how his skin glowed under the stars, his eyelashes wisps of gold, the cool glint of his long thin fingers feathered around her neck. The rush of under river flow pulsed beneath her heels whenever Dio drew close, as if the water knew their baby neared.

“Caña,” she said as she pressed Dio's palm against the kick inside her body. “We'll name her after cane, after the fields where you first had me, mi amor.”

She remembered sugarcane, cutting leaves swirled about her ankles, the firm knotted ribs of stalks bracing her arms as he entered—

He remembered it differently: rows of corn just past the ditch that slips into the river, stalks and earthmounds sheltering their bodies, the taste of cornsilk between his teeth—bitter yet sweet as the promise of rain—leaves of ears cutting at his ankles as he entered—

“Cualquier cosa que desees, mi azucar,” Dio whispered into Madra's ear, “I'll name her anything you want,” though he secretly wished for a boy: hair gold as cornsilk, eyes green as husks; he'd name him Cobb—un hijo Americano, a boy who would propagate.

Hand in hand they trailed down the little hill, routed away from the river out into the open field, a wide flat expanse where a resaca once lay, the dry inlet bed rich with loam. The soil pulled them in. In that field, on the earth, Madrugada lay split. Dirt, earth, bodies: Dionisio rained down on her fierce brown flesh, her body parched as the arid resaca. His glans to her lips, his seed to her throat. She thought of a terremolino wafting away, leaving dust and destruction on the ground. She pulled him back into her, pressed the pulse of his veins into her self.

The beautiful storm is leaving us, she swallowed. “La lluvia nos lleva,” she whispered. “Ahí viene,” she gasped. She felt asphyxiated, all the air in the world abandoning her. Her water broke but instead of clear warm fluid trickling down her thighs, out slipped a slurry of sludge. The gush of murk pulsed from her womb, then darkness.

Dionisio beneath her then, cradling her back, his lips to her lips, resuscitating Madrugada, “Madra Madre Ma—” On the earth, in that field, Madrugada splayed at dawn. Her body shuddering and crumbling apart like a dried mudcake. Her fingernails tilled the soil, one push then another claw / rake / striate, the dirt wedged into her nailbeds. Earth quaked beneath her, split.

“Cane,” she begged, aching for something to clench between her teeth as her body quavered one last push then dissolved into a furrow: from earth returned to earth. Arms-deep in sediment, Dio rutted and rooted through the muck until he dug out the newborn, brown as dirt, then sucked the mud out of the suffocating baby’s nostrils, wondered at the dark pucker of foreskin between the creature’s legs: Caine—as he entered the world.

“She wouldn’t look Jewish at all”: Cabaret at Studio 54, 7.31.14

Jennie Gruber

On July 31st 2014, I saw *Cabaret* on Broadway, at Studio 54 with my wife, Katie, and her mom, Ann. Fifteen years before, I saw the same production at the same place with my Dad and sister on a visit to New York.

Thank fucking god my mother-in-law loves musicals. Thank fucking god she loves me, is finally glad her daughter is a homo so she can have me for a daughter-in-law. Perhaps she loves me because I am sort of an embodied musical, a musical who loves her oldest child with all the emotional sincerity of a really extravagant showstopper.

For this show, Studio 54 is designed to make you feel like you’re sitting at the Kit Kat Club, with little tables with lamps that respond to lighting cues and uncomfortable chairs, and table service from waitresses in Weimar costume, but not character (for example, they know what a credit card is). Katie, Ann, and I have excellent seats, elevated over the heads of the people who paid to be much closer. I can see the table my family sat at fifteen years ago – good, but not as good as these seats.

I am wearing a black and white polka dot dress and bright red lipstick, because I know I won’t be making out with my wife much tonight. My wife is wearing dark jeans, a black leather belt, a blue button-up shirt, her glasses. When I take her home, I will unwrap all of her butch smartness and possess her delicious muscles, her soft and round bounce.

As far as I’m concerned, *Cabaret* is the perfect musical. It’s extremely political, in the way I like, which is to consider war not as a narrative of heroism but the result of hatred and control. How can Moms and Dads allow their children to watch this stuff?

When I told my Dad I was gonna ask Katie to marry me, he worried that he had made me (and my sister) gay by “not being around enough.”

Which was like, um, obviously nobody's worried about that but you. And also: thank you?! And also You probably made us gay by taking us to shit like *Cabaret*, Dad.

Alan Cumming, in his dick-hugging harness and rouged nips, is queerness personified. So how is it exactly that straight ladies are posing for each other's iPhones making out with the cardboard cut out of Alan Cumming on 54th street? Is it because of *The Good Wife*? *Spice World*? *Spy Kids*? This man's name is Cumming! His perfume is called Cumming! His second perfume is called The Second Cumming! They sell it in the lobby, along with sterling silver pineapple earrings and dark green nail polish. I spritz too much sample on myself. My mother-in-law does the same, and says, "It smells like shit on me! But it smells good on you. That's how perfume works!"

Cumming looks stiffer than I'd expect, a little like he knows he can give about 65% and still have everyone lapping out of his hands, which we do. The tourists like it when he breaks the fourth wall. I enjoy his sorrowful moments draped in shimmering gowns, the way he swings a leg over the proscenium and watches.

There are silhouettes of simulated blowjobs. Pineapples lamps descend from the ceiling during "It couldn't please me more." The strung out limber Kit Kat girls do not disappoint as they stomp out my all time favorite sinister slut anthem Mein Herr ("*The continent of Europe is so wiiiiide Mein Herr.*"). People start to squirm during the punch line of "If you could see her (The Gorilla song)". I do get some satisfaction sensing the growing discomfort as it dawns on the audience: this is a play about Nazis. Not in *The Sound of Music* "Whoops my boyfriend joined the SS!" kinda way, but in a Alan Cumming peels off his leather trench coat to reveal a striped concentration camp suit with a Star of David and a Pink Triangle kinda play about Nazis.

The actor playing the American version of Christopher Isherwood is really forgettable. In the movie, he's British, like Isherwood, and Sally is American, like Liza Minelli.

Would Isherwood's Sally Bowles recognize herself in this understudy's superficial characterization? (the Understudy has pipes, to be fair). Makes you think about how you might meet a writer very briefly, share some strong black coffee, and then end up an archetype on Broadway almost a century later.

When I told my Dad I was going to ask Katie to marry me, he said; "Well, if you can't find a nice Jewish boy, at least you found a nice Jewish girl."

1967 Borders

Meg Leitold

La canadienne,
qui prend sa douche
toute habillée,
wilts
under a generous Bedouin sun
bent in broiling
like an unfamiliar perfumey aunt
somuchloveit'sjusttoomuchlove

Leith doesn't cry
in my arms.
Her eyes are lion-hearts
cracked open, golden,
luminous.
The posters on the wall
valiantly claim
que no pasarán
but my heart does falter
sometimes,
quietly
to myself.
¿Ya
han pasado, no?

The alleys in the camp
are so narrow
you can't see the sky.
When they razed Jenin they rebuilt it
with wider streets
so the tanks could get through.
For next time.

Adeeb stops the car
and we walk down to a river
with three plastic soda bottles.
“The sweetest water
you’ll ever drink,” he beams,
rolling *rs* like honey
over blazing earth.

I have not felt the land
alive like this
in a long time. I can
hear its cheeks
sucking in,
bracing.

Smell of mint,
warm blood,
rotting oranges,
cardamom. Olives
pucker with distaste,
longing
for a time beyond
concertina wire
before the hills sprouted
concrete sentries,
blighting
the horizon.

Adnan’s tears
under the now-silent mill.
Mechanical forest wallpapered
over ghosts.

I hardly dare to breathe in the night,
the babies are so close
and so flushed—do they have fever?

The moon is huge.
The crowing of roosters in the dark relieves me,
as if to unmake
all of this hate.

*How do you unrecognize
a village?*

And still the only word I am sure of is
sumoud.

Grace
—
Meg Leitold

Every time you croak *But I didn't*
I want to wrap you in blue sky and whisper
every breath of refusal every atomic second
that the feral creature in your thorax did not
tear you to pieces.

Turned your face away,
let your tiny velvet-scrap die
so your heart didn't haemorrhage
to stillness on the quilt. Both ventricles rallying
to spirit you limp
and quiet to the end.

You became dust,
feather above yourself hovering perfect
a thousand shivers scattered
like seeds. This shrapnel
an act of grace. No soul makes it out
whole.

This I know: When the rabbit-terror lands
there is no choosing. You could not have
saved you. You
saved you.

But the sepsis
will kill you. The clearing-out must be
fire and gulping.
Stoke your rage-embers soft:
This clotted heartbreak is clay
for the molding.
Do not let yourself calcify.

Empty the rot stringy and silver
with both hands.

Not Without Passion (*excerpt*)

—
Claudia Moss

Chapter 1

Okay. I'll admit it. I'm scared. Damn scared. Breathe. I remember reading somewhere once that if you can admit that something or someone frightens you then you've already won half the battle. In my case, though, it isn't that easy. See, I am that someone. Have always been.

So what scares me about me now?

I'm changing...seemingly without my consent. Yet deep within, I know the transformation has been brewing on simmer for most of last year. And no, I'm not a werewolf. It's not that kind of party. Had it been, I'd be the first sistah werewolf to my recollection. But hell. Breathe. I don't even like freaking werewolves or skin walkers or Buffy vamps or fairy-inhabited stories, although I did watch "Avatar" until I wondered if I'd be turquoise with big doe eyes when I looked in the bathroom mirror. Talk about pathetic. For months I cooed Jake's lines in my sleep with visions of Neytiri dancing or fighting her way across my dreams, an older, sexy blue Zoe Saldana.

One more again. Breathe.

I can hear Sydeeka and Jewel now, "And what the hell is a 'Skin walker'? Something from your trove of reservation stories?"

The back of their tonsils will resemble twin archways when I tell them they're the Native take, yes Sephira's telling, of shape shifters.

Back to the subject at hand.

Where to begin? Let's see. Why not at work?

As of last week, the final week in May 2012, I am a former partner in Snelling, Riddick & Renfro Law Offices. I wasn't voted out or blackmailed. I just got good and tired of getting up each morning and doing the same thing I did the day before. Everything on rote. The schedule annihilated my Spirit: pop in bed before 10:30 PM to avoid cussing the sun and shower and smooth my hair back and wrap my ponytail into a tight black bun and paint my corporate game face

and slip into a designer suit and matching pumps, briefcase in hand, and arrive at the office by 8 AM and leap on the treadmill of never-ending telephone calls, meetings, debriefings, more meetings, clients, paperwork, court and late-night work sessions preparing for big cases and agenda setting, that is, if I remembered where the parking deck was by 8:30 PM.

To add insult to injury, being nice downright exhausts me.

Half the time my mouth begged to fire a round or two at whomever couldn't or wouldn't execute a task I clearly explained or purposely wrote in simple English. Alright. My ex-partners shone in some areas but were dimwits in others. Ms. Odom, our receptionist, drove me to Happy Hour most evenings. That Minnesota twang she obviously thought cute wasn't. Her shorthand proved her illiteracy, the tweed suits annoying and I won't mention her farce of a filing system. Tips of the iceberg these all were.

Fact is, my life force lacks what once motivated me.

Revenue the firm commanded and still commands used to be a pulse in my jugular, not to mention the pride glowing behind my smile and eyes whenever the firm chalked up another mesmerizing victory and especially so when the case didn't appear to be anywhere in our favor. Forget my exhilaration whenever someone wanted to know, "So, how many ways do you butter *your* toast, Miss Renfro?"

In spite of the spectacular house and classic car and the spending power I wield, I did it--bit the bullet and called that fateful meeting and outlined how I wanted to tie our partnership into a neat red ribbon I could live with. I had my assistant E-bay my journals, law library, memorabilia and anything else my partners didn't want and climbed into my extreme silver Bentley Coupe '11 and drove home.

A woman who remembered she was already free to do what she damn well pleased.

On the home front that day, I jarred myself, moving as if I'd been body snatched.

There I stood, in the kitchen, looking blankly, thinking I might have shot myself in the foot and reassessing what I'd gotten myself into, figuring I must not have wanted to be stopped or else I'd have confided in Sydeeka and Jewel to arrest my damn ass before the go-down went

down but no. I paused. Feeling light though not light-headed and peeling off my tailored black suit and white silk shirt, which I recognize now as my farewell Snelling, Riddick & Renfro suit, I slowly climbed the stairs to the bedroom, where I fished a box from the back of my walk-in closet.

From wads of untouched tissue paper I withdrew an ornate pair of knee-high moccasins and delicately sewn clothing Sephira had given me on one of her visits to Atlanta: a pleated blue velvet skirt, a matching long-sleeve cotton blouse, a Concho-adorned sash belt, turquoise jewelry and a shawl.

Though I hadn't a single intention when I awoke that morning to be dressing in traditional attire, looking fresh off the reservation, I didn't fight it.

Only admired myself in the floor-length mirror and went downstairs to the family room, where I found a CD of Native American chants and songs and filled the space with traditional music and, spreading my arms, the shawl draped behind me like wings, I breathed and began to dance.

In the old way.

As I'd seen Sephira and Grandma Ansazi, before she died, dance.

In ceremonies and at home.

Dancing a soft, rhythmic bouncing from one leg to the other, shoulders bobbing to the beat in their feet. Black braids favoring venom-less serpents singing behind them.

They danced to the time in the chant, in the music.

Then and only then, remembering the unforgettable feeling that all things were within my reach when I worshipped in dance and song, even with twinges of fear still flashing in my blood, I realized my official freedom celebration had begun. And the more I danced about the family room, the clearer Sephira's words were in my heart: "*Before you can receive that for which you ask, Moon, always honor the Great Spirit in Navajo dress so that you are recognized.*"

Chapter 2

I've been meditating daily since leaving the law plantation.

In quiet moments, with zilch thoughts breaking through to advise me I'm borderline crazy and need to make myself useful by cleaning out the garage, I envision being born again.

Not in the sense Do's mama would see the ceremony.

Which would be me finally coming to my senses after all of the misguided teachings for which Sefhira is held accountable. According to Big Mama Sassafra, if my dad had allowed her to come in and pray and sprinkle holy oil and water in the corners of the new house he bought in '63, in Arizona, of all places, calling himself bringing his Dream Girl home, she might have helped him bless Jesus in and that Great Spirit of Sefhira's out. "But no, you couldn't tell him nothin' then," her favorite words, "and he can't hear much of nothin' now."

Knowing Big Mama, me being born again equates a weekend visit with her outside of Montgomery, Alabama, complete with sheets and deacons and down-home singing and creek water. Even today.

But, for me, it equates being right where I am.

After all, how many people can boast they staged their own rebirth?

For mine, I am robed and sitting on this freshly vacuumed Persian rug, my lap a white bowl, in the center of the family room, facing the deck. The wooden blinds are drawn not to bend the light from the moon streaming in through the sliding glass doors. Every piece of the cushioned wrought-iron deck furniture moved to the side, the view of the backyard is tranquil, fenced and tree-lined.

Around me croons the sweetness of silence.

High on the wall adjacent to the windows are paintings of a Black Madame Butterfly and the Caress; my prize paintings, one a gazelle-looking, Asian-kissed sister, and the other two striking women, one draped across the white-swathed lap of the other. My Afro-centric, semi-art gallery, the room is a temple of oversized floor pillows, an ocean of white tea lights in decorative glassware and a low-standing altar in the corner near the fireplace. The flat screen and pushed-back matching sofas appear unrelated. Flat incongruent.

To anyone with binoculars in the homes directly beyond the back fence, no doubt, I am looking peculiar and on the verge of something that might prove worth the full moon.

Thank goodness the house on an elevated foundation, to the right, has been on the market a little shy of six months.

Jewel says I'm an exhibitionist.

She's right. If the housewives, single women, visiting and live-in girlfriends around here get a say in the matter, I'd be a nuisance, too, my wardrobe enough to wake the sensually dead. I can hear them now: "Whoever heard of short shorts and loud high-heel pumps after twenty-five? See, the immoral can go insane overnight. And just think, folks thought it happened 9 times out of 10 in the moneyless ranks. They say she's a professional. At what is what I'd love to know?"

But who cares?

If I stop to do that, I'd be sitting here singeing my nose hairs instead of basking in clarity and a resolve I haven't known in years.

Lucid. That's it.

Under this white robe I'm in my birthday suit, since no one is born fully clothed. Nothing hidden. No more. I haven't owned up to me in a while; to what I want, to what I will not live without, to my past, to the staid reality of my professional world, however, profitable. No more.

No, ma'am.

It's high time I start living up to what I imagine I've modeled for my children and hurl myself into a life that floods me in exhilaration and uncertainty and calculated risk and possibility beyond my wildest dreams. Where is that proverbial limb of life when you need it, damnit? Probably disappeared the day I slipped into a notion of security ...false security... and latched onto the uniformity of one day never detouring too much from the last. Shit. That is some bullshit!

Me.

I have a history of never doing anything by the book. Honestly. Sephira Renfro would be the first to raise her hand anywhere and testify to that statement. "Breaking rules for the hell of it and always because she knows she can is my only daughter's Golden Rule" is her mantra, and she proffers it often—invited or uninvited.

“That little squaw is so much unlike me,” she preaches, “I still nurse half a mind to return her to Tuba City Hospital on the reservation and interrogate my doctor and her team of nurses about where they got her and where they were supposed to take her being the river between us, its banks questionable, started narrow and shallow before swelling wide and deep.” I used to listen to her, trying not to burst from the laughter bubbling up inside me.

Couldn't roll my eyes.

Even though my father's baby browns used to threaten water at Sephira's speechifying, he never bowed to me back-talking her or reminding her that the blend of Native and Black blood in me made for an addicting cocktail: the silky black braid snaking my back a replica of the glossy one bouncing against hers; our twin cheekbones sharp enough to cut paper; the steady ancient expression we cultivate effortlessly in photographs; the uncanny way we had of reading people without words and the Arizona red under the dark cast of our skin.

What widened Sephira's river later, muddying its banks, was me choosing to plan a family with a woman who'd, years later, be my ex and prove just “as trifling as any no-count man,” Sephira's exact expression, and though my ex and Sephira love and adore their children and grandchildren, the entire production meant numerous tumultuous chapters in the saga of my life.

But I've much too much to do right now than give Sephira another moment of my time. And this time I mean it. So I rise and stretch and shake out my hair. Feels like a shawl on my back. Maybe I'll cut it this year and further alter my energy and embrace that overdue makeover, figuratively speaking, from my crown to the hem of my gown.

Outside, the night is flavorful, spicy.

The air vibrates with a night symphony: insects chirping, grass dancing under evening breezes, distant barking, neighbors' voices on the wind, an occasional car humming nearby and the sonata of houses clapping and creaking, whining and singing.

Shrouded in moonlight, the deck waits patiently for the show to begin. Off to the right sits a monstrous pot, its mouth tinny earlier when I poured pail after pail of hot water into its wide fat belly. Tonight,

it's a womb. Usually it's a huge artistic arrangement for flowers and vegetables and spices and herbs. I had it emptied two days ago. Had it scoured inside and out, thanks to Coltrane, who, bless his heart, would love to do more than service my lawn, so he jumps at whatever I ask, though I compensate him for every side order lest he misconstrues the fact he'll never be my man.

Huh uh.

He's been around long enough to have seen my lovers and friends and their lovers, yet this knowing fails to dim the orange-red flame in his eyes whenever he sees me.

That is definitely something I am releasing tonight, for my birthing. The notion of falling in love with unavailable women. Speaking of bull. That is Coltrane's present and my history. Besides ... now that I think about it, it's simple. Part of me cuts the rest of me off from love, from what I say I want. Wasted fucking energy is what it is. The fear of love separates me from the life I envision in the foolishness of thinking I'll attract the same plastic partners from my past. In passionless relationships. Trapped in believing I won't be able to say what's really on my mind, like "Please leave, Miss Mama! Nope. There is no reason. If I begin articulating the ones percolating on the surface of this train wreck, the gas below will become obnoxious and we'll be blown to bits in the explosion. Bye!"

Hold on. My labor pains are set to begin at 10:30 PM.

According to my cell on this wrought-iron end table, I'm five minutes away from the gestational fun, so I get still. Fill and empty my lungs, preparing for a magical new existence. Somewhere off in the yard, something moves. I hear a scampering, a quick rustle of leaves. Short of the police stepping out of the darkness to inquire after what I'm about to do, it's on.

Then it happens.

At the appointed time sharp, the Dobie sound system, piped to the deck, ruffles the evening air with a soft crashing of waves. Draped in the moon's amber spotlight, I untie the sash of my robe and lay it across a deck chair. In an instant the night shifts its attention from the stars and focuses wholly on my flawless nudity.

I'm throbbing. Everywhere.

Inch by inch, I lower myself into my amniotic fluids. First my wiggling toes, the pale pink pedicure pretty on my small dark feet. No corns, rough spots or bunions. I've been pampering me for a long time. Then my ankles and legs sigh taking in the luxurious wetness. The skin slick, shaved and silky, my legs have been dubbed intoxicating, dangerous. Walking and running Stone Mountain trails keeps them on women's lips.

I grip the sides of the pot as a June breeze kisses the length of my thick thighs. My eyes close to take it all in. Now, tingling, I know a tad more about why skinny dipping tops my "2012 Things-to-Do List." Delicious, that's how it feels. Skin. Water. Air. Of course, to this, I imagine the woman who takes my breath away and returns it with steamy kisses lighter than mist.

I'm nearly orgasmic when the warmth laps my ass and airbrushes its lips over my pubic curls to just under the pink barbell in my navel, the startled moisture caressing my punany, inciting a quiet riot in my hips, making them shiver and bounce. Then the gulping water rises, kissing and lapping, nibbling and laving, devouring my back and trembling belly, delighting and fondling my palm-sized breasts, moving and consuming, until only my face remains dry, my braid heavy against my neck and back.

"Ah." Feels like heaven. So serene. So blissful.

Red rose petals from the dozen I bought at The Farmer's Market on Ponce float by my mouth. Every once in a while my lips disappear below the water and I blow bubbles and laugh and fountain wetness over my head and the sides of the pot. Then I go in for a plump strawberry. Nip it between my teeth. Tonguing and spinning it. And chewing with a newfound pleasure, as though its seeds and pinkish folds have never found their way between my lips.

I savor more.

My lashes flutter, sealing the flavor. I'm so hyped I look up at the evening sky and whisper the unladylike promise: *The very next time I meet a woman who leaves me speechless with her intellect or humor or who makes me jump up and down just staring at her face or watching her come*

or walk away or just be her magical self in the world, she will be my feast--meal, table and utensils.

Back under I go, this time head totally submerged. Seconds later, I pop up, shaking, slinging iridescent beads and shimmering sprays. Then I edit myself.

“There is nothing unladylike about that promise!” I say it aloud.

As of tonight, I no longer govern myself by the world’s perception of anything. Hell, I’m grown. Do you hear me, Madam Night, I’m me, divinely perfect in who I am, my definition of me shifting and changing at my whim.

Why?

Because I’m not bossy, I’m grown. Whoever I say I am, I am. And whatever I say I’ll do, it’s done.

My spirit’s full, brimming with the moon’s oomph.

A powerful thought, it makes me splash like a seal. My arms embrace the blue-black sky, and I am free. Nothing pinning me down, blocking me from what I desire.

Under the Rose Moon or the Strawberry Moon, which Sephira says are the proper names for a full moon in June, I gather myself, move into a meditative posture, legs pressed into my belly, thumb to forefinger, back straight, eyes clamped, and silently speak my wishes to the night wind.

Chapter 3

Brrrrring!

The ringing of my cell on the nearby table jolts me into sudden alertness. I’ve been pruning, drifting, despite the ocean waves CD having long ended.

Even if I hadn’t programmed Nicki Minaj’s “Your Love” as her ringtone, I could guess the caller.

I fan my left hand vigorously, flinging droplets of water before reaching for the phone.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hello, my moon child. I caught you at the right time, I know.”

“The right time, in the right place, in a place so right for me.”

I can feel Sephira’s smile through the line. “That’s too much right to be wrong. So how are you celebrating the final moments of the Rose Moon tonight?”

“You’ll never guess, but I’m still lazing under what’s left of it, doing something I never thought about until now.” I hold the cell up with one hand and then spatter water off to the right with the other.

“You marinating in a bubble bath?”

I smile. “Let’s say I’m pickling in that monstrosity of a flower/herb pot on my deck and as soon as we say bye-bye, I’ll be slipping into the downy softness of a white terry cloth robe bought expressly for my rebirth into a new phase of my life.”

“Moon Renfro.”

“Ma’am?”

“Don’t tell me you’re outside in your forty-eighth birthday pj’s, jaybird naked?”

“Okay. Then I won’t mention it.”

“I’m not kidding, Moon.”

“Me neither. At the moment, my head, neck, arms, shoulders and a part of my chest are exposed. But it’s okay, Mom. Really.”

“You can never be certain who’s watching you, wench! It’s a full moon, ya know, and under its influence, everyone’s not meditating for a Higher Consciousness to manifest dreams and goals. Exercise common sense, girl, especially while practicing public indecency.”

“You’re making more of it than the situation merits. Trust me. Besides, who could be eavesdropping on me, of all people, in this neighborhood--a sexually repressed housewife more interested in calling the police, wanting me served with indecent exposure before her happy-hour-loving hubby staggers in, if he hasn’t been arrested for DUI?”

Sephira’s tone sharpens. “Don’t belittle my good intentions.”

“Sorry, Mom. I apologize and appreciate you caring about your only child but I could stand someone else expressing love and care for Sephira Renfro’s do-it-herself daughter outside of you and Dad for a change. Dare another year come and go without a beloved to share the adventures of my life?” I inhale deeply. “I think not. No thank you.”

Sephira goes to humming in that ‘We both know who’s to blame for

that, now don't we?' way that annoys the hell out of me. She does it smugly, as if she's in the choir humming sanctimoniously, to cover for the untalented.

"I heard Dr. Oz say the other day that humming helps clear bad sinuses." She skips by my comment and positions me for the finger press.

"You're the one in charge of who enters or exits your life, Missy. Haven't I taught you anything?"

"Precisely. Which is why I'm out here cleaning up my intentions and clearing my clogged chakras and softening my heart and sloughing away hardened preconceived judgments and rinsing my Third Eye and---"

"Thank you, Miss Moon." She clips me before I shift into second gear.

"I got it. Just don't call me if a well-meaning lunatic rings your doorbell, inquiring about a repeat performance, preferably inside the house."

"Well, if said lunatic is cute and present with faculties intact and is gainfully employed or employable and willing and finds this Luna-loving princess lovable and if she can love and respect my family, and me hers, while we learn how to savor and share each other's lives, I'd welcome her knocking. Isn't that a major part of living, Mom---learning how to love yourself and others unconditionally? Is that not the greatest love of all? Every time I hear or voice that expression about loving yourself, I think of Whitney. Goodness, I still can't believe she's gone."

Quiet.

Sephira mulls my words over, combing through the part she means to unravel first, yet when she's silent for the next five minutes, I ripple her solitude.

"Mom, don't you want me to be happy?"

"Don't wait to be happy. Choose to be happy."

I can't argue with that so I don't.

The best thing I can do is keep my happy ass in this pot a few minutes longer: listen to my mother breathe and study the Georgia night.

Fireflies twinkle like fairy dust from the stars. A lone ant tackles the trek across the deck's blonde banister. Along the back fence three trees stand a silent sentry, their branches lifted in praise of a sky that has swallowed the moon. A smattering of stars adorns a purple expanse of heaven in the west.

Even as the water sends a shudder through my body, I'm at peace inside. Around me the Sand Castle Shores community, a sometimes snotty but mostly friendly enclave of heart-stopping houses and luxury vehicles, is peaceful, too. Another quick shiver follows the first, and I realize this time I'm trembling with the excitement and uncertainty of my decision. Somewhere in my soaking and chatting, Friday night hop scotching into Saturday morning, I assure myself everything is okay. Sephira will be privy to my latest escapade sooner than later, so right now I'll save myself the trouble of a verbal tennis match.

"Moon, are you listening?"

Oh, goodness. I wonder how long I've been silent, honoring my thoughts.

"Sor-ry," I sing-song, "but what did you say, Mom?"

"I said, 'Do you plan to catch a summer cold sitting in that pot all night?' Your Native blood is strong but don't forget it's diluted with your father's fluids and he's never been one for circumventing illness."

"Mother, that's not nice."

"And when have you known me to vie for Miss Congeniality?"

"Never."

"Correct. So get your naked wrinkled self into that robe. Quit courting trouble before I have to leave Sedona, Arizona, on the next flight out. It's a little after 10 here. So what is it...past midnight there?"

"Think so."

Doing as she says, I ease out of the water, skin goose bumped, slip into the terrycloth robe and run my hands briskly up and down my arms. The material feels good, staunching the chill and stilling my tremors.

"Mom."

"Are you dry yet?"

"Almost."

"Are you off that deck?"

I step over the sliding glass doors' threshold, turning to slide the latch and lock it securely behind me. Most of the tea lights are empty so I blow out the ones still flickering and power down the Dobie system.

"Huh uh. And for the other questions, yes, yes, yes," I say and then more solemnly, "Mom, what were you doing before you called me?"

“Reigning in my creative energies like you, except I elected to do it clothed.”

Upstairs, I two-step down the catwalk to my bedroom, where I tumble across a white chenille bedspread and sigh. Deep and slow, like I sighed after pushing Symphony, the baby of the quads, out 24 years ago. Huh...huh...huh. The next one feels so revitalizing I sigh like I’ll sigh when a fascinating woman lifts my hair and smothers my neck and earlobes with feather-soft kisses and a tongue trailing wet heat.

“Moon, get your soundtrack right. And your head. Just what are you doing now? You’re carrying on as if your friendly neighborhood peeping Tom---no, Thomasine---already climbed through a window and is now running you a warm shower.”

I’m feeling too magical to entertain that one.

“Mom, ever notice a grateful sigh is twin to the Universal utterance in the name for God in most of the world’s religions? Aaah. Releasing the body and spirit into rest translates an appreciation for the Divine.”

“Lovely, darling,” Sephira says flatly. “Was that what you wanted to say? If so, I am about to do like Jesus and go down to the bottom of my ship and go to sleep. You can stay up if you desire and greet the new day, sighing. Though it’s early here, I’m taking myself to bed. Your father’s been snoozing since I lifted the phone---the television documenting his sounds and you know he makes aplenty.”

“Is he okay? Oversleeping can be an indicator of many things.”

“To my knowledge he’s good, Sweetie. Just old.” Then, playfully, “Get in the shower and wash away those waterlogged moonbeams and get to bed, Missy. You’ve done enough for one night. The sea gets any rougher between now and sunrise and somebody’ll get upset and go looking to wake Jesus from His good rest.”

I roll across the bed, falling out. The sea gets any rougher. Sephira’s a trip.

She’s one of a small percentage of people who worships Jesus right along with the Great Spirit.

“I love you, Mom. Give Dad a hug and a kiss for me, okay?”

“Okay, my moon child. And we love you too, baby. Have a good night.”

She makes her soft smooching sound and waits for my “Muah. Back-at-cha,” before disconnecting the line.

There is No Other Shelter (*excerpt*)

Joseph Osmundson

No one yet knew whether the storm would hit. The sky was blanketed with high clouds that blocked most of the dying light. The sky threatened, but there was no wind. It was still. In a few hours the transportation would shut down on the entire Eastern Seaboard. I was sitting on a MetroNorth train from Grand Central to Poughkeepsie, one of the last trains to run on these tracks, and I did not know when I would be able to go back home.

This is my story. The others are fiction.

I have always loved storms. Growing up we had rain but rarely storms. In the Northwest it drizzles for months. I only knew storms from the summer days when we would travel to the Midwest to visit my grandparents. Midwest storms tear and scream. They detonate. We would huddle together in an interior bathroom and listen to the storm sirens that sounded remote and imminent, as though they came from everywhere and nowhere. The sky would turn from a wide, clear blue to an almost yellow. I only saw this sky once, but I had heard so many stories that it had already become a part of mine. We were leaving a movie that day, my mother and grandmother and sister and I, and we did not have time to make it home to the safety of the bathroom. I watched from the backseat of my grandma's car, pulled over to the side of the road, as the sky turned yellow before the wind arrived, as the wind came before the rain, and as the rain and hail finally fell down, erasing the sound of the sirens. It was almost a relief when the storm hit. I don't remember being scared, even then. We were together. When it was over, the wind and rain dissipated fast, opening up to the wide blue sky, leaving the ground smelling fresh, new.

I sat on a MetroNorth train, and I did not know when I would be able to go back home. The Hudson line of the MetroNorth carried people who work in New York City back home to the Hudson Valley. I lived in New York and worked in Poughkeepsie. The train looked like something from the 1980's, with deep maroon and saturated blue seats. It always seemed dirty, coated with a layer of dust or grime. Out the

window to the west was the Hudson, always, a wide river that ran brown most of the year. The Hudson was calm that day, sat with no current, the tide balancing the water pushing south, allowing neither escape nor retreat. The train seemed to float so close to the water that I felt like I was on it, in it. With Hurricane Sandy on her way, I imagined the water rising, chasing the train, the wide brown river enveloping us all.

I had woken up that Sunday feeling like I was late to catch a flight. I knew that the trains were likely to be shut down, but I did not yet know when. That weekend people could sense the coming storm and were out wandering the city one last time. It felt like the apocalypse had been announced, and we were waiting. I pulled myself out of Kaliq's arms to check the time on my phone. 9:30a.m., early, considering we got home at 3a.m. and didn't sleep until after 4. I needed to know how I could get to work, what time the last train out of the city would be. My head hurt. I was praying for an email saying that classes were canceled, which would have made things simple. That email would have allowed me to stay where I was, where I wanted to be. I would have been able to stay with him.

Emails streamed into my inbox, but not the one I wanted. Kaliq did not move. The MTA website was slow to load. I clicked refresh three times. It said what we all knew it would say. There will be a complete transit shutdown. I had a choice: take one of the last trains north to the Hudson Valley, to work, and risk getting stuck there alone; or assume that work would be canceled, make an excuse, any excuse, to lie here, to spend a day or two alone with him, cooking and reading and laughing. I rolled back over.

If you looked down from above you would have seen his tall body covered in blankets, nothing but a mound, only a head sticking out, dark brown and bald, on his pillow, and my naked body lying diagonally across the bed above the sheets, navy blue. I scrolled down the page, my finger making that gesture we have come to see so often, touching the screen, moving, touching, moving. It could almost be a dance. Near the bottom of the page the time of the shut down was listed. At 7p.m. all the trains would stop running. I knew what my choice would be. I could not miss work, not even for him.

I closed my eyes and moved my body closer to his. I turned on my

side to throw my arm around him. I burrowed back under his covers to touch his skin, even if his room was too hot. We were two bodies, barely discernible under blue covers, breathing in synch, almost sleeping, and wondering - one of us, at least - when we would be able to feel this touch again. I was happy to be awake, not fully asleep, so that I could feel his arms, remember these last few moments.

We could not linger that morning. We had to get up and move, or at least I did. I left him on 14th street, his street, hundreds of people moving in all directions. He was going to the store. Kaliq was not convinced that anything was going to happen. There had been too many close calls, near misses, storms that never materialized. I was returning to my own apartment in Harlem, packing, leaving. I was convinced that the storm would be catastrophic; I imagined flooded streets and burning buildings and no power, no lights, no heat, for days.

We kissed on the street. I had to reach up to touch his lips. I turned my back to him, walked to the train, and passed, \$2.25 poorer, into the largest subway system in North America. One MetroCard swipe of 998,863 on an average Sunday in 2012. But this was not an average Sunday. I did not read that morning on the train. I carried my bag in my right hand. I did not listen to music. I just wanted to think, to listen to the sounds of the train, to listen to the conversation around me. The train uptown was packed with people moving before they could not move any longer. Sometimes I just liked being part of the hoard, one of our many, carried along by the crowd, abdicating my decisions to the flow of others. I was trying not to think about storms or him or work or life. I stood with my back against the door, leaning forward at every stop as the doors opened. Would I get stuck? The door felt cold against the back of my head. When would I see him again? I switched the bag from my right to my left hand. My head hurt, I wanted coffee. I focused on my bag digging into one hand, the metal pole cold in the other hand. Two teenage girls were talking about sex, wondering aloud if syphilis is or is not an STD. They did not know. The motion of the train was inconsistent, pushing my body forward, back. After years in this city, my body casually adjusted, knew just when I had to hold on tight.

New York is a city that lives off its public transport, the heart that

pushes us all through concrete and skyscraper. And so New York is a city that exists in public spaces. All the living, in Omaha or Minneapolis, that normally is done in cars, here occurs on public transport, or right there on the sidewalk. People cry, fight, break up, get back together. We ride the train hung over and apprehensive. I climbed out of the subway three blocks from my home, five miles north of his.

And without the trains and the buses, we don't go much of anywhere. Sunday night, all this controlled chaos, all this motion, a few million people traveling from point A to point B, would become stationary, dead, the streets empty, no place to go, nowhere to be. New Yorkers had to contemplate the impossible: spending hours or even days in our homes with no external diversions. And what if we lost power, internet, cable? What would eight million bodies trapped on too little land do without Facebook and Netflix and TV and Twitter? The question, as Sandy lumbered up from the Carolinas, was what would this city of movers and doers, creatives and businessmen, actors and models and waiters and scientists, what would we do with silence, stillness, wind and rain?

We did what people do when the end of the world is near. We ran to one another. It was not my choice, but I was running away. On Sunday morning, I was hung over, and I was next to him one last time, and I wanted to stay, but then I had to start running away. I got on the subway and then on a train. I looked out at the Hudson River, wide and brown and still. It could all blow over; it could be another nothing. The sky was still and gray. I was not afraid, but I did not want to be alone. No one could say when I would be able to run back home.

Archetype #1: Trouble

kynita stringer-stanback

Trouble is
Hot red head
In
Red pumps
Leggy brunettes
Small waists
Big round hips
Thick lips
Tight pecs
And
High breasts
Wing tips
Skinny ties
Chocolate lavender eyes
Tattoos
High-heeled peep toe shoes
Bald head conjuring flavors
Of
Cappuccino with jasmine
Sexy beards
And
Round bellies
Low hanging nipples
Thoughts
Ripple through my mind
GET THEE BEHIND ME SATAN!
Trouble I see you comin
And
Though
You are soft and sexy
Things will get messy
Thank you for the flirtation

That flaming twinkle in your eye
Five years ago baby
A whole 'nother time
TROUBLE
IS
ME

Archetype #2: Division

kynita stringer-stanback

DIVISION

IS

He said

She said

Ruminations

In my mind

About

What I thought You

Meant

Spent the day in silence

Cuz

Words can be violent

Slashing and cutting

Each other

As

The

OTHER

In front of

Others

Their community

Entering our conversation

Which has yet to begin

Instead of snappin'

And

Poppin'

Off

At the MOUTH

We sit down

Angry passion

Finds it way

Through

INK

Thank you
For testing
My
Patience
And not slipping
N2
HATRED
Thank you
For
Clinging
To
LOVE.

Archetype #3: New Love

inspired by Jody Watley's song "I'm Looking for a New Love"

kynita stringer-stanback

Quedo
Aquí
Conmigo.
Dicen que un
Hogar
No es un
Lugar
Es una
Persona.
¿Estarás mi
Hogar?
Vamos
Y
Hagamos
Nenitos
Bonitos.
Regalame
Tus besos
Una vez
Y
Miles veces mas.
Amorcito
Bienvenido
Viva en mi
Corazón.

Archetype #4: Communication/Dialogue

kynita stringer-stanback

Boiling liquid
Erupting from our eyes
Etching tracks
As facts
Are faced.
Wounds ripped open
Exposing
Past trauma,
Our deepest thoughts
And
Fears.
We sear
Them back up.
Wrap one another
In the loving
Embrace
Our
Words
Have made.
Look around
The future
Is NOW
The present
Our
GIFT
Lift every pen
STAND
IN
POWER

Archetype #5: (Mis)Understanding

inspired by Marvin Gaye's song "Holy Holy"

kynita stringer-stanback

Shoni*
Yoni
Lingam
Buddy
Slayed them
With rhymes
Of
Pernicious acts
Liberating
Yet
Constraining
Creating
Boxes
We will
Never fit
To quote a faculty genius
"We is what we eat."
Flesh and blood
Consumed
With
Wallets.
But I'm
BROKE.
Had a career
Then it all ended
Contract
EXPIRED
My cohort
Passed away
Cancer took her
From us
We are the same

Age
Yes
We live in a society
Where we die
From poison
In our
Breasts
Stressed
With life's daily tasks.
We forget
We don't ask.
Palabras sagradas
Hablanos de corazón
Nos almas
EL AMOR
SUPERAR
TODO
SIEMPRE
Vayamos con
DIOS
BUDDHA
JEHOVAH
YAHWEH
JESUS CRISTO
EL ESPIRITU
SANTO
Salvanos
De nuestra
Propia destrucción

*Shoni is the main character of Octavia Butler's final novel, *Fledgling*.

Archetype #6: Transformation

inspired by Bob Marley's song "Who the Cap Fit"

kynita stringer-stanback

Put your
Big people drawers on
To those who don't wear
'em—gird your loins
and come ova
HERE.
This will be
What we make it
Out to
BE.
We can
DEFINE
Bust a
rhyme
or two.
Nice shoes.
Snaps in the air.
Smiles as big
As the sun
Tears as fat
As monsoons.
We create
We move
We write!

Edge of the Map

Parrish Turner

I have always been fascinated by the edges of maps. Where exactly do the two ends of the earth overlap? What is just past that ocean in Narnia? Where did the elves plan on going when they left Middle Earth? My favorite comment has always been “Here there be Dragons.”

The Weld family crest is topped with a dragon. Specifically, a wyvern. My sister found the crest in a pile of folders.

Morgan: I think we have a dragon on one of the family crest's.

Parrish: Really?

Morgan: (Shuffles through files and papers) Here! Well, actually I think this is a griffin.

Parrish: A griffin?

Morgan: Yeah, a griffin. I don't know. It doesn't look like a dragon.

With those claws in the air? (flips through more papers) Wait, no that is a dragon.

Parrish: What?

Morgan: Yep, dragon. Well, no, a wyvern.

Parrish: What the hell is that?

Morgan: A dragon, but with only two legs and a tail. So like a seal.

Ooo he is dripping blood.

Parrish: Dripping blood? Really? I don't know if I see that, but ok.

Hm. Well then.

The wyvern sits on top of the crest, tail out to the side.

The motto at the bottom of the crest is '*NIL SINE NUMINE*.'

Nothing without God.

I grew up in Catholic Bible study groups every Sunday. It was a little confusing when I was younger because they were called Parish School of Religion and I thought it has something to do with me. Egotism I'm

sure. Bible study teachers never really knew what to do with me as I always seemed to be asking the wrong questions.

The teacher must have been discussing God's call and how we would know if we should join the clergy because we would hear his call. I never felt like I had to pay that much attention in Bible Study. The correct answer was always "God's love." I hadn't been paying much attention to the lesson, or at least so the teacher's expression would have said when I asked for clarification.

"So if we don't join the church, we have a family?" I asked.

"Exactly." She said.

I knew a lot as a child but didn't quite know how to put it into words. I knew I wasn't being called to a nun. Maybe a monk. But I was told I couldn't be a monk. I knew I would never be a mom. But those were my two options? I wanted to travel and do stuff. Didn't really know what... but it seemed like I would be too busy for such things.

"What if we don't want to get married?"

This question deeply concerned my teacher. "Well, you can't have sex..."

Gross. I was twelve and such behavior held no interest for me.

Nowadays, I identify more as culturally Catholic. It has been in my family for... well... a really long time. My English family stayed Catholic during the Reformation and were the first to build a 'church,' although with some provisions. When Thomas Weld came to ask King George the Third, he was told he could "build a mausoleum and you may furnish it inside as you wish." So Thomas Weld took that as the go ahead. He built St. Mary's Chapel in 1786 the first freestanding Roman Catholic Church build since the Reformation.

It is hard to see that sort of dedication to the Church in your family and just walk away.

We can trace my mother's family back to 640 AD. His name is Pepin, the first of Landon. There is a wikipedia page, but there isn't much information to be found on it. He had a daughter named Begga.

My grandfather had this family tree, typed out on printer paper and taped together. It was taped up to the wall behind his bedroom door and

stretched from floor to ceiling. Another hundred years or so sat scrolled up to the side with the latest generations. I am not on this family tree. The tree just isn't quite long enough.

I once went online to see what I could piece together. I made it to the 1600's before I got a firm handle on a country of origin. England. Which I already knew but it was nice to 'discover' it for myself. My family were the first Lord and Lady in Jamestown, part some of the first waves of Europeans to come to the New World. Which makes me about as American as you can really get. For a white person.



This is a picture of one of my ancestors. My sister and I found it one day as we sifted through the internet to see what could be dug up on our family. This is what we found... I labeled in my computer as "Sexy Ancestor", which I am regretting now that I have no idea who this is. Maybe Pepin? Or Alphin?

I don't go to church much anymore. When I do go to service at St. Peter Channel, I end up spending more time staring at the window my grandfather paid for when his wife past away. All I can think of when I see the giant stain glass window is

"Surely some of this money could have paid for my college tuition."
I'm an asshole.

The window shows John Carroll who was one of the first to bring Catholicism to America. He consecrated at St. Mary's Chapel in 1790. The window is stunning and I sometimes will go to the church on a weekday when I am home and just sit and look at it for a while.

When my grandfather past, we inherited a painting. It is no more than a foot tall with a ridiculously ornate golden frame. Mom tells the story of how it belonged to our grandmother and her father before that.

Grandmother's father used to tell her that, if the house were ever to be burning down, grab that painting first as it was the most valuable thing in the house. Her sister claims the painting she inherited was the one which needed to be saved. My theory is that their father told each of the seven children a different painting, so as to save as many of the valuables as possible.

My mom used to swear that the painting was of St. Aloysius but that never sat right with me. After a heated discussion and some scouring of Wikipedia, we came to the conclusion that the painting was not of St. Aloysius. You see, St. Aloysius was a Jesuit who spent his life educating the poor before dying of the plague. The painting illustrates a naked man, tied to a pole with arrows sticking out from his chest. Nothing in his Wikipedia page suggests that Aloysius was ever shot with arrows.

The painting is of St. Sebastian. The gay saint. It is the only reason I knew who he was. There is nothing particularly homosexual in his story. He was an early Christian and a martyr. Its just that his art tends to be a tinsy bit on the homoerotic side. His nude tied up frame is often reminiscent of early bondage pinup girls. So one can understand the gay man's obsession.

I have dibs on the painting when my parents die.

My sister is getting the sapphire ring.

The Judge's Chair sits in the my family's living room. The room is filled with old relics from family members long since dead. The chair is framed by a large floor to ceiling window and old white lace curtains. The sun always comes through that window, casting shadows of the chairs foreboding on the floor. The chair is wooden, relatively simple in design. It is quite large. I still require a slight jump to get myself into position. The wood isn't polished or sheened in any way. It just simply is. When I was younger, I would run my finger along the grains in the wood, tracing all of the dents and curves.

In between the front two legs of the chair, a large ring is affixed. Spokes line the circle, always reminding me of some sort of old prairie wagon wheel or the steering wheel of a pirates ship. The former was probably more accurate, but the latter was more fun. I would imagine

myself out on the sea, defending my right to do whatever the hell I pleased and stay up past my bedtime. But inevitably, I would be reminded that I was just steering a chair and that wouldn't make much of a difference on my bedtime.

By the time I was in the 4th grade, only two of the original eleven spokes were still attached. It would seem that they weren't designed for the feet of small children to use them as steps on their way up the chair. The slow breaking of the chair wore away at my mother until she forbid us from going near the chair at all. For after all, the chair was valuable.

What the chair lacked in value from gold or silver or shiny gems, it made up for in age. The chair heralded from Jamestown. *The Early Days of Washington* has a photograph of our very chair on page 147. We own 4 copies of this book. My aunts and uncles own several more. The chair was built for the judge in Jamestown and somehow stayed in the family and made its way down to Georgia.

We have no real idea how much the thing costs. Some days, while channel flipping covered in her snowman blanket, my mom will state again that one of these days, she is going to take that chair down to the Antiques Roadshow and get it appraised. With the book, my sister reminds, we might be able to get on television. My mother really isn't the TV type. And with the size and shape of the chair, it would be incredibly cumbersome to carry around a showroom full of people also carting around their old hand me downs from generations past. I know it is never gonna happen.

Over the years, the chair acted as a coat rack for my mother, filing it with stuff so that my sister and I would not be able to sit in it, lest we break off even more pieces. Once my sister and I were out and gone to college, my mother finally decided to get it fixed, having kept the pieces stored away for so long. No more tyrannical children around to break it again. It is now sitting back out in public; its presence filling up another wall in our living room. People never seem to want to sit in it, with its looming height and stiff back, but I find it oddly comfortable. Even though I am much larger than I was, as I suppose is the norm, I still can curl up in the chair's wooden embrace.

For Show and Tell, my sister and I would often bring in this set of stirrups. Tarnished bronze metal stirrups. Mother told us that they were from the Civil War, so that meant that they were really old compared to our elementary school selves. Not that we really knew what stirrups were for. They were simply heavy chunks of metal. There was a saddle that went with them, but that has since been donated to a museum. The chocolate colored leather was getting old and it was too large to keep in the house.

There was no historical documents of any kind to back up any more details as to where this piece might come from. There are seals on each side of the stirrups, although one is missing. We had hoped that someone might be able to identify whether the seals were Union or Confederate, but the seals are too generic to provide any leads.

My mom now has them set up as book ends.

Forrest Gump is a classic movie which I neglected to see until I was in high school on a field trip. A southern classic, many of my friends have profile pictures sitting on the very bench that Forrest sits on to narrate his life story. It sits in Savannah, Georgia, surrounded by the spanish moss and passing cars.

Many people miss the foreboding moment where Forrest's namesake is mentioned. Nathan Bedford Forrest was a Confederate general and the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Forrest's mother intends the name to be a reminder that "sometimes we do things that, well, don't make sense."

It wasn't until I was in college that my own relation to Nathan Bedford Forrest came to light. His is part of the dark spots on the map which we don't address often. Yet there he was, among the rest of the Forrest family. I still see his name on the tree and I don't really know what to make of it.

When my cousin was pregnant, I heard the names Nathan, Maxwell, Sarah, Kathrine... But the suggestion of Yturbide would force my normally soft spoken family to angry grumbles which edged just past the point of grumbles. My mother swore it was a family name.

Yturbide has one of the most difficult names to google. Also spelled

Yterbide, Iterbide, and Iturbide, his Wikipedia page is about the only thing to come up. I have two sources of information. A newspaper article published on June 25, 1939 and an old typed story portraying my family's 'side' of the story. Yturbide's parents were the type that brushed shoulders with politicians and ambassadors. They had become friends with the Mexican royalty. When the King of Mexico realized that he wasn't going to be able to have his own biological children, he looked to adopt Yturbide. He told the mother that she would be able to come live with them at the castle, but when they arrived, the royal family took the baby and locked the mother outside. The official story in the newspaper is that the mother went crazy and was not safe to be around Yturbide. The family story describes it as simple kidnapping. The Mexican royal family was usurped only a few years later so it was kind of a moot point.

My younger sister was named Morgan. My parents had given me a family name and wanted to do the same for my sister. They scoured the family trees and ended up on Morgan. When asked, my sister gets to tell the curious inquirer that she was named after the infamous Captain Henry Morgan. He was a privateer and eventual governor of Jamaica. I am not really certain how one makes that career shift, but I suppose it is possible. When we were young elementary school children, an author we met was working on a book about Capt Morgan and sent us a free copy. Well, sent my sister a free copy, but it remained on my shelf, as I actually read the thing. It was a little disappointing, as I was expecting battling pirates and the book portrayed Captain Morgan more as an aging man with ulcers.

Capt Morgan was a fearsome pirate, whereas my sister was more of a laid-back lay-low type. She could never be bothered to take a ship out to sea to fight for gold. It just wouldn't be a sound economic decision. Piracy isn't a stable source of income. She chose accounting instead, probably the much better option. Certainly more legal.

I was named after MaMa. Parrish was her maiden name. I am not sure what possessed my parents to look at that name and say "You know what would be a great name for a kid?"

MaMa told me the story as we sat in the shelter at their land in the mountains. The shelter was originally just a roof, but my Granddad had found a sale on the windows which crank open, so he bought them all and just lined the outer edge of the shelter. The tin roof still booms whenever any drops of water pass overhead. We sat on a swing that was probably originally built for some southerner's perfect front porch, but ended up in the shelter with the hodgepodge of other furniture. Some old leather desk chair. The old chair from our own living room, with the green Crayola marks of a 5 year old me.

I sat, legs dangling, next to my thin MaMa. She had a tear in her eye as she told me of the phone call from my father. I was frozen. Adults were not supposed to show emotion like this. Crying was something children did. Or mother during sad movies or books. Why would MaMa be sad about my name? It wasn't even hers anymore.

I don't think I understood happy tears at the time.

When I was younger, maybe 11 or 12, I asked my mom what I would have been called if I had been born a boy. Travers, she told me. Trav for short. At Girl Scout camp that summer, I told everyone to called me Trav. I still have trinkets around my old bedroom bearing that name. My grandfather's name was Travers. I always looked up to him.

When asked what was pictured in a random painting on his wall, he would proceed to tell you the history of the Revolutionary War. He knew so much about everything and was happy to tell you about it. It was hard to get a straight answer on anything out of him. But as a child, it was exhilarating. He held a glass over the kitchen table, threatening to dump it all over. But the water would build up and build up on the edge and not spill over! It was magic. "No, surface tension!" He knew about history and science and math. He knew about airplanes and meteorology and I never left his house without learning something new.

As I grew older, his stories became tedious. I had only asked when the French and Indian War ended. I hadn't asked for a breakdown of Franco-American relations between 1716 and 1775. (The war ended in 1763, in case anyone was wondering) I began to avoid any statements or questions which might result in a distracted rant about the Popes of the

1000's. We were never able to avoid it completely, but we could easily round the conversation elsewhere when we saw him getting distracted. I always felt so stupid because I knew nothing about what he was talking about. I wanted to avoid talking to him until I had learned enough to be able to keep up with him.

I regret that now.

I had a computer in my room from the 7th grade. I was extremely lucky. It was something my father had put together from spare parts of other computers. He was exploratory in those days. I used to play video games, like the educational ones my mom bought me or Nancy Drew, although the computer could never quite handle those games properly. I also had access to the internet. It was a huge amazing machine that could give me access to any information I wanted in just a few minutes. I could spend hours on Wikipedia, drifting through page after page of useless history. My sister and I used to play this game to see how quickly you could connect Hitler to Jesus. Which isn't hard. My mother would always remind me that anything I wrote on the internet or sent as a text [I got my first cell phone in 9th grade] would be out there forever. There was no way to take back what we said.

My sister has been sorting through boxes of old family paperwork lately. She found a letter. It is addressed to Col. Forrest on August 24, 1788. In the letter, Rebecca Plater expresses her grief at Forrest's insistence on meeting with her father. She goes on and on about how bad it would be for him to do, going as far as to say:

I yesterday received a very ill-natured letter from my Uncle, which hurt my feelings more than anything that could have happened; but I will forgive him_ tho will never forgive you while exist if you disobey me.

She married the guy two years later. So I guess the argument didn't end too badly.

I wrote my parents a letter when I was 16 years old. I don't believe I have it anymore. See, when you come out as transgender, it often takes a little more explaining than if you are coming out as gay. Gay gets it all across in one word.

My letter was two pages long, Times New Roman, single spaced. I spelled everything out as clearly as I could. I had my sister proofread it; my way of easing her into it as well. She read over it and said it looked fine. We didn't really have any conversations about it.

The letter changed the course of my life. But the exact words that were put to paper have been long lost along the way.

I can look at my mother's family tree and I know my family. I know who is related to whom. How far back the story goes. But they are only names on a list.

My sister will have children. Whenever my sister and I stare at the family tree, we pick names for her children. She decided her first child's name, boy or girl, will be Mackell. I am pushing for her next child to be Alpin. We both understand what it is like to not find your name on the walls of mugs, although I more than her. And we have no problem subjecting her children to the same fate.

I say we, as though I have any say in her children's lives. Even as we joke that I will be living on her couch, as I have chosen the less financially stable profession, I still will only be a guest in such activities.

Children are one of her dreams and aren't so much included in mine.

Since my grandfather passed away, the huge family tree which once hung in his room has moved to my parents house. It sits in a drawer in a huge chest that sits in our family room. Some quiet afternoons I pull it out and lay it across the floor. I look down at it, skimming over generations and generations of names. From Alpin, King of the Scots of Argyll to Godiva of Mercia. From King Ferdinand IV of Castile to Anne Radclyffe of Winmarleigh. From King Charles the First of England to Louis Weld, my great-grandfather. The lines branch away and continue onward. There is one section where a couple has two children and their descendants get married not 5 generations later.

Margaret Sinclair -- Thomas Stewart

|

Margaret Steward -- William Douglas

|

George Douglas -- Mary Stewart

|

George Douglas -- Isabelle Sibbald

|

Archibald "Bell the Cat" Douglas -- Elizabeth Boyd

The tree is filled with royalty, but also with more common people, like Catherine O'Brian who died in 1818, Henry Weld the bicycle maker, Janet Hepburn mother of two children, and Richard Jenkins, the vicar of Burnham. Individual's entire lives are summed up in a single sentence. "Lived in exile in Denmark, Russia, and Hungary." "Her dowry included the Orkney and Shetland Islands." "Mistress of James before he became king." "The favorite of King Edward the Second; Earl of Winchester; hanged, drawn, and quartered."

The tree is a giant web, connecting me to so many others. It is a map, showing the path my genes took to get to me. And then I remember that I will be a genetic dead end.

This is a strange knowledge - to look back at over a thousand years of family history and know that your line ends with you.

When I was younger, I found a plaque in my father's office, buried under a pile of floppy disks and books. It read:

Turner

You got it from your father, it was all he had to give. So it's yours to use and cherish, for as long as you may live. If you lose the watch he gave you, it can always be replaced. But a black mark on your name, son, can never be erased. It was clean the day you took it, and a worthy name to bear. When he got it from his father, there was no dishonor there. So make sure you guard it wisely, after all is said and done. You'll be glad the name is spotless, when you give it to your son.

I don't remember if I asked if I could have it or not, but the plaque now sits in my childhood bedroom. It haunted me as a child. As my father

had produced two daughters, there would be no one to continue his name.

I think the feeling is guilt. Yet, that can't be right. And yet...

It is standing at the corner of the map, knowing this is the edge. I don't really have a record of what this place looks like. Maybe there will be dragons.

Save It

Noah Stetzer

When I finally
leave the hospital,
they smile and pat
my shoulder
with their gloved
hands. But I take
infection with me
when I go--toe nails
hard green and black
and gums receding:
a pink tide going out.
Reluctant ownership
returned, they clap
for me, a fighter
knocked out one
too many times, too
stupid to stay down.
A passenger inside,
absolved of this body.
Schedules assigned
nourishment and catheters
excrement; gloves charted
pressures and chemical
work; ball-point pens
directed solutions: twice
daily MRI's, eleven
pills, thirty-seven four
hundred milligram bags
of Bactrim drip, ten
milligrams of benzodiazepine;
one chest tube
size twenty inserted

to left lateral chest,
fixed by sutures and tape,
one chest tube
size twenty inserted
to right anterior chest
at intercostal space,
suction regulated
at twenty centimeters
water depth; tube sites
with Vaseline occlusive
dressing--answers pushed
in through the hollow tip
of a needle and along
the honed edge of a knife.
They congratulate me
as if the things my body
do are my own achievements:
nails grown, hair shed,
blinking, breathing, beating
are all my hard work.
I am just an apple
in a bowl, the yellow insides
of an egg, a quarter
clanking in the dryer.

Contributors' Biographies

Jane V. Blunski is an MFA candidate in Fiction at the University of Arkansas. Her travel book, "Love, Tupelo" was published in 2012 by Corvus Press, and she is the recipient of the Lily Peter Creative Writing Scholarship. Originally from Lafayette, Louisiana, Jane lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas. **Yana Calou** is a genderqueer Brazilian-American writer, performance artist and media activist on economic, racial and gender justice issues. Yana has performed at the Pop-up Museum of Queer History, La MaMa, Dixon Place, and BAX. Yana lives in Brooklyn and is currently working on a master's degree in women's, gender, and sexuality studies at the CUNY Graduate Center. In a past life, they led communications for the Utah Pride Center, GLAAD, the Retail Action Project, and the Women's Media Center. **PJ Carlisle** is the Herbert Woodward Martin Post-Doctoral Fellow for Diversity and Creative Writing at the University of Dayton. Carlisle received a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Utah, and there served as the managing editor of *Western Humanities Review*. Published work has recently appeared in *Quarterly West*, *WHR*, *Thickets*, and the NPR Pittsburgh radio show *Prosody*. A first novel, *EpicFishStory*, won the Mary McCarthy Internal Award for fiction from Bard College, judged by Harry Matthews. Chapters from *The Golden Book of Dangerous Boys*, a new novel that explodes conventions, gender, and genre, won both the Turow-Kinder Award and the AWP Intro Journals Project Award. **Timothy Carrier** is originally from St. Louis, Missouri, and lives in New York City. **Celeste Chan** is a writer and artist/organizer, schooled by DIY and immigrant parents from Malaysia and the Bronx, NY. A VONA fellow, her writing can be found in *As/us journal*, *Feminist Wire*, and *Hyphen*. Her films have screened in CAAMFest, Digital Desperados, Entzaubert, Frameline, MIX NYC, National Queer Arts Festival, and Vancouver Queer Film Festival, among others. She has presented and curated in the SF Bay Area, NYC, Seattle, Bloomington, Glasgow, Berlin, and beyond. Alongside KB Boyce, she co-directs Queer Rebels, a queer and trans people of color arts project. She lives in San Francisco.

www.celestechan.com. **Wo Chan** is a queer Chinese immigrant devoted to poetry and drag. He received a BA in creative writing from the University of Virginia. Wo holds poetry fellowships from Poets & Writers, Poets House, Kundiman, and Lambda Literary. As a drag artist, Wo is a member of Brooklyn-based drag troupe, Switch n' Play, and has performed at Brooklyn Pride, The Trevor Project, and the Architectural Digest Expo. He lives in lives in Brooklyn above a daycare. **John Copenhaver's** novel *Dodging and Burning* placed as a quarterfinalist in the 2010 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award. He's attended Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and Tin House. He was a fellow in genre fiction at the Lambda Writers Retreat in 2011 and 2014. He graduated with his MFA from GMU, where he edited the literary magazine *Phoebe*. He has published in regional journals, including *Timber Creek Review* and *The Roanoke Review*, and was first runner-up in the F. Scott Fitzgerald Short Story Contest and Narrative Magazine Winter Story Contest, 2014. He is attending residencies this year at VCCA, Ragdale, and VSC. His blog is *Talking the Walk* (johncopenhaver.wordpress.com). **Annette Covrigaru** is a Long Island, NY native and recently graduated from Kenyon College with a B.A. in English emphasizing in Creative Writing. In 2014 she was the winner of the college's Muriel C. Bradbrook Award. Her stories have been published in Kenyon's student-run literary magazine, *HIKA*. In past years, she has worked as a Kenyon Review Student Associate and has interned at Random House. An incoming M.A. student in the Weiss-Livnat International M.A. Program in Holocaust Studies at the University of Haifa, she looks to merge her studies of the Holocaust and queer identity to create nonfictional stories and preserve LGBTQA Holocaust narratives. The short essay "Afterlives" was written during the Lambda Literary Emerging LGBT Writers Retreat. **Jenna Leigh Evans** has been published in print and online journals including Electric Literature's *The Outlet*, *The Toast*, *the Nervous Breakdown*, *Autostraddle* and *The Billfold*. Her novel *Prosperity* was published in 2014. She lives in Brooklyn and can be found at jennaleighevans.com. **Seth Fischer's** writing has appeared in *Best Sex Writing 2013*, *The Rumpus*, *Pank*, *Guernica*, *Lunch Ticket*, and elsewhere. His piece "Notes from a Unicorn" was listed as a notable essay in *The Best American Essays 2013*. He was a 2014 Lambda Literary Emerging

Voicing Fellow and a 2013 Jentel Arts Residency Program Fellow. He also teaches at Antioch University Los Angeles and Writing Workshops Los Angeles. **Garrett A. Foster** is an Emmy Award–winning writer for his work on the CBS daytime drama *Guiding Light*. A graduate of Vassar College with a B.A. in English, Garrett has worked as an editor and writer at *The Palm Beach Post* and *Sun Sentinel*, and served as editor-in-chief of *Soap Opera Magazine*. A Connecticut native, he traded in his show shoes for flip flops to move to South Florida in 1991 and hasn't looked back since. *The Domino Murders* is his fourth completed, yet-to-be-published novel. **Lisa Galloway** grew up in Indiana where she was adopted into a family with Southern Baptist roots (read more in her forthcoming collection). Thankfully, she moved to the far more progressive Pacific Northwest landing in Portland, Oregon just over ten years ago. In the last year, she's worked as a writer/ researcher consulting with attorneys advocating for people screwed by ineffective systems, a carpenter, a vegetarian food cart cook, a video ethnographer for healthcare operations change, and a caterer. She's the author of *Liminal: A Life of Cleavage* from Lost Horse Press' New Poets, Short Books Series, a graduate of Pacific University's MFA Program and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize for her poem "She Was a Chagall." She is currently finishing her second poetry collection titled *Mother, Marriage, and Other Natural Disasters* that's mostly about her mother's death, contentious family dynamics, first gay marriage, and the other interestingly intense events from her astrological Saturn's Return. **Alex Grandstaff** is a nonbinary native Houstonian and founding member of Gamma Rho Lambda's Kappa Chapter at their alma mater, University of Houston. Alex is into urban fantasy and magical realism stories with a side of memoirs. A writer of fiction and comics, they are currently writing and illustrating a graphic novel *The Trialand* and working on the novel *The Moving City*. Both pieces began as a part of Alex's senior honors thesis, a collection of fiction focused on queer protagonists. Alex still resides in Houston and can be found blogging at AnalyticalAlex and making art on AGrandMark. **Jennie Gruber** is a writer, educator, media-maker, queer punk, and true karaoke believer. She holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing from Sarah Lawrence. Her writing has

appeared on *Vice*, *Nerve*, *Helix* *Queer Performance Network*, *Fleshbot*, and *Gaga Stigmata*, in *The Believer*, *AORTA*, and *Whore!* magazines, and in several Cleis Press anthologies. Her workshops and readings have been featured at a variety of venues, including Red Umbrella Diaries, Perverts Put Out, Lesbian Sex Mafia, and the Feminist Porn Conference. In a parallel dimension, she is also an award-winning experimental documentary filmmaker. Born in Northern California, Gruber now lives in Manhattan with a very sweet bear. When she isn't giving reign to the travel impulse, **Theodosia Henney** can be found in Vermont, working in a delightful jam factory, studying circus, and planning her escape to the West. Her life is too scattershot to adopt any fur-children, so she fills the void with remarkable human friends, haphazard baking adventures, and an ever-growing collection of books. She knits and throws knives at her dresser to relieve stress. Visit her at theodosia-henney.com **Ricardo Hernandez** is an aspiring poet. A recent CUNY Baruch graduate with a BA in English Literature, he spends most of his free time reading and writing, and hopes to earn an MFA in the near future. He lives in Queens, NY. **Regina Jamison** is a writer, educator, and mother. She is currently working on her MFA in Creative Writing at City College in New York. She has published short stories in Zane's lesbian anthology, *Purple Panties* and in the vampire lesbian anthology, *Girls Who Bite*. Her poetry has appeared in *Off the Rocks Vol 14 & 15*, and *Promethean ezine*. She is hard at work on completing her novel, *Lurleen*. **Miah Jeffra** is from Baltimore. He runs social justice arts network ShadowLab and teaches interdisciplinary studies at San Francisco Art Institute and writing at Santa Clara University. He is recipient of the Clark-Gross Award for his novel *Highlandtown* and Sidney Lanier Prize for his short fiction. His work can be seen most recently in *North Atlantic Review*, *Educe*, *A Cappella Zoo*, *Fourteen Hills* and *Edge*. He lives and fights abusive real estate speculation in San Francisco. **Wayne Johns'** poetry and fiction have appeared in *Best New Poets 2014*, *Bloom*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Image*, *court green*, and elsewhere. A former Kingsbury Fellow at Florida State University, he is currently the Moore Professor of English, Communications & Media Studies at Greensboro College. **Meg**

Leitold is a ball of queer femme fire based in Toronto and a returning Lambda Fellow from the 2013 Non-Fiction workshop. A graduate of Concordia University's Simone de Beauvoir Institute and the University of Toronto, her writing has been published in several zines, art installations, and journals, including *No More Potlucks*, *Historiae*, and *Subversions*. In her spare time, she delights in dancing, reading fiction, and out-jargoning the mansplainer. **Yuska Lutfi Tuanakotta** earned MFA degrees in fiction and nonfiction writing from Saint Mary's College of California. His peers described his pieces as "sartorially delicious, peppered with just enough snark, wit, and charm." In spring 2014, he facilitated the memoir writing workshop for Lafayette Seniors Citizens, curated its blog, and its anthology. He is working on his book that explores issues of drag performers, gender, and religion in his home country Indonesia. Yuska is an American Tribal Style belly dancer, photographer, and collector of antique fabrics and jewelry. He loves cats, cheesecakes, and beefcakes. For more information, visit www.tuanakotta.com. **William Lung** is an MFA student and adjunct lecturer at the City College of New York, where he's been the recipient of the Stark Short Fiction Prize. His fiction is often inspired by true stories and a love of travel. **Marcos L. Martínez** is a native of Brownsville, TX, earned his BA at Georgetown University, and is completing his MFA in Fiction at George Mason University. As a Sally Merten Fellow, he has taught creative writing to high school students and adults throughout Northern Virginia. He currently serves as Editor for Stillhouse Press, a collaboration between GMU's Creative Writing Program and Fall for the Book. Marcos is also a Lambda Literary Fellow. His work has appeared in *The Washington Blade*, *RiverSedge*, and *Whiskey Island*. Current projects include his novel, *Embarkations (or, Boating for Beginners)*, and *Cleave: The Journals of Caine Lance Calletano*, a companion book of poetry told through the voice of his novel's main character. Marcos lives in Alexandria, VA with his husband of 22 years, Wayne, and their obsidian cat Obi. **Megan McHugh** is a poet and flower farmer in New Orleans. **Ed Moreno** is a writer, lecturer and bookseller living in Melbourne, Australia. He is currently undertaking a PhD on Brazilian writer Caio Fernando Abreu at La Trobe University. Originally from New Mexico,

Ed came to Australia “for a visit” in 1995, attended the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras, fell in love with the rowdy, sophisticated locals, the bush, the beaches and the cities and now calls Australia home. Ed’s short stories have appeared at *blithe.com*, *questions.com.au*, *Mini Shots*, *Poslink*, and in Cleis Press’ *Best Gay Romance* and *Best Gay Erotica*. He is currently working on his first collection of short stories. Author, Poet, Screenwriter, Talk Host, Speaker and Aspiring Documentary Filmmaker, **Claudia Moss** is a lover of words and has been since she could straighten her back and sit up in the middle of the floor and talk, while her twin Claude could walk and she was left to sit in one spot and report on his whereabouts. Author of the young adult novel, *Dolly: the Memoirs of a High School Graduate*, Claudia’s work can be found in *Venus Magazine*, *The Hoot & Holler of the Owls: An Anthology of Writers from Hurston/Wright Writers’ Week*, *Gietic: Erotic Poems/Kinky Short Stories*, *Longing, Lust, and Love: Black Lesbian Stories*, Lesbian Memoirs’ poetry collection, *Her Voice*, Pearl Cleage’s *Catalyst Magazine*, Rachel Bussel’s *Lust Chronicles*, Zane’s *Purple Panties*, and Jolie du Pre’s *SWING!* She is in the final stages of completing her first poetry CD, which will be released in 2014. In addition, she is finishing a second romance, *Not Without Passion*, another collection of poetry, *Rhythms of Love/Ritmos del Amor*, and a collection of monologues, *Breaststrokes*. Enjoy her archived Internet radio talk show, *Claudia Moss LIVE*, on www.Talkshoe.com. **Joseph Osmundson** is a scientist, writer, and educator from rural Washington state. His research focuses on protein structure and function while his writing explores identity and place and sexuality and class and race and all sorts of messy, complicated stuff. His work has been published on *Salon*, *The Feminist Wire*, and *Gawker*, and in the anthology *The Queer South* (Sibling Rivalry Press). He has taught at The New School and Vassar College and is currently a postdoctoral fellow in Systems Biology at New York University. **Morgan M Page** (Odofemi) is a transsexual performance + video artist, writer, and Santera in Montréal Québec. She was a 2014 Lambda Literary Fellow in Genre Fiction, and was the recipient of two 2013 San Francisco MOTHA awards (New/Upcoming Artist of the Year and Group Exhibition of the Year, TWAT/fest). Her first novel is due out in early 2015 from Topside

Press, and her writings have been featured in Cleis Press' *Best Sex Writing 2015* (forthcoming), and Exile Edition's *Fractured*, as well as online at *PrettyQueer.com* and *TitsandSass.com*. Her website is *Odofemi.com*.

Baruch Porras-Hernandez is a writer and performer based in San Francisco. His work can be found in numerous anthologies, he has performed in N.Y.C., L.A., Washington D.C. Canada and all over California. He regularly organizes poetry shows and has been the head curator and organizer for The San Francisco Queer Open Mic and Performance Series for the past 5 years. He was born in Toluca, Mexico and raised in Albany, California. **Christina Quintana** is a New Orleans-grown, Brooklyn-based writer. Her plays have been developed and/or produced by the Alliance Theatre, INTAR Theatre, Prospect Theatre Company, Williamstown Theatre Festival, and Southern Rep. Her work has also appeared in *ITCH Magazine*, *KNACK Magazine*, and *Glyph*. She is a proud finalist for the 2014 Alliance/Keneda National Graduate Playwriting Competition and former intern for the Unterberg Poetry Center of the 92nd Street Y. BFA, Santa Fe University of Art and Design (College of Santa Fe); MFA Playwriting, Columbia University. www.cquintana.com. **Jeffrey Ricker** is the author of *Detours* and the YA fantasy *The Unwanted*, both published by Bold Strokes Books. His writing has appeared in the anthologies *Foolish Hearts: New Gay Fiction*, *A Family by Any Other Name*, *Men of the Mean Streets*, and others. A graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, he holds an MFA from the University of British Columbia and lives in St. Louis with his partner and their contrary dachshund. Keep up with his work at www.jeffrey-ricker.com. **Roberto F. Santiago** is a poet, translator, and lead singer in a solo act who produces his own music, and dances rips into his pants. Roberto received an MFA from Rutgers University, BA from Sarah Lawrence College, and is the recipient of the 2011 Alfred C. Carey Prize for Poetry. Currently, he works as College and Career Coordinator in San Francisco. His first full-length collection of poems, *Angel Park*, will be released April 2015 by Lethe Press. His poetry has been published in such anthologies/journals as *Assaracus - Sibling Rivalry*, *CURA: A Literary Magazine of Art & Action*, *Hypothetical: A Review of Everything Imaginable*, and *The Waiting Room Reader: Stories to*

Keep you Company - CavanKerry. **Corey Saucier** is a Lyrical Philosopher and a Black Queer Christian Poet. He is a Los Angeles Native and was a Lambda Literary Emerging LGBT Voices Fellow in Non-Fiction (2011) and Fiction Genre (2014) as well as getting the UCLA's Writers Program Scholarship in 2012-2013. His words can be found on Justword.tumblr.com and he is currently a featured columnist in *A&U Magazine*. Corey is penning his first novel tentatively titled *Clover*, a dark piece of speculative fiction about Fairies, Homosexuals, and God... And he is delighted to have his first three chapters featured here. **Noah Stetzer** is a graduate of The MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and a recipient of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference work-study scholarship. **kynita stringer-stanback** is an Information Activist. A native North Carolinian, she currently resides in the Bull City (Durham, NC) with her life partner, their three children and two cats. **Hope Thompson** is a Toronto-based playwright, filmmaker and writer and is a graduate of Norman Jewison's Canadian Film Centre. Hope is interested in mystery, film noir, camp and comedy and has written and directed several award-winning short films and one-act plays in these genres. Hope's monologue, "Cardigan Confidential" was published in the collection, *City Voices: A Book of Monologues* by Toronto Artists and she performed it at World Pride in Toronto in 2014. Hope is currently working on her first mystery novel, *Sharp In The Dark*. www.hopethompson.net **Parrish Turner** is an aspiring essayist and playwright who hails from Georgia. He is pursuing a degree in Writing and Linguistics from Georgia Southern University. Parrish has participated in the New Horizons Playwright Festival, Georgia Southern's Ten Minute Play Festival, and, with his fellow playwrights, been honored with the Metro Atlanta Theater award for his work on the musical *By Wheel and By Wing*. His current projects include an adaptation of *Frankenstein* and a collection of memoir essays. **Victor Vazquez** is a PEN Center USA Emerging Voices Fellow, and a LAMBDA Literary Emerging LGBT Voices Fellow. He holds two playwriting commissions with 24th Street Theatre's Teatro del Pueblo Initiative working with the community of University Park in South Los Angeles. He is a recipient of the Hispanic Scholarship Fund McNamara Creative Arts Grant, a

graduate of UC Irvine's undergraduate creative writing emphasis program, and currently works as a Community Organizer in the Artistic Department at the Pasadena Playhouse in Pasadena, CA. Spanish is his native language. He is writing a book of poems titled *MEN*, and a novel titled, *Us, Boys*. He lives in Los Angeles. **David Weinstein** is a writer and editor based in Boston. He works as an editorial assistant at *Ploughshares* and is an editorial consultant in his spare time. His MFA in nonfiction, still underway at Emerson College, has him writing personal and biographical essays. Of particular interest to him is the impact of technology on gay communities and relationships. His work has appeared in *Slate*, among other publications.