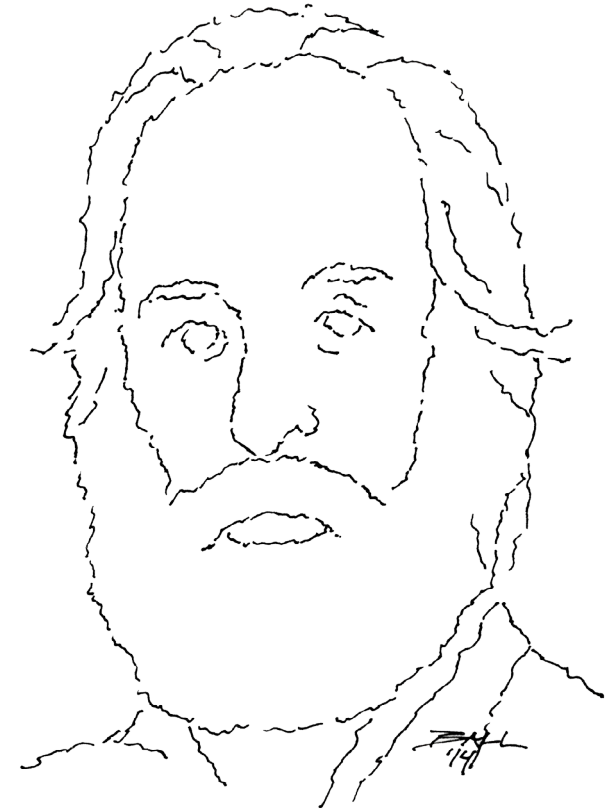




YAWP

FALL 2014



I TOO AM NOT A BIT TAMED, I TOO AM UNTRANSLATABLE,  
I SOUND MY BARBARIC *yawp* OVER THE ROOFS OF THE WORLD.

—WALT WHITMAN

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# YAWP



ISSUE ONE



FALL 2014

ART

FICTION

POETRY

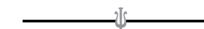
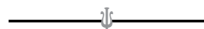
# YAWP

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# STICKS

K. ERNAL SANDERS

Every year Thanksgiving night we flocked out behind Dad as he dragged the Santa suit to the road and draped it over a kind of crucifix he'd built out of metal pole in the yard. Super Bowl week the pole was dressed in a jersey and Rod's helmet and Rod had to clear it with Dad if he wanted to take the helmet off. On the Fourth of July the pole was Uncle Sam, on Veteran's Day a soldier, on Halloween a ghost. The pole was Dad's only concession to glee. We were allowed a single Crayola from the box at a time. One Christmas Eve he shrieked at Kimmie for wasting an apple slice. He hovered over us as we poured ketchup saying: good enough good enough good enough. Birthday parties consisted of cupcakes, no ice cream. The first time I brought a date over she said: what's with your dad and that pole? and I sat there blinking.

We left home, married, had children of our own, found the seeds of meanness blooming also within us. Dad began dressing the pole with more complexity and less discernible logic. He draped some kind of fur over it on Groundhog Day and lugged out a floodlight to ensure a shadow. When an earthquake struck Chile he lay the pole on its side and spray painted a rift in the earth. Mom died and he dressed the pole as Death and hung from the crossbar photos of Mom as a baby. We'd stop by and find odd talismans from his youth arranged around the base: army medals, theater tickets, old sweatshirts, tubes of Mom's makeup. One autumn he painted the pole bright yellow. He covered it with cotton swabs that winter for warmth and provided offspring by hammering in six crossed sticks around the yard. He ran lengths of string between the pole and the sticks, and taped to the string letters of apology, admissions of error, pleas for understanding, all written in a frantic hand on index cards. He painted a sign saying LOVE and hung it from the pole and another that said FORGIVE? and then he died in the hall with the radio on and we sold the house to a young couple who yanked out the pole and the sticks and left them by the road on garbage day.



# PLANNING AN ATLANTIC FUNERAL

HUEY LOUIS

**E**yes drawn to blue haze drag up thoughts of crest and spume, a baby horseshoe crab scurrying in a drill of seawater. How clouds come marveling to the ocean only to hurry off across it. Over maps the gazes drift out to the deep blue, stirring up dreams of bones and ghosts from carpets of seaweed. When fantasy falters, the grown take children in their arms and journey to see. Like revisiting an old crush, maybe your first, at the movies.

The Atlantic of my memory loves the moon the best. Groping for her chilly face, the waters crush the sailors and surfers piling on for a piece of their own. Remember that Odysseus, lost in strange bedrooms, met only monsters and difficulty. If you must be heedless, take up a trade, learn a form of respect, catch the jissom in your palm. Ask needless questions. Just who are the oceans sleeping with?

A gravid affair, it moves us, warps our seed and grain and stalk, lights our houses with its moods, makes overtures to our unborn kin. Under the fleshy fatness of full lunar exposure, attendant waters mute the pain, assume the mess. Brackish or Martian, waters conspire. Where bodies move, life impends.

Remember your roots. Each day, children reach their first coast. There they acknowledge what calls to them in the most intimate of beds. There's a girl with red hair, green eyes, a disturbance of freckles under a banana—green sundress. She rushes the mineral blue, as if to cross or pierce it and lift it like a turtle to carry home. See recognition catch her high on her toes, where the sea meets the nails her mother painted red.



# FLICKER

PATTI O. DECH

I'm from a nowhere town, with nowhere people thrilled to death about it, and I have to get out before my bones shift under my skin to make me the same way. Under the moon, like some beast, I'll howl. How do I get out? "You just go." My father says. I ask my mother what I will have to do if I ever want to come back. She says, "You'll have to stop being too big for your britches." I catch summer in a jar like a lightning bug and wait for it to flicker out. My friends and I smoke cigarettes all day and drink milky coffee in the burning sun. That's May to June. We sit on my porch and watch squirrels dance on power lines; contemplate killing birds that sound too happy. June to July we make road trip plans that never come together because we're lazy and poor. July to August we collect sweat under our knees and talk about how the lake feels like bathwater. At night, we sit in our local bar and drink the cheapest stuff they got. I like to drink enough to make me smile without it being a lie. Everyone always tells me what a fun drunk I am. That's no lie right there. I know what fun looks like. I don't want to leave. "So don't go." My father says. I don't want to leave. But, if I have to, I want to carry all my nobodies behind my ear—whispering into the shell of me—filling me with the soul of me: bumblebees lingering by the dewdrops in the morning, forgotten dried peach juice in the hollow of an arm, wild grown honeysuckle and wisteria, whippoorwill wisdom that makes no sense until it does.



# THE HUSBAND'S TALE

BENJAMIN DOVER

*the difficult signs for light, for danger,  
as well as the simpler one for love*  
—“Adam Signing” by John Engels

1.

I know that they say—it was her silence  
I married her for. They’ve got it right. She’s  
never spoken. She has no voice box,  
so she can’t even hum to herself. Yes,

she can write—her elegant hand can fly  
across a page, every sentence crackling  
with intelligence and passion for life,  
the world and its creatures, books, art, music—

and when she signs, people gather around  
her as if her hands and fingers reveal  
how we came to be here, what we must do  
with our lives, and what happens after we

die. No matter they can’t read her gestures.  
They want what I want. To listen anyway.

2.

Forty years we’ve been companions—a long,  
intricate dance begun the day we met.  
In high school, someone said, That new girl can’t  
talk, and I went to see her for myself.

So her stillness was the first fact I knew  
about her. Her looks were ordinary—  
no one said she was pretty—but her face  
had a kind of power. Kids got quiet



around her, and if she looked straight at you,  
it could make you shiver. She and I locked  
eyes that first day, and nowadays we joke  
that was the moment we made our wedding vows.

She was voted our commencement speaker.  
Beside her, I read her speech. Sounded her words.

3.  
Never a man, but when women see us  
together—their faces say it, they suspect  
a talking husband with a silent wife.  
Like it's a new sexual perversion.

They might not be wrong. When Ruth Ann and I  
make love, it's the words I say that excite  
her, the flutter and cares of her hands  
and fingers that move me along with her.

Is this too intimate? Well, there you have it—  
The other side of power is a cool,  
secret place, a meadow where two can go  
to lie down in smooth grass to spend hours.

A fingertip brushing along the skin  
inside a wrist. Just you whispered like Amen.

4.  
Yes, children. And yes, they must have suffered  
difficulty and embarrassment they  
never even told us about, schoolmates  
with hands over their mouths mocking Ruth Anne,

exaggerating the long stare at a face  
that's become my habit. Robert's oldest,  
Michelle only a year younger. They're sweet  
Kids and never told us of any trouble

we might have caused them. School's where you find out  
how the world views your parents. They brought home  
friends, and the friends watched us. We know they had  
their thoughts. But somehow we passed inspection.

Once we even chaperoned a school dance,  
danced the jitterbug for them—but just once.

5.  
Once, furious, her hands seemed to explode:  
You use silence against me! It's not fair!  
I must have blinked, because her mouth opened  
like that agonized person's in Munch's The Scream—

and she made the same sound the painting makes—none  
whatsoever. It was just so eerie!  
Married a few years, we suddenly saw  
That navigating love all right didn't

mean we could handle fear and rage. I don't  
know how I knew to do this, don't remember  
deciding to do it, just knew to drop  
straight to the floor, knee, hug her knees, bury

my head, and say, "I'm so sorry!" When I  
looked up, she smiled and signed, Keep talking.

6.  
My worst fear was she'd be hurt somewhere near  
and I'd be oblivious. More and more  
I'd go and check on her wherever I thought  
she was—gardening, ironing, watching TV.

I got so I could do it without her  
noticing, just a glance from a window  
or through a door, but in the course of years  
I realized she knew almost every

time but pretended not to notice. What  
this says about our marriage or the two of us  
I don't know, but once when she sat reading  
in the back yard sunlight, I passed the porch door

like a ghost spying on a statue, then  
stepped back and caught that slight to—herself grin.

7.

Gardening would be only the general  
term for what she did with flowers, trees, rocks,  
water, grass, shrubs, even daylight and shadow.  
It took years for me to see how the odd

little pieces of land around our house  
had evolved into a park for ghosts or  
angles, or maybe it was outsider art  
for a few discerning pedestrians

who could recognize arrangements she'd changed  
dozens of times—buried hoses made fountains,  
one that washed down a rock face into a pool  
lined with stones she'd found, a miniature

grotto with a bench beneath soft Chinese  
chimes that called Come sit down in paradise.

8.

One more won't hurt. Saying it swung open  
the door to Les Bon Temps—and Ruth Ann tipsy  
was funnier than a dozen speaking  
women. "You're slurring your words," I'd tell her,

and she'd gesture gibberish and cross her  
eyes. Oh, we said it a lot in those years  
before the night I hip—checked her across  
the kitchen and broke her wrist.

What had seemed

only giddy pleasure turned in that instant  
to a drunken husband (me) abusing  
his disadvantaged wife (Ruth Ann), waking  
their sleeping kids with his violent act.

Right hand in a cast. The left didn't feel  
like talking, and our sad silence a jail.

9.

One Monday morning at Dunkin' Donuts  
I realized I was pointing at what  
I wanted. I actually forced myself  
to say Thank you to the woman counting

change into my palm. I sat in the car  
a long while, thinking about when I'd last  
spoken aloud. As if they were someone  
else's, my hands signed—Friday afternoon

at work. Kids away at school, with the house  
to ourselves, Ruth Ann and I, without  
ever agreeing it was what we wanted,  
had given ourselves over to silence.

Or maybe released it from the basement,  
attic, and closets. Treated it like a guest.

# BREATHE

LIKA MADIQ

Her teeth are not so white anymore. She cannot bring herself to finish the broccoli on her plate. She packs up the leftovers in a styrofoam container and orders dessert. She avoids eye contact with the waiter speaking only in dry monosyllables. The darkness is still crawling but the light can now stand on its own two chubby feet with just the tiniest of wobbles. Blame drifts across her face and drips into her coffee cup when she lowers her lips taking paper sips.

A cat wanders among the patrons periodically avoiding eager hands wishing to pet it darting from table to table snapping its speckled tail. She watches the puss prowl for scraps casually finding shade from laughter and conversation underneath chairs perhaps convinced like an inquisitive child that it is somehow invisible to these giants who fill the world with a racket of garbled words and hulking strides. The skewbald feline wanders off from view to examine various suitable exits.

She finds herself charging through the streets racing to return to her house before the rain ends afraid to tread softly under the watchful gaze of the all-seeing sun. She knows old Apollo's tricks. Using the moon as a mirror for instance. Peeking through clouds or walls by igniting his x-ray vision.

Rusting door handle. Carpet stairs. Creaking. The shriek of her whistle insufficient to ward off municipal ghosts guarding the stairwell. She manages to calmly close the apartment door behind her. She stares long at the cardboard bookshelves trying to recall how to breathe again. There is a whisper of panic in the way she insistently rubs her face with the soft heel of her hand.

She opens the window hoping a gentle unscented breeze will tempt her to draw breath once more. She is now scratching at her throat hoping the friction will somehow help. She goes over the steps. Unlock her nostrils or part her lips. Ignore the fear. Try not to interrupt with clenched swallows. Slowly sip the air all around. Ignore the image of her grandmother suffering an asthma attack when she was seven. Do not force the air. Sit down with her back against a stiff surface. The straw is widening. Little sips. But.

She crawls along the carpet passing through the space between the living room and the door to her bedroom. She does not stop to catch her reflection. The walls of the room are darkening. Shrinking. Closing in on her. Slowly the sooty master bathroom. The echo through which. To stand up. Worse this time.

When he returns he will have to breathe for them both. A man who can't let go. His words have their own length of leverage. His tongue trilling the resonant

columns of air. When he speaks she cannot help but reply and in so doing must nourish her lungs and in turn her heart. She needs to hear his voice again and not just over the telephone which she finds empty of too many of his most important frequencies. The ones that set off the little earthquakes inside of her. That reduce this stifling coffin of insecurity and doubt to rubble.

# FEATURED ARTIST

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## MATEO DEL VAGA



**M**ateo del Vaga was born somewhere in the Rio-Grande basin at an undisclosed location and time. He was raised on the outskirts of Lake Charles, Louisiana in awe of the silver tongues of water pouring out of the Petro-Chemical plants that flowered along the bayou. He currently lives in California where his childhood continues to haunt him and his work.

*Mateo's work can be seen on pages 33, 34, 43, 47, 51, 61, 91, 119 and 137*



# MRS. GREENWOOD'S JELLY

ANITA BLACKMAN

Love in a vacuum, Dorothy thought. Love in the mail. Love in a blender. She almost laughed, then remembered she was pretending to sleep. Every morning, she waited for John to leave like this, listing out ways to contain and distort love. It lacked some dimension of rationality, to her mind. Love, which you couldn't even touch with one shaking finger.

Dorothy never warmed to sharing daybreak, to a plush floor meeting her morning feet. She never got to like not waking up to milk the lone female goat, to weed the half-acre of vegetation, to wonder at a newborn thing mewling out the arrival of dawn. She liked a quiet bath, though, how it was hot every time, liked the day's first light to wash over her in laggard waves. But John always prattled on about bank rates in his undershirt and socks—interests and securities and economic recovery. As if she understood those things, or cared. He shouted for her to bring the paper for his bathroom. He hummed Duke Ellington while the coffee percolated, the closest sound she could make to rain snatched away by his off-key crooning. Dorothy hated Duke Ellington. And she cringed at John's furry body reddened by the hot water, turned her face toward the door as she handed him the towel he always forgot to grab.

The first thing to go was doing the coffee for him. Next was the paper. Finally, the towel went. Exhaustion, she claimed. She became like the land. Resting herself until she could become useful again, lest she over-reap what had been sown in this marriage. She thought if she stayed in bed, he'd quiet down and she could ease herself back into the routines of her married life, rhythmic-like, without his noticing she'd changed him by changing herself. But no. John talked to himself. He talked to the walls. Scuttled his wet, naked body down the hall, skin squeaking, to the linen closet every day.

Dorothy waited for the thunk of heavy wooden door, the storm door's thwack. Thunk—thwack. Thunk—thwack. She'd measured the days of their marriage by that odd melody for four years. Not in a tedious way, not to complain. But this morning, the one morning she required privacy, the doors didn't bang, so she stopped listing love and got out of bed to see what was the matter.

John sat on the sofa bent over his shined shoes.

"You'll split your coat like that," she said and squatted next to him in her nightgown.

"The horn's stuck is all," he said.

She plucked it out easily. "There," she said. "Off to work with you."

“You ought to scold me for shoes on the carpet.”

This surprised her. “Why? Isn’t that what the sweeper is for?”

He shrugged. “My mother always did.” He smiled at her and pinched her rear through her nightgown. “See you at supper,” he said.

She forced a smile in return and let him pass by, out the door, thunk—thwack. Her own parents had barely spoken, just shoved eggs or emptied plates across the table with barely a look in the other’s direction. With John she felt she was playing a part in a play for which she hadn’t rehearsed, always grasping for the appropriate reactions, the right lines.

Dorothy hurried to the bedroom, tucked John’s side of the sheet under the mattress, letting her side hang free. She squared off the white chenille coverlet, its raised patterns running in perfect little grids up and down the bed. She creased the blanket beneath the row of pillows with the flat of her hand, marveling for a moment how white the white. It all took less than a minute to arrange. She’d gotten the whole house down to just an hour of daily work. Then nothing. The days stretched out before her like spun sugar. Slow, hot, saltless.

Dorothy lit a cigarette for breakfast, ashed it into the toilet, then flushed the butt. She had an hour until the post. She opened *Art and Beauty Magazine* to the dog-eared page and read the ad for the fortieth time:

Every person who is married or is contemplating marriage should listen to a word of advice. Too many people enter into the holy bonds of matrimony absolutely ignorant of any of its responsibilities. As a result, thousands of homes are wrecked, poor and innocent men and women are made to suffer untold misery all because they did not know the laws of nature.

She smoked another cigarette, then wrapped herself in a brazier and threw on a shapeless green dress. On her way out, she grabbed the umbrella and a five from the middle of the roll in the mason jar. “Send no money,” the ad said. “When the three books arrive, pay postman only \$2.39 plus postage.”

The post office bustled, all light and motion, dresses cut in familiar fashion, hats in duplicate on men’s heads. She made nervous small talk with her neighbors as they came and went. More people were at the post than in all of her home town. And they were chipper, nothing like her people, who wore troubles on their faces, loss in their eyes. Pleasantries didn’t come so easily to Dorothy, although she tried. An extra smile at John, a feigned compliment for a friend. Slapping her cheeks in the mirror, rosing them up so she’d seem excited about

things that didn’t excite her, such as a second car, or new drapes, or John’s going on about how he couldn’t wait to have a baby.

Betty Jean from two doors down joined the line.

“Morning, Dorothy. Lovely day today, isn’t it?”

“Just ducky, if you don’t mind rain.” Dorothy kept her hands tucked firmly into the pockets of her dress, one hand smoothing the five dollar bill against her hip. The umbrella hung askew from her wrist.

Betty Jean touched her arm, her made-up face beaming. “It’s not raining, dear.”

“It will rain,” Dorothy said.

“You’re certain?” Betty Jean loved when conversations turned in her favor. Her face raised—eyebrows, nose, and chin all at attention.

“I grew up on a farm,” Dorothy said. “It’ll rain.” Her daddy had taught her the signs—wind shifts, leaves upturned where the stem met the flat parts, the way the birds moved.

“If you say so.” Betty Jean was positively smug. “Maybe you’re pregnant,” she whispered with a sneaking smile. “That’s how I first realized.”

“How?” Dorothy asked. Her face tightened.

“My looks went to hell for a while, and I found it so difficult to go about my day. Oh, won’t John be pleased?”

Dorothy shrugged and moved up in line. John would be pleased at that. Had they ever even discussed children as anything but inevitable? She stewed about it daily, pulling in tiny sips of air between the cigarettes, flitting about the house full of nerves. She was indebted to John for bringing her up in the world, economically so to speak, despite her discomfort with it. But was she expected to repay him in children?

“Next,” called the postman.

“Packages for Mr. Greenwood, please.” Dorothy slid the postal note across the desk.

“You got it, Mrs. G.” He leaned over, disappearing into a laundry-sized bin of packages. “Here you are. From Sears.”

Dorothy stabbed the box with the letter opener that had been her daddy’s, three years dead, rest his soul. She was supposed to believe he was watching her, a celestial star suspended in heaven meant to protect her. She crossed herself and whispered an apology, though she wasn’t sure to whom she should be directing

it. Her father? Jesus? John? She pried the box open and spread the books out on the floor. She fingered their covers and bindings. Dimpled, matte—finish. Serious looking, but with whimsical women spread across the inside pages, all happily informed of how to avoid foolish chances in marriage. She'd start with the most basic of the texts, *What Every Mother and Girl Should Know*. Most of what she knew was from her limited experience with John and watching animals on the farm, although her daddy had tried to keep her from seeing. She counted herself lucky she'd come across the box of magazines when she and John had moved in. "Decide to learn all about birth control now! Later may be too late," the ad read in each issue. It had taken her four years to decide to learn.

The next item was more intimidating. She tried to wrap her thoughts around the idea of deceiving John, the guilt she'd feel, but shook it off. She'd gotten lucky so far, but every passing day brought her closer to a fate she couldn't even picture. She hadn't the faintest idea how to use the stuff, though. Dorothy inspected the tube curiously, a lump rising in her throat. The name seemed to be the main problem with it: contraceptive jelly. On the one hand, it sounded technical and tricky. On the other hand, it sounded like a breakfast tart, harmless and pedestrian. She'd begun to read the directions when a car pulled noisily up the drive. She looked at the clock on the mantle—not even lunchtime yet.

Dorothy's stomach heaved, and a bitter taste rose to her mouth. In a panic, she kicked the packaging under the sofa and stacked the books beneath a pile of magazines on the coffee table. As the door opened, John halfway through it already, she realized she was still holding the jelly.

She quickly rotated it so that the label faced her stomach.

"You're back early," she said, trying for calm. She gingerly rearranged the sofa pillows with her free hand.

"I'm coming down with something," he said. "Make a broth for me, won't you, dear?"

"Sure. Why don't you go lie down?"

"What's that?" he asked, nodding at the jelly.

"Oh, this? This is a . . . well an experiment really. It's supposed to heighten one's pleasure, or some such thing." She hadn't thought of how she'd get away with using it. "It was going to be a surprise."

"Where'd you get an idea like that?"

"The, well, one of the ladies' magazines had an ad and—"

"A ladies' magazine." He nodded and half—smiled. "So they're not just about homemaking. Well, maybe tomorrow you can tell me about this experiment of yours," he said, heading for the bedroom.

"You go on and lie down. I'll bring you that broth in a jiffy."

Dorothy threw herself onto the sofa once he was in the bedroom, knotted inside and fully as ill as John claimed to be. They were coming down with something. But she forced herself up to her feet and went to the kitchen to warm the broth.

At the sink, she scrubbed jelly's label with steel wool until it broke apart in gluey lumps of wet paper. Bright blue suds stained her fingers and ran down her forearms, cascading into the sink. She heaved again, and allowed herself to vomit into the sink. She washed it all down the drain and set the tube on the counter where John would be sure to see it, sure to be overcome by curiosity once he was well, sure to implement himself in her plan to manage this part of her life—her own body.

She poured the broth into a large bowl and carried the steaming bowl down the hall in tiny, careful sashays. She set the bowl by the bedside. "There you are," she said and touched John's forehead with the back of her hand for a moment. She thought of her new books and of tomorrow, and of the next tomorrow, and of the one after that. She'd bought herself months, at least. It was a temporary solution, and one with admittedly short sight on long—term consequences, but it was enough for now. She'd problem out the rest later.

She rested in the kitchen, where she liked to watch the sky and the little plot of green behind the house. These, her last connection to her home. Her last remembering. A gray cloud moved across the sky. The rain began. Dorothy puffed a cigarette. Love in a plastic tube, she thought. Love in a boil. Love in the afternoon.



# SNOW

JENNA TULWORTS

I remember the cold night you brought in a pile of logs and a chipmunk jumped off as you lowered your arms. “What do you think you’re doing in here?” you said, as it ran through the living room. It went through the library and stopped at the front door as though it had known the house well. This would be difficult for anyone to believe, except perhaps as the subject of a poem. Our first week in the house was spent scraping, finding some of the house’s secrets, like wallpaper under wallpaper. In the kitchen, a pattern of white–gold trellises supported purple grapes as big and round as ping–pong balls. When we painted the walls yellow, I thought of the bits of grape that remained underneath and imagined the vine popping though, the way some plants can tenaciously push through anything. The day of the big snow, when you had to shovel the walk and couldn’t find your cap and asked me how to wind a towel so that it would stay on your head—you, in the white towel turban, like a crazy king of snow. People liked the idea of our being together, leaving the city for the country. So many people visited, and the fireplace made all of them want to tell amazing stories; the child who happened to be standing on the right corner when the door of the ice cream truck came open and hundreds of popsicles crashed out; the man standing on the beach, sand sparkling in the sun, one bit glinting more than the rest, stooping to find a diamond ring. Did they talk about amazing things because they thought we’d turn into one of them? Now I think they probably guessed it wouldn’t work. It was as hopeless as giving a child a matched cup and saucer. Remember the night out on the lawn, knee deep in snow, chins pointed at the sky as the wind whirled down all that whiteness? It seemed that the world had been turned upside down, and we were looking into an enormous field of Queen Anne’s lace. Later, headlights off, our car was the first to ride through the newly fallen snow. The world outside the car looked solarized.

You remember it differently. You remember that the cold settled in stages, that small curve of light was shaved from the moon night after night, until you were no longer surprised the sky was black, that the chipmunk ran to hide in the dark, not simply to a door that led to its escape. Our visitors told the same stories people always tell. One night, giving me a lesson in story telling, you said, “Any life will seem dramatic if you omit mention of most of it.”

This, then, for drama: I drove back to that house not long ago. It was April, and Allen had died. In spite of all the visitors, Allen, next door, had been the



good friend in bad times. I sat with his wife in their living room, looking out the glass doors to the backyard, and there was Allen's pool, still covered with black plastic that had been stretched across it for winter. It had rained, and as the rain fell, the cover collected more and more water until it finally spilled onto the concrete. When I left that day, I drove past what had been our house. Three or four crocuses were blooming in the front – just a few dots of white, no field of snow. I felt embarrassed for them. They couldn't compete.

This is a story, told the way you say stories should be told: Somebody grew up, fell in love, and spent a winter with her lover in the country. This, of course, is the barest outline, and futile to discuss. It's as pointless as throwing birdseed on the ground while snow still falls fast. Who expects small things to survive when even the largest get lost? People forget years and remember moments. Seconds and symbols are left to sum things up: the black shroud over the pool. Love, in its shortest form, becomes a word. What I remember about all that time is one winter. The snow. Even now, saying "snow," my lips move so that they kiss the air.

No mention has been made of the snowplow that seemed always to be there, scraping snow off our narrow road— an artery cleared, though neither of us could have said where the heart was.



*“I strive to find original and striking ways to reveal the relationship between characters and location—and to compose this in a way that can capture the internal struggles and divisions that plague the subject and those around them.”*



# HUE AND CRY

TARA HOLENME

That year Lizzie’s kid sister kept a list of things that were funny when they happened to other people: tarring and feathering, peeping toms, mad cow disease. The rare encephalopathy from which their father suffered didn’t actually come from eating infected cattle, it turned out, but from a spontaneous somatic mutation—what Bill Sucram’s neurologist described as “losing the genetic lottery”—yet the ailment was enough like mad cow that Lizzie’s mother swore off animal products. Overnight, Myra Sucram stopped fricasseeing duck and took to ordering exotic soy dishes from a newly—opened kosher—vegan deli on Walloon Street. Her family’s health consumed her: She spent mornings arguing with Bill’s insurance carrier, afternoons researching manganese contamination and do—it—yourself dioxin tests at the public library, evenings promising her husband and daughters that medical breakthroughs can happen overnight. She wore her grim smile like a shroud.

Lizzie’s father resigned himself to his diagnosis. He informed the Pontefract Board of Education that he had six months to live and that he did not intend to spend them at the office. Then he composed a list of people who harbored him ill will—a shady plumber he’d sued in small claims court, his estranged step—brother in Las Vegas—and he telephoned each, one by one, to apologize. That night, the thirty—eight—year—old agnostic middle school principal summoned his daughters to hot cocoa at the kitchen table and announced: “I fear I’ve taught you girls too much grammar and not enough forgiveness.” So Lizzie was mortified, yet not unprepared, when their father insisted on taking them to meet the sex offender.

The sex offender’s name was Rex Benbow. He’d been staying inside his grandmother’s immaculately—tended bungalow at the end of their block for nearly two weeks, the subject of protests and countless flyers, but Lizzie had been far too concerned with her father’s wellbeing and her own hopeless crush on Julia Sand to give the parolee a second thought—until Lizzie’s closest friend confessed to a fascination with the man. Suddenly, he acquired the allure of an outlaw.

“My brother has been spying on the place. He says the cops aren’t protecting his house anymore,” said Julia. “So the coast is clear.”

“Clear for what?”

“Clear for us.”

The girls sat side—by—side on the swing set in the playground of their

former elementary school. At thirteen, their long legs dangled aimlessly—Lizzie in acid-wash jeans, Julia in a denim skirt over tights. The pair had been meeting after school like this all autumn, a coven of two, sometimes sipping liqueurs in miniature bottles pinched from Dr. Sand's study. Today, they were sober. It was the first week since the clocks had fallen back and slender shadows darkened the nearby playing fields.

"Have you gone totally crazy?" demanded Lizzie. "You don't really plan on trying to meet him, do you?"

"Meet him? Who said anything about meeting him?" Julia laughed playfully. Her dazzling green eyes turned all feline. "We're not going to find out anything interesting by meeting him. What we need to do is to wait until he goes out—I mean, the guy has to come out eventually—and then we'll sneak inside to explore. We just have to be careful my brother doesn't see us."

That was the audacity that rendered Julia so alluring, the same leap—and then—look mindset that would get her friend hooked on heroin three years later. The wild intensity stamped on the girl's delicate features genuinely frightened Lizzie—but she found this danger magnetic, disarming. It mattered nothing to Julia that her own father and older brother were among the "concerned citizens" going door to door with petitions aimed at driving the sex offender from the neighborhood.

Julia added that she'd read a newspaper interview with Alice Benbow's former nurse, who claimed the old lady no longer left her first-floor bedroom. So as long as they kept quiet, they'd have free roam of the house.

"You're not afraid, are you?" Julia asked.

Lizzie gnawed on the string of her sweatshirt hood. A station wagon panned across the playing fields with its headlights, made a U-turn in the elementary school parking lot, and departed up the avenue. "I just don't get what you're expecting to find," said Lizzie—struggling against her own imagination. "Do you really think he's going to leave stuff lying around?"

"You are afraid," snapped Julia.

"Okay, I'm afraid. Why shouldn't I be afraid?" Lizzie lowered her voice. "I've got enough to be stressed out about without getting raped and murdered."

Julia laughed again and shook her head. "Nobody is going to get raped and murdered," she said—accentuating Lizzie's concerns so that they sounded foolish. "Or, at least, we won't. Not if we're prepared." She reached into her purse and withdrew a double-edged boot knife. The five-inch blade sent a shiver down Lizzie's spine.

"See, we're fine," said Julia. "Besides, he likes boys."

Lizzie's veranda offered an unobstructed view of Alice Benbow's bungalow, so the girls ensconced themselves on the porch and waited. Although Bill and Myra Sucram weren't the type to suspect mischief, Julia insisted that they set up a pair of easels and pretend to be painting the autumn foliage, just in case their constant presence on the terrace drew notice. To Lizzie, this seemed like overkill—yet she dutifully filled her canvas with bright hues of amber and vermilion. Meanwhile, her partner brazenly painted the Benbow dwelling itself: a flawless facsimile, down to the stars on the curbside flag and the tire treads on Alice's ornamental wheelbarrow.

Their first week of espionage proved a washout: nobody entered or left the Benbow house for five straight evenings. Of course, it was possible that Rex conducted his excursions in the mornings, while the girls were at school, but Lizzie didn't have the courage to suggest this to Julia. Most days, they had the porch entirely to themselves, except for the occasions when Lizzie's eleven-year-old sister, Rebecca, an aspiring newspaper reporter, asked them to use vocabulary words for her in context: vertiginous, mandrake, cantilever. Also vigilante, pedophile. Once, as twilight approached, Myra served them hot chocolate, and then sat silently in a wicker chair while they drank—looking as though she wanted to share something profound, but couldn't quite muster the strength. Several times, Bill Sucram steered his motorized wheelchair down the makeshift plank that covered the porch steps, and complimented the girls on their artistic efforts. "Few hobbies more wholesome than painting," said Lizzie's father. "And if you two ever want a live model," he added, winking, "you just ask." At those moments, Lizzie felt a twinge of remorse that she wasn't spending more time with her father—and less with Julia—but then she'd hear her friend's electrifying voice and the guilt would pass.

Julia's precautions did ultimately prove prescient—but not as protection against the suspicions of the Sucrams. Rather, it was her own father and brother who appeared on Lizzie's porch that Saturday morning, the latter armed with a clipboard. Dr. Sand and his son both boasted lantern jaws and deep-set black eyes; in their matching cardigan sweaters, they reminded Lizzie of Mormon missionaries. Julia herself referred to her family as "victims of the body snatchers" and often claimed she was changeling.

"Fancy meeting you here, Julia," said Dr. Sand—as though this were the

world's funniest quip. "Morning, Elizabeth. Your parents home?"

Lizzie leaned through the front door and shouted for her father. Less than a minute passed before Bill Sucram emerged from the house.

"Morning, Bill," said Dr. Sand. "How are you holding up?"

"Not too bad for man with Swiss cheese for brains," said Lizzie's father. "But keep an eye on me. Yesterday, I tried to unlock my car door with my tooth brush."

Dr. Sand smiled uncomfortably. His son stood at broad-shouldered attention, the clipboard behind his back. Julia continued to paint.

"I'm joking," said Bill. "Cut me some slack. I have to cram thirty years of bad humor into six months."

"Of course," agreed Dr. Sand. "In any case, my boy and I are trying to persuade the town to enact an ordinance prohibiting sex offenders from residing within five-hundred yards of children under eighteen."

"Are you now?" inquired Lizzie's father.

"We're hoping you'd be willing to sign. Your wife too, if she's around."

Julia's older brother stepped forward with the clipboard.

"And why exactly do we need such a law?" asked Bill.

Dr. Sand glanced over at the girls, then up the block toward the Benbow house.

"I thought you'd be more aware of what's going on. I don't want to delve into details at the moment," he said, looking pointedly at Lizzie and Julia, "but there's a level one predator living on your block. Haven't you seen our flyers?"

"Oh, I've seen your flyers," said Lizzie's father. "But as far as I'm concerned, punishment is the job of the criminal justice system. I'm in the business of forgiving people, not harassing them."

Dr. Sand's face lost its color, but his voice remained level. "I don't think that's an accurate characterization, Bill. We're not harassing anyone. You're an educator. And you're a father. Surely you must."

"Must I? Well, I don't," said Lizzie's dad. "In fact, I've been thinking of inviting the poor fellow over for dinner."

That was too much for Julia's father. "I won't pretend to understand, Mr. Sucram," he said—shaking his head like a preacher befuddled by sin. His legs turned around so quickly that he nearly toppled his son. Lenny Sand flashed his sister a look of warning on his own retreat down the steps.

"When holes start sprouting inside your brain," Bill Sucram called after them, "You may see things differently."

Lizzie's father watched from the head of the stairs as the Sands knocked on

the door of his neighbor. He listened for a moment while the dentist presented his petition to elderly Mrs. Greenbough, who kept asking Sand to speak louder—until the dentist was forced to shout the language of his proposed ordinance into the tranquility of the suburban morning. Then Bill Sucram apologized to the girls for disrupting their work and wheeled himself back inside the house.

"Your dad is awesome," said Julia. "Totally awesome."

Another three days elapsed without any signs of life at the corner bungalow—and then, on Tuesday afternoon, the girls returned home from school to find the Benbows' garage door rolled up. As they watched, dumbstruck, a twenty-year-old Lincoln Town Car, glistening with tail fins and suicide doors, eased into the driveway; the driver exited the vehicle and pulled the garage door shut behind him. When the car passed Lizzie's porch, the girls recognized Rex Benbow—older, but unmistakably the face from the flyers—at the helm. Instantly, Lizzie sensed perspiration erupting on her neck and along the bellies of her forearms.

"Okay, babe, it's now or never," declared Julia. "Tell your mom we're walking downtown to see a movie."

Lizzie did as instructed. Then she trailed Julia up the block and around the corner onto Fleming Street—where they advanced ten meters before backtracking into the Benbows' rear yard. Julia plucked two pocket flashlights from her purse, tested each inside her cupped palm, and handed one to Lizzie. "I did some reconnaissance last week," Julia whispered—and to Lizzie's amazement, her friend retrieved a crowbar from behind the septic tank. Seconds later, she had pried open a cellar window and vanished into the darkness below. By the time Lizzie built up the courage to follow—or rather, by the time the fear of entering had paled compared to the terror of standing alone on the sex offender's lawn—Julia had already switched on the overhead light.

The finished basement smelled of mildew. Watermarks from remote floods scarred the linoleum. Along one wall, built-in shelves contained cartons marked "GLASSWARE," and board games, and a hapless assortment of books. More stacks of books covered a warped ping pong table. In the far corner, a pair of stilts leaned against a sofa missing several cushions. A side door opened onto a small vestibule that contained a washer—dryer and another door led to a windowless bathroom. What struck Lizzie was how ordinary the room appeared: her own basement would likely look the same in two more decades, when she was the sex offender's age, except that her father had invested in a table for billiards

instead of ping pong. She wondered if she and Julia would still be friends then—or even more than friends—if they would reminisce about the crazy evening when they sneaked into the sex offender’s basement.

“What are we looking for?” Lizzie asked.

“I don’t know yet,” hissed Julia. “We’ll know it when we find it.”

Julia honed in on a metal filing cabinet opposite the bathroom. Lizzie watched over her friend’s shoulder as the girl rummaged through folders of Alice Benbow’s tax returns and medical bills from her late daughter’s chemotherapy. Eventually, Lizzie’s attention drifted to the volumes on the shelves: Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, Cliff’s *Notes to Jude the Obscure*, Peterson’s *A Field Guide to the Birds of Virginia*. Nothing pornographic, nothing more risqué than the collected works of D. H. Lawrence.

“Nothing down here,” said Julia. “Let’s go.”

She grabbed Lizzie by the hand and led her up the basement stairs onto the first floor of the bungalow. Sweat mixed with sweat in their palms. They tiptoed across the tiled kitchen and into the narrow foyer, where the hardwood floorboards whimpered under their feet. A door stood ajar along the corridor, discharging the reflected lights and rhythmic din of the nightly news. They edged past the grandmother’s room, one at a time, like pioneers traversing a rickety bridge. And suddenly, after they’d both attained the safety of the far shore, an ancient voice cried out: “Rex? Are you home already?”

Julia reached for Lizzie’s hand again and squeezed. Lizzie didn’t dare to exhale. From Alice Benbow’s room rose the flat, soothing voice of Tom Brokaw announcing the formal dissolution of Czechoslovakia. The grandfather clock in the foyer ticked away the seconds, but Lizzie lost track of time. When the old woman had remained silent for what must have been five minutes—but felt like several generations—Julia tugged on Lizzie’s arm and steered her into the sex offender’s bedroom.

The girls navigated the chamber by flashlight. A matching rosewood chiffonier and bowfront dresser stood on either side of the window; additional drawers ran beneath the platform bed. Vintage movie posters covered the interior walls: *Paper Moon*, *The Man Who Would Be King*. On the nightstand rested a pair of reading glasses, a Bible, and an ashtray full of cigarette stubs. Julia ran her hand under the carefully—folded bedcovers, under the pillow and mattress, behind the dresser. She found nothing salacious or remotely incriminating. She yanked open the drawers below the bed and discovered

collections of stamps and baseball cards. Lizzie perched her body atop the edge of the bedspread and thought to herself: I’m in a sex offender’s bedroom. I’m sitting on a sex offender’s bed. She turned off her flashlight. At some point, Julia climbed up beside her on the bed.

“I’m sure there’s something here,” whispered Julia. “We just don’t know where to look. Think, Lizzie: If you were a pervert, where would you hide stuff?”

“I don’t know. I guess if it was that important, I’d take it with me.”

Lizzie hadn’t meant her words to sound like a challenge—but, in the darkened room, they came across as more aggressive than she’d intended. Her head was swimming. She wished she could spend eternity alone like this with Julia, yet part of her brain was warning her to flee immediately.

“You’re right. You’re right and I’m an idiot! Of course, he’s taken it with him,” declared Julia. “Dammit, Lizzie. Why do you have to be so brilliant?”

Lizzie waited for Julia to say more, but she didn’t. She sensed her friend alongside her on the sex offender’s bed, and she sensed some subtle, inchoate shift occurring between them. She did not dare to move or speak. And then instantaneously, with no warning, the door opened and Lizzie found herself blinded by the overhead light. Across the room, the form of Rex Benbow emerged through the murk. He sported a plaid hunting cap and had a knapsack draped over one shoulder. Lizzie was afraid to glance at Julia—afraid that her friend might draw her knife.

“You girls should go home,” said Rex Benbow. The sex offender didn’t sound angry, just fatigued. “I don’t want any trouble.”

“We saw the front door open,” said Julia—her tone calm and composed. “You really shouldn’t leave your door open like that.”

“Please. You can’t be here,” said Benbow.

Lizzie waited for Julia’s next move. The sounds of the grandmother’s television drifted down the corridor, punctuated suddenly by the old woman’s voice: “What’s going on, Rex? Is someone with you?”

“Nothing, Grandma,” called out Benbow. “Only the radio.”

Benbow stepped away from the doorframe and looked desperately at the girls. Julia stood up. “I think we’ve overstayed our welcome, Lizzie,” she said—and she led Lizzie into the foyer and down the Benbows’ front steps. Overhead, a low ceiling of clouds kept the night cool and damp. The girls retreated to Lizzie’s porch without speaking, and in the sharp autumn air, Lizzie found herself wondering whether the sensation she’d felt on the bed—the tingle that

something had shifted—was real or imagined.

“What are you thinking?” Julia finally asked.

Lizzie didn’t dare answer honestly. “I’m glad you didn’t stab him,” she said.

Chagrin spread across Julia’s features, but Lizzie was never certain whether Julia had been disappointed with her response or with the evening as a whole.

“Did you see that knapsack?” Julia demanded. “You were so right about him taking things with him. Next time, we’ll have to sneak in while he’s at home—maybe when he’s sleeping.”

After breakfast the following Saturday, Bill Sucram took his daughters to meet the sex offender. Lizzie had listened to her parents argue about Bill’s idea into the early hours of the morning—her ear plastered to the wall separating her bedroom from theirs—and at one point he mother snapped, “Fuck forgiveness! They should cut his cock off,” but by the time Myra Sucram summoned her daughters downstairs for vegan French toast and strips of soy bacon, she had acquiesced to the inevitable. “Your father has an outing planned for you girls,” she said with apparent cheer, as though her husband were taking her daughters apple picking or Christmas shopping. Myra’s soft, beleaguered face betrayed no hint of her prior anger. “I do hope you don’t already have plans, Lizzie.”

Lizzie had in fact promised her entire day to Julia. Her friend had found a tattoo artist in Richmond who didn’t check IDs. Yet as much as it pained Lizzie to bail on her—the girls hadn’t spent meaningful time together since their encounter with Rex Benbow—her father’s increasingly visible frailty left her no real choice. Lizzie was a good girl, at heart, and she did not wish to disappoint him.

Bill insisted that his daughters spruce up for the occasion. Lizzie squeezed into the somber ankle-length skirt that she’d worn to her grandmother’s funeral, while Rebecca wore a checkered gingham dress with a baby-blue sash that reminded Lizzie of the Judy Garland impersonators at the Easter parade. “You two look fit for church,” declared Bill, his voice already dysarthric from disease. “Okay, we’re off,” he added, as he wheeled himself onto the front porch. “We’ll be back home for lunch.”

“And if you’re not?” Myra asked.

Lizzie’s father let the question evaporate into the air. He navigated his motorized wheelchair onto the asphalt and then jolted his way up the Benbows’ slate path. His daughters followed. Dead leaves of various hues coated the Benbow yard. Two doors away, Mrs. Greenbough’s Irish setter stood alert at the

perimeter of an invisible fence, yapping at a birdbath beyond her reach. Lizzie suffered under the confining grasp of her pantyhose, which made her feel like an old woman.

Rebecca pressed the doorbell.

A long silence yielded to footsteps, but the door did not open. Rebecca looked at her father for guidance, and he signaled for her to ring the bell again. Once more, a long silence ensued. Lizzie was already building the courage to suggest that they return home, when a voice from within said, “Please, go away.” Instantly, Lizzie recognized Rex Benbow’s flat inflection—and she nearly lost control of her bladder. “My grandmother is old and sick,” added Benbow. “We don’t want any trouble.”

“We’re not here to make trouble,” replied Bill. “I’m your neighbor, Bill Sucram. My daughters and I wanted to welcome you to the block. That’s all.”

They waited. From behind the door, they heard the sound of Benbow’s voice—but muffled and distant, likely addressed to his grandmother.

“I’m not leaving until you shake my hand,” called Lizzie’s father. “Let us show our good will and we’ll go home.”

Lizzie bargained mutely with a god she didn’t actually believe in—offering up all aspects of model citizenship if the sex offender didn’t open the door. “He wants to be left alone, dad,” she argued. “Please. You can’t force yourself on him.” Yet a second later, Lizzie’s prayers were answered by a chorus of multiple deadbolts unlocking.

Rex Benbow stood in the doorway, wearing the same plaid hunting cap. His gangly arms hung limp and simian at his sides. Lizzie’s father introduced himself for the second time and extended his hand to the sex offender. Rex shook it tentatively.

“These are my daughters,” said Lizzie’s dad. “Elizabeth and Rebecca.”

Lizzie waited for Rex to recognize her. She contemplated denying his accusations: It would be her word against his, a teenager against a convicted predator. In the nearby hedge, chickadees and titmice cavorted innocently. Lizzie felt the sex offender’s burning gaze upon her, but she dared not meet it.

“Glad to meet you both,” said Rex.

Rebecca volunteered her hand to the sex offender. Lizzie felt obliged to offer hers as well. The man’s grip was lifeless, but his dull eyes met hers and sealed their secret. Lizzie suddenly understood that Benbow feared her more than she feared him—and that this daytime visit caused him far more pain than

had their nightly intrusion.

“May we come in?” asked Bill Sucram.

The sex offender hesitated for a moment and then opened the door fully, allowing Lizzie’s father to wheel into the foyer. “You’ll forgive me for not having anything to offer you,” said Rex. “We don’t get many visitors.”

Rex Benbow led them down the same corridor that Lizzie had explored with Julia earlier that week, until they entered a tidy, dimly-lit sitting room. The furnishings, sturdy and utilitarian, recalled the 1950s. A bricked-up fire place defined one of the walls and, near the heavily-shaded bay windows, three tall stools surrounded a coaster bar. The upholstery reeked of stale tobacco. Not only did the place appear ordinary, Lizzie noted. It also looked rather shabby.

At the sex offender’s behest, the girls seated themselves around the coffee table. Bill Sucram drew up his chair alongside their host’s. And then the interruption of the previous evening replayed itself.

“Who’s there?” cried Alice Benbow.

“It’s all right, grandma,” Rex called out. “It’s just the neighbors.” He turned to his guests and added, apologetically, “She won’t remember in ten minutes.”

How different Lizzie felt about the grandmother now: in the light of day, she genuinely pitied the unfortunate woman imprisoned with her exiled offspring. She almost felt sorry for the sex offender himself. Rex was sitting with his hands folded in his lap, his jaw clenched, clearly waiting for the visit to end—but Bill Sucram seemed utterly oblivious to the poor man’s discomfort.

“What I came over here to say,” Lizzie’s father was saying, “is that I know everyone in Pontefract hasn’t been entirely welcoming to you, but I don’t want you to think that those elements represent the entire community. Or even the majority. As far as I’m concerned, people have a right to atone for their mistakes. You’ve served your time. Whatever you’ve done in the past is now between you and your conscience.”

“Thank you,” said Rex.

Lizzie longed for her father to stop—to leave the poor man to his private misery—but she didn’t dare intervene. It struck her that her father and the sex offender were roughly the same age, that they were both relatively young and futureless. Rebecca has slipped a small notepad out of her pocket and was scribbling away ferociously like a cub journalist.

“We should have you over for dinner one night,” said Bill. “I’m sure my wife would love to meet you—and it might be good for you to get out of the house.”

Rex stared at his own hands. I wouldn’t want to impose...”

“Nonsense. It would be our pleasure,” said Lizzie’s father. “We’ll have to do it sooner rather than later though, because it turns out I’m dying. Holes in the brain—like a giant sponge. But it’s not contagious—not unless I donate a cornea to you, at least—so there’s nothing to worry about.”

“I don’t like to leave my grandmother alone,” said Rex.

“That’s very conscientious of you,” answered Bill. “But we could find a way to work around that. Maybe one of the girls could stay with her...”

“I don’t like to leave my grandmother,” Rex said again—but now his voice sounded more desperate, like a man losing his grip on a ledge.

“You’ll think it over, Mr. Benbow, won’t you,” interjected Lizzie. “When you do decide you’re ready to have dinner, you’ll give us a call.” She had no idea where the words arose from—and they shocked her as much as they did her host. Even Rebecca stopped scribbling and glanced up in surprise.

Rex flashed Lizzie a look of relief and gratitude. “Yes, I’ll do that.”

Lizzie stood up and Rex did the same. It was almost as if they had choreographed their interaction in advance. As the pair inched toward the corridor, Bill Sucram finally sensed that their visit was drawing to a close. “I do hope you will call,” he urged. “You have nothing to be ashamed of—at least as far as we’re concerned.” Rex Benbow thanked Lizzie’s father once again as he led them along the foyer and kept the same forced smile lacquered on his face until he’d shut the door behind them.

Outside, a cold drizzle was falling, transforming the Benbows’ front path into a slick of sodden leaves, threatening to catch in the wheels of Bill Sucram’s chair. Across the street, Lenny Sand watched them from the front seat of his Buick. He drove off at high speed as they approached the curb.

“We tried, girls,” said Lizzie’s father. “That’s all a person can do.”

Julia and Lizzie never made another attempt to discover the contents of the sex offender’s knapsack. Nor did Lizzie’s father ever receive a phone call from Rex. When Lizzie reflected back upon the entire episode, which grew increasingly hazy with each passing year, what she remembered most vividly was neither the night of the break-in, nor the morning of the house call, but the afternoon following their visit, when Julia’s father briefly laid siege to their own house.

The protesters carried signs reading “FOR SHAME,” and “NIMBY” and—this placard held by a cornfed young woman wearing a man’s fishing hat—“PERVERTS

OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER.” They numbered about three dozen. Dr. Sand paced back and forth at their helm with a bullhorn, warning that, “This is a family community, not a social experiment. Predators are not welcome here. Nobody has a right to welcome sex predators to our community.” Two junior officers from the Pontefract police department sat guard on the Sucram’s porch. Myra ordered her daughters to remain inside and to stay away from the windows.

“I’m sorry you girls have to be exposed to this at your age,” she said. “But they’ll get tired and give up soon enough.”

“I want to go out there,” threatened Bill. “I won’t be bullied in my own home by a pack of McCarthyites.”

“Well, you can’t,” answered Lizzie’s mother. “You’re in no physical condition to take on a mob—and I’m not having you get yourself killed over nonsense.” Myra stood behind her husband’s chair and kneaded his shoulders with her tiny hands. “Let them blow off their steam. What does it matter to us?”

“It’s not nonsense,” said Bill—but while he maneuvered his chair into the foyer, he made no effort to wheel himself out onto the porch.

Lizzie waited for her father to drive off the protesters, and then she realized that her mother was also waiting, and her sister too, that they were all expecting her father to defy Myra’s warning and take on the mob. But he didn’t. Lizzie’s father was now as much a prisoner inside his own distorted body as the sex offender was inside his grandmother’s house, and the horror suddenly seized Lizzie that he truly was going to die. On impulse, she rushed toward him and wrapped her arms around his chest, pressing her head into his neck and trying to savor him forever. That was the moment that would last with her—long after her mother resumed cooking meat, and Rex Benbow returned to prison, and Julia Sand choked to death on her own vomit in a motel room with an hourly rate. Lizzie would remember being thirteen years old, and hugging her dying father, and knowing that he was no longer the man who could fend off all danger: it was the only thing that she could never forgive.



*“These characters hold contradictions—they are at war with themselves. I want to capture this sense of decision and opposing forces. This conflict is both compelling and relatable, and capturing this is at the core of my artistic approach.”*



A black and white photograph of a surgical tray. In the foreground, several surgical instruments are laid out on a white cloth, including a pair of forceps, a pair of scissors, and a pair of tweezers. A clear plastic cup is also visible. The background is slightly blurred, showing more instruments and a tray.

# THE GOOD SURGEON

I. P. FREELY

He has learned to endure  
the feverish hemorrhage of human suffering  
that is every interminable workday:  
the shattered pelvises, the crushed spines,  
blistered flesh of toddlers  
who have toyed with matches;  
also maggots boring into virgin skin,  
bacteria feasting on ripe tissue,  
metastases barreling through arteries  
at terminal speeds.  
And the bedsores. Itches that quadriplegics  
cannot scratch. Pain.  
Pain: a whole eternity undone in an instant.  
Desperate voices crying unto their disparate gods:  
Where is my hand? Where are my eyes?  
What have you done with my mother?  
Then the bargaining:  
One more year! One more month!  
One more precious day!  
Promises to improve:  
I'll stop kissing my sister-in-law,  
I'll fess up on my taxes.  
I'll stay on the wagon.  
I'll never skip another pill,  
forge another check,  
molest another child.


He has done damage of his own:  
perforated bowels, ligated major vessels,  
transected nerves in their prime.  
He has lost count of how many dozens,  
scores, he has butchered—each  
with the noblest of intentions.

He has learned to endure it all.  
What torments him are the hours  
after he has hung up his long white coat,  
tucked his stethoscope into his attaché case,  
removed his blood—drenched scrubs.  
He returns to his quiet, suburban street—  
a tricycle abandoned on the drive, porch  
bulb in need of changing—where his wife  
in her cozy threadbare robe has kept  
his lamb shank warm, and his daughters,  
already tucked in, have only one request.

He begs off, unknots his tie, bewildered.  
Who is this man, he wonders, who can  
knead a human heart in his naked hands,  
but can no longer imagine a bedtime story  
to comfort his own children?



*“A polluted landscape, a wasteland of unfulfilled hopes and material exploitation. A hunger for meaning. Be it existential symbolism, religion, family, or just belonging. Human failings, vice and temptation. This world is inhabited by people that traffic in sexual and chemical gratification. Broken characters, struggling to be good, struggling to be whole.”*



# THE ROAD STRETCHES ON AND THEY WONT WAIT FOR ME

HEYWOOD J. ABLOMI

S ometime outside of Hanover she turned to me and said, “Kid, you don’t know shit about death.” She sat in the passenger’s seat, the pads of her bare feet braced against the glove compartment, her head tilted back so that her neck arched like a bow pulled taught, and her skin flashed caramel in the passing headlights.

We had been driving for two weeks, pulling over at night to the empty parking lots of office buildings to curl up and sleep. Mara would take the backseat, her head pillowed on the worn gym bag she had showed up with, while I stretched out in the passenger seat, my long legs propped on the dashboard. The night before Hanover I had stayed up, studying the fabric of the car roof, so different from the hospital ceiling I had lived with for so long, and listened to Mara’s breathing, a slow steady rhythm like waves breaking upon the rocks. In the morning I waited, thinking that the driver side door would open and one of the doctors would step in and take me away for another round of chemo.

“You’re looking tired,” Mara told me the following morning as we pulled into Mechanicsville. “I can drive tonight.” She had pulled back her long hair into a ponytail that twisted like a black ribbon in the wind. When I had picked her up outside of Auburn her hair had been loose, swirling around her waist like a river of night. Her eyes still held the large, wild look that had sparkled in the headlights as she approached me at the gas station, asking for a ride.

Mechanicsville was a tourist trap for Civil War enthusiasts, obese families driving down for weekend vacations to catch a reenactment at Beaver Dam Creek. They clogged the roads with minivans and SUVs that came in colors called “Emerald Rain” and “Tomato Jubilee,” classic rock stations leaking through the windows, kids grabbing each other in the back seat with sticky candy hands. The roads were lined with greasy diners, fast food chains, and the occasional mom—and—pop mini mart to cater to the ever—present crowds. Gift shops began sprouting out of the ground, and then devolving into their lesser cart version, probably for authenticity’s sake. Mara watched Beaver Dam Creek pass outside my window.

“I thought you wanted to visit all of them,” Mara said as it disappeared behind us. “I’ve already been here.”

She shrugged and started finger—combing her hair. I caught sight of some

grays sprouting above her ears, and wondered how long it took them to form.

“So what’s today’s battle?” she asked.

“Cold Harbor.”

That first night Mara had gotten in the car with me, we had ridden in silence for nearly half an hour. I was terrified of this older woman next to me, her black hair swirling around her waist, and drove without looking at her.

“Ma’am?” I asked, the words leaking out in a reedy whisper. “Don’t you want to know where I’m going?”

“I suppose eventually,” she said, leaning her head back. “Where are you going?”

“Tomorrow’s Gettysburg,” I said, the word releasing a calm over me.

Gettysburg was the touchstone of my life that I kept returning to, the only constant over the past five years.

“Just tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” I said. “I might stay a bit longer. I have to get on the road before night.”

After a little while, she asked, “Why Gettysburg? Is it for a school project?”

“No,” I answered. “I’m just visiting all of them.”

Cold Harbor lay a couple of miles east of Mechanicsville, near Gaines’ Mill, a large field that bled into the sprawling cemetery, neat rows of wooden crosses disrupting the wild freedom of the area. I imagined the cavalry, both blue and gray, marching together against those neat crosses, fighting the last and most common enemy.

“So many,” Mara said, coming up behind me. “Jesus, Hunter, what the hell happened here?”

“The end of Grant’s Overland Campaign,” I said. “One of the bloodiest in the whole war. Also one of the most unnecessary.”

I watched Mara recoil internally, her shoulders hunching up around her ears as her arms wrapped around, reaching for her spine.

“What a waste,” she said.

During the course of our drive south reliving 1864, Mara told me more of what she had left behind. She had grown up in Auburn, gone to college nearby, gotten married, and moved back to Auburn. Her husband had been impetuous and used to getting his way. He liked to travel, and was not home most of the time, even after their daughter, Nicole, was born. Mara told me they used to fight about his absence when he was home. Their marriage was all but ended when Mara got the

call that he had been killed in a hunting accident. In the end, his body came back to Auburn to stay.

Mara started teaching kindergarten while Nicole went to day care, driving to pick her up at a small building at the other end of town at three—o—clock every afternoon, taking Nicole’s tiny hand in hers and walking next door for ice cream.

During the long night drives I heard more about Nicole than anything else. Nicole liked purple. She didn’t like orange. She wanted to be a ballerina. Or a zookeeper. She was afraid of swimming pools and crows. She liked sloppy joes and pumpkin pie. She hated asparagus and potato salad. She had trouble remembering her father, but had a picture of him by her bedside. She was a restless sleeper who kicked off her blankets. She had a tiny gap between her front two teeth that she could whistle through. She would sing in the bathtub. She would skip with Mara on their way for ice cream.

On an afternoon in November, as they drove home eating their ice cream, the world went dark and let out a metal scream. Mara had been thinking about how this would be the last ice cream for a while, until the weather got warmer again, and whether she should start taking Nicole out for hot chocolate instead. She had been smiling at Nicole, sitting in the back seat singing wordlessly to the Rolling Stones on the radio.

When she woke a few days later in the hospital, Nicole was already in a box.

Cold Harbor was so pretty it hurt. The softly sloping hills of the wild nature and the ordered death competed for space in a battle that left me winded. Mara wandered on ahead down the hill, moving listlessly towards the cemetery. I felt slightly insulted at her lack of response, her ignorance to the richness around her. Cold Harbor was a flaw in history, a violent unnecessary battle that terrified even hardened generals.

“Hunter!”

Mara was waiting a couple rows into the cemetery, the wind snapping her ponytail out behind her.

“Are you just going to stand there?” she shouted up at me.

I made my way slowly down the hill, a little winded, angry that even in remission, I still felt weak. I imagined a younger version of me, my age firmly planted in the single digits, before my body rebelled, taking these slopes easily, my mouth open and alternating between yipping in glee and gulping down the

crisp air. I was in what they called the prime of my life and smaller than most boys my age, my muscles atrophied from years of being too sick to get out of bed. The wind was freezing and it was only going to get colder once the sun went down. Tonight I'd have to get the extra blankets out of the trunk, and tonight, when we park by the side of the road again, I'll curl up and forget I'm not in the hospital anymore.

I first started visiting the hospital on a regular basis when I was eleven, coming in to get regular chemo treatments and then watching my hair wash down the shower drain. By my twelfth birthday I had moved into the children's ward. I had lost so much weight that my old clothes no longer fit, and I lived in hospital gowns. For my thirteenth birthday, my father gave me a history book, hoping that I could continue my studies. I had finished it by the time I was fourteen, and asked for a book on the Civil War. By fifteen I had three more books. By sixteen I was in remission, still in the seventh grade, and back at the foreign place called home. It hurt to be back in my old room with my astronaut quilt that didn't quite reach my feet anymore, and the planet stickers stuck on the ceiling that had lost their glow years ago. My parents were still working two jobs to pay off all of the hospital bills and were barely home longer than it took to change their shoes and grab a sandwich. That first summer after I was released from the hospital, the house had an empty feeling, the kind the hospital had late at night in—between the orderlies' shifts. I felt awkward and guilty to have forced my way back into the house, knowing that my parents had missed so much with me, and now we didn't know where to go. I had a college fund that I knew was pointless, and a fresh life to take advantage of. And on the day before school started, when I would be isolated again, trying to catch up to my peers, I hopped a bus into town. In a beat up Honda and my bank account significantly drained, I made my way to Fort Sumter. And as I fell asleep that first night in the backseat, I imagined my parents finding the note I left them taped to the fridge, explaining how life had moved on ahead of me, and I had to find it, and them understanding as they went to bed that night that it was the best choice for all of us.

Mara had always treated my wandering with indifference. We had become American gypsies, following the march of dead armies, and when I drove at night I imagined them walking along beside me, brass buttons glowing in my headlights.

But as we were leaving Hanover, taking the winding night roads towards Cold Harbor, we passed a school of children, bright in their blue jumpers, squealing as they ran around a playground, and Mara became withdrawn. She began playing with the tips of her hair, scrutinizing them and then peeling them apart into smaller pieces.

"This is a stupid thing to do," she said.

"What?"

"This," she said, the word sounding like a hard release of air. "This whole thing. This pointless journey of yours."

"It's not," I said, my hands flexing on the wheel. I imagined my brothers around me, both gray and blue, turning towards Mara, their hands gripping their rifles like mine gripped the steering wheel. "This is what I'm doing with my life."

"You're doing nothing, Hunter," Mara said, kicking off her shoes and bracing her feet against the dashboard. "You're chasing the past. What's the point?"

Instead, I thought up a story: Imagine we're chasing Nicole, I wanted to say to her. Imagine you're playing a long game of tag, and she never tires. She's running ahead of you, out of your reach no matter how fast you go. And when you tire and need to rest, she waits, still ahead of you, and doesn't understand why it's taking you so long. Still, you chase because she's waiting, and she runs because you're chasing. You keep going expecting that one day you'll be fast enough to catch her again.

I didn't say it, though. I knew bringing up Nicole would make Mara politely ask me to pull the car off the road, where she'd get out and walk around, returning a few minutes later with red, swollen eyes.

But Mara rolled her eyes and dropped it, rolling down the window to lean her head out. She held her hair back in a fist, and a few thin tendrils escaped and twisted away from her face.

"You know what it's like," I said. "Facing death. Waking one morning with a fresh start. You could do anything. You could go anywhere."

"In this shitty Honda?" Mara laughed, turning to look at me. Her eyes were hard, and her wild look had grown cold. I felt like a kid in front of her, both foolish and selfish. "My life is over. I'm a ghost."

"Now you're just being stupid," I snapped. "You're still here."

"Am I?" She leaned her head out the window, tipping it back to look out the window at the stars. "I used to lie out in my backyard at night as a kid to watch the stars. I was always amazed by how many there were, they looked to me like

sprinkles on an ice cream cone, and I used to forget where I was and reach out my hand, thinking that I'd be able to touch them. And one day in class I learned that a star is millions of light years away from another. They sit out in the darkness alone. I used to imagine the stars reaching out their hands like mine, forgetting where they were, thinking they'd be able to touch another. For a long time, I thought that there couldn't be anything sadder than that." She pulled herself back inside the car. "Maybe I still do."

I felt my brothers around me, pressing in on the car, stretching for miles ahead and behind me, promising me more if I just kept moving forward. I wondered if they were my stars, that when I finally reach the end of my journey, will I finally be living my life, or just all of theirs. After all, was it really their strength they had lent me the years in the children's ward, their hands that soothed me in my illness, had guided me when I woke up at night in the hospital and couldn't remember what day it was, or how old I was.

They pressed in around the car, promising that the chase would go on.

"But you're not dead," I finally said stubbornly, sure of my rightness.

"Kid, you don't know shit about death," she said softly. Her voice was frail and tired, as if she was speaking under heavy anesthesia. "I'm still breathing. And I feel nothing."

That night, as Mara slept curled around a worn gym bag that held Nicole's clothes, I thought about the hospital, the years in the children's ward, waking in the middle of the night and running my fingers over my soft scalp, and knowing that in the morning I'd put on a baseball cap and my mother would come in to see me before she left for work. And in the evening my father would come by before his second shift started, and bring me a new Civil War book. But alone I sat and watched five years slip away, years spent attached to IVs, and later losing myself on my own in the bathroom, retching as I laid curled up on the cold tile, rinsing my hair down the drain. I read about men, brothers, marching into battle as I battled myself, and in those hours spent, decimated on the cold bathroom tile, I felt them around me, carrying me on.

Cold Harbor Cemetery was too big, and the volume of tomb markers made me dizzy. I was afraid of walking too far in the same way I was afraid of swimming out too far in the ocean and losing my way back to shore. Mara had wandered ahead, flitting between crosses, leaning in to read a worn name every now and then.

The wind had picked up and it was much colder out among the dead.

"Which one do you want?" Mara shouted to me. She was several rows ahead, sitting casually on a tomb marker.

"What do you mean?"

"Where do you want to be eventually," she said, spreading her arms wide. "Pick one."

As she walked back towards me, I couldn't give her an answer. Her eyes held me pinned, and her black hair flapped behind her. I wondered if Nicole, who feared crows, ever feared her mother.

"No answer?" she asked when she was next to me.

But there was more marching to do, and I had to keep moving, keep fighting. Each step I saw them there around me, my brothers, urging me onward and onward. I was not ready to stop.

"I'd like that spot," Mara said, pointing to a cross under a shady tree. "It's prime realty."

The shade looked cold and separate.

"You pick out where you want to be buried?" I asked her.

"Sure," she said. "Just planning for the future. I've picked one out at each battlefield we've been to."

I imagined her headstone surrounded by my brothers, awkwardly fit in between the neat rows and anachronistic, but oddly Mara. She was marching with them, boldly towards death, but also alone, their lives having blazed to an end while hers continued on. I imagined her seeing them like I did, and wondered if she reached out, would she touch them? Would I? And would I find their blaze of life and purpose and strength and suddenly stop while it was in my grasp, or would I reach the end and still feel adrift?

And I imagine that, some point in my journey, Mara would find the perfect spot and stop there. I would go back to the car and she'd stay sitting in the cemetery, waiting. I imagined myself swinging by her spot again after it was all over and she'd still be there, waiting. She was moving forward and just wanted to stay stuck. I was stuck, waiting to find my way forward. Or was it the other way around?

Two days after Mara had gotten into the car with me that first night at the gas station, she asked me why I left home. We were sitting in an empty diner late one night, feasting on hamburgers and soggy fries at a table dusted with cigarette butts.

"During the Civil War, men left home to fight, not because they felt strongly about the cause, but because it gave them purpose in life. I'm doing the same thing."

Mara toyed with her fries a little, pushing them around on her plate.

“And when do you stop traveling?” she asked.

“When I figure out what I want to do with my life. Or something.”

“Or something,” she agreed. “I guess that’s what I’m doing. The or something.”

She poured some more ketchup on her plate.

“I wonder what parents do in this situation. You left them behind. Will they eventually move on?”

“I asked them to,” I said. A letter, hastily written, taped to the fridge.

“But will they? Maybe, the day after you left, they packed up and followed you. They could have been one step behind the whole way, watching you from a distance. Waiting for you to figure things out and turn around.”

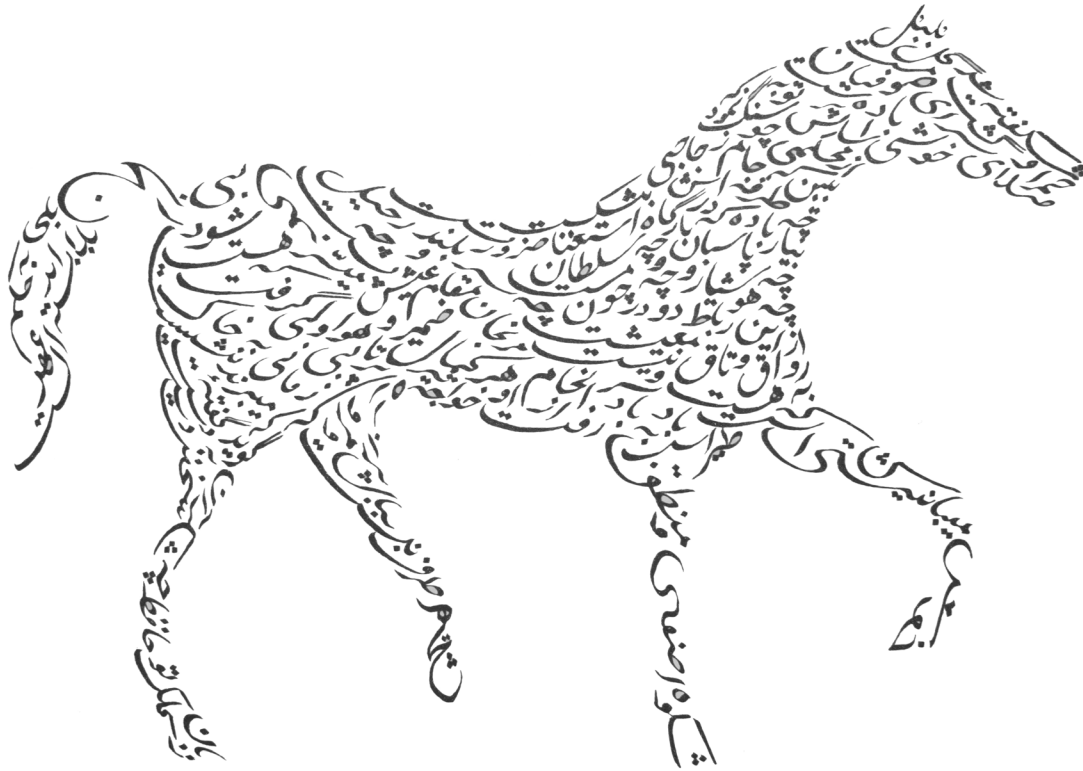
I turned my back on Cold Harbor and headed for where I’d parked the car. Mara looked at one of the headstones a little bit longer before turning to follow me. Driving back past the souvenir carts, I thought about buying a postcard, not of Cold Harbor, but something simple like Grant or Lee, and sending it to my parents. I’d stay up that night while Mara slept curled around Nicole, thinking about what I’d write, explaining how my battle was still around me, that they had to understand that I still had the energy to wake up another day and march on. And I’d stretch out, wrapped in my astronaut quilt that didn’t quite reach my feet, and decide to mail the card to the hospital, in case my parents had moved away.



*“I’ve zoned in on the idea of personal geographies. These references demonstrate a visual mechanism for revealing landscapes through physical topography.”*

# SCHEHERAZADE

DON KEEDICK



Tell me about the dream where we pull the bodies out of the lake  
and dress them in warm clothes again. How it was late, and no one could  
sleep, the horses running until they forget that they are horses. It's  
not like a tree where the roots have to end somewhere, it's more like a  
song on a policeman's radio, how we rolled up the carpet so we could  
dance, and the days were bright red, and every time we kissed there was another  
apple to slice into pieces. Look at the  
light through the windowpane. That means it's noon, that means we're  
inconsolable. Tell me how all this, and love too, will ruin us. These,  
our bodies, possessed by light. Tell me we'll never get  
used to it.



# ANNA MARIA'S GUIDE TO RESURRECTION

IMA GOODLAY



Anna Maria cradled the empty soup can between her palms and knelt at the base of the crooked oak behind the trailer she now shared only with her father. The tree was dead, like her mother. The can was the last piece to fix that, though. Well, that and the wait. Seven years was a long time, but that was all right. Anna Maria had thought it through. When the girls on the playground had explained all the steps—and there were a lot of steps—this last one had made her pause. She would be nearly seventeen when it was finished. But then she'd remembered the day she had finally gotten through a pop spelling quiz without missing a single word. She'd run until her legs nearly gave out, almost the entire two miles home. When she'd stumbled in the door, too winded to speak, triumphantly holding up the paper with "A+" scrawled across the top in red, her father had glanced up from his newspaper and grunted. He may have said "good." But her mother had abandoned her dinner preparations mid-baste and taken the crumpled paper from her sweaty hands. "Oh, Anna Maria," she had said, and she had beamed. So on the playground, Anna Maria had closed the notepad with the detailed instructions the girls had provided, thanked them, and left. She didn't know why girls who had never been friendly to her had suddenly shown her such kindness, but then again, since the funeral people she didn't even know were offering her wisdom, prayers, and something called "condolences." (Not to mention an awful lot of flowers that were dying all over their trailer.) At least this was advice she could use. Some of it had been easy. First, peanut shells from the floor of Mansey's Tavern. She'd had to sneak in after dark and crawl under some feet for those, but it turned out people were more interested in the girl on stage than something bumping their legs. Three stones from the bottom of a river took barely half an afternoon.

The claw of a hairless beast might have been hard except her Aunt Aggie had one of those cats, and Anna Maria's mother had always helped trim its nails. Aunt Aggie had cried a little when Anna Maria offered to help, but it had been easy enough to swipe one of the clippings when they'd finished. It was nice to see her, too. Her face was round, like Anna Maria's mother's. When Anna Maria looked in the mirror, she saw something different. Something hollow.

Anna Maria had been worried about trying to get a piece of Bobby Cloverton's hair. "From the root," Stephanie had said on the playground. "Or it won't work." Bobby was one of the meanest boys in the school, and yanking

on his head could easily lead to having her face smashed in the dirt. In the end, Anna Maria had worried for nothing. He'd been dozing during recess one day and she'd snuck up and plucked a hair right from his head. When he jumped and screeched at her, she assured him she'd saved him from a bee (or maybe a horde).

The biggest item, and the one that nearly ended her quest, took nineteen days from playground to success. For most of that time, Anna Maria had been convinced it was impossible.

Then she'd remembered the sunny day when Jason Brinton had jumped out from behind a parked car so she would swerve and crash her bike. He and his friends had all pointed and laughed at her while the hot cement burned her torn up skin because she was too embarrassed to get up.

Her mother hadn't told her to "find something in common" like their guidance counselor or to "ignore them until they get bored with you" like her father. Her mother had hugged her into her warm, vanilla scent and said, "oh, Anna Maria" in the same tone she'd used when Anna Maria's favorite hamster had died. Then she'd taken her to the bathroom and washed her cuts and bandaged them and smiled at her.

Anna Maria tried to keep that memory fresh in her mind while she'd stared at the item on her list. "Mrs. Olinsky's spit." If resurrection were easy, Anna Maria reasoned, then everyone would do it.

Mrs. Olinsky was their fourth-grade math teacher. Anna Maria's mother said (when she was alive) that Mrs. Olinsky reminded her of her grandfather, who worked the fields from dawn to dusk and wasn't interested in anything but food and sleep when he was done. "Stern" was the word she'd used, but Anna Maria would have said mean.

Anna Maria had thought of hundreds of ways to get Mrs. Olinsky's spit, but they all included getting other stuff too. Gum or a soda top or a straw or a licked envelope. Stephanie hadn't been as clear about this as she'd been on Bobby's hair, but Anna Maria hadn't wanted to take any chances. She was pretty sure pure was better.

So she'd taken a little sample bottle from the science room, then she asked. Mrs. Olinsky had looked at her like she'd lost her mind along with her mother, but after Anna Maria explained that she was working on a "project" and yes, it was helping her move past her grief (whatever that meant), and thanked her for her "condolences," Mrs. Olinsky spit in the bottle. A session

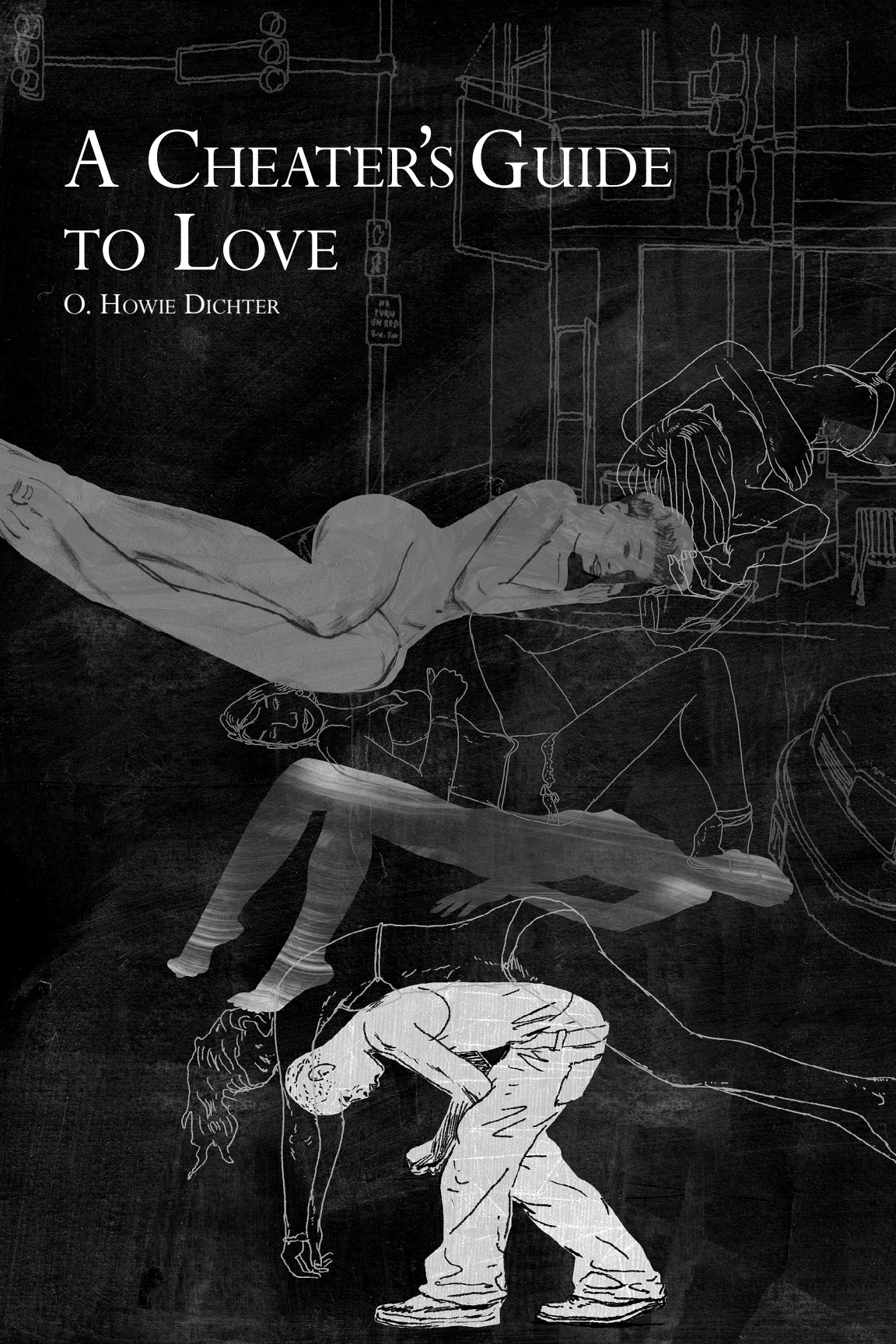
with the guidance counselor seemed like a reasonable exchange.

Shells, stones, claw, hair, spit. Anna Maria could feel them beneath her, buried in a circle under the dead oak in her backyard. The soup can would complete the set. She dug a small hole and buried the final piece, then sat inside the circle and asked for her mother, as she would do every night for the next seven years.

It was really not so long to wait to hear "Oh, Anna Maria" one more time.

# A CHEATER'S GUIDE TO LOVE

O. HOWIE DICHTER



**Y**<sup>ear 0</sup> Your girl catches you cheating. (Well, actually she's your fiancée, but hey, in a bit it so won't matter.) She could have caught you with one sucia, she could have caught you with two, but as you're a totally batshit cuero who didn't ever empty his e-mail trash can, she caught you with fifty! Sure, over a six-year period, but still. Fifty fucking girls? Goddamn. Maybe if you'd been engaged to a super open-minded blanquita you could have survived it—but you're not engaged to a super open-minded blanquita. Your girl is a bad-ass salcedena who doesn't believe in open anything; in fact the one thing she warned you about, that she swore she would never forgive, was cheating. I'll put a machete in you, she promised. And of course you swore you wouldn't do it. You swore you wouldn't. You swore you wouldn't.

And you did.

She'll stick around for a few months because you dated for a long long time. Because you went through much together—her father's death, your tenure madness, her bar exam (passed on the third attempt). And because love, real love, is not so easily shed. Over a tortured six-month period you will fly to the DR, to Mexico (for the funeral of a friend), to New Zealand. You will walk the beach where they filmed *The Piano*, something she's always wanted to do, and now, in penitent desperation, you give it to her. She is immensely sad on that beach and she walks up and down the shining sand alone, bare feet in the freezing water, and when you try to hug her she says, Don't. She stares at the rocks jutting out of the water, the wind taking her hair straight back. On the ride back to the hotel, up through those wild steeps, you pick up a pair of hitchhikers, a couple, so mixed it's ridiculous, and so giddy with love that you almost throw them out the car. She says nothing. Later, in the hotel, she will cry.

You try every trick in the book to keep her. You write her letters. You drive her to work. You quote Neruda. You compose a mass e-mail disowning all your sucias. You block their e-mails. You change your phone number. You stop drinking. You stop smoking. You claim you're a sex addict and start attending meetings. You blame your father. You blame your mother. You blame the patriarchy. You blame Santo Domingo. You find a therapist. You cancel your Facebook. You give her the passwords to all your e-mail accounts. You start taking salsa classes like you always swore you would so that the two of you could

dance together. You claim that you were sick, you claim that you were weak—It was the book! It was the pressure!—and every hour like clockwork you say that you're so so sorry. You try it all, but one day she will simply sit up in bed and say, No more, and, Ya, and you will have to move from the Harlem apartment that you two have shared. You consider not going. You consider a squat protest. In fact, you say won't go. But in the end you do.

For a while you haunt the city, like a two-bit ballplayer dreaming of a call-up. You phone her every day and leave messages which she doesn't answer. You write her long sensitive letters, which she returns unopened. You even show up at her apartment at odd hours and at her job downtown until finally her little sister calls you, the one who was always on your side, and she makes it plain: If you try to contact my sister again she's going to put a restraining order on you.

For some Negroes that wouldn't mean shit.

But you ain't that kind of Negro.

You stop. You move back to Boston. You never see her again.

#### *Year 1*

At first you pretend it don't matter. You harbored a lot of grievances against her anyway. Yes you did! She didn't give good head, you hated the fuzz on her cheeks, she never waxed her pussy, she never cleaned up around the apartment, etc. For a few weeks you almost believe it. Of course you go back to smoking, to drinking, you drop the therapist and the sex addict groups and you run around with the sluts like it's the good old days, like nothing has happened.

I'm back, you say to your boys.

Elvis laughs. It's almost like you never left.

You're good for like a week. Then your moods become erratic. One minute you have to stop yourself from jumping in the car and driving to see her and the next you're calling a sucia and saying, You're the one I always wanted. You start losing your temper with friends, with students, with colleagues. You cry every time you hear Monchy and Alexandra, her favorite.

Boston, where you never wanted to live, where you feel you've been exiled to, becomes a serious problem. You have trouble adjusting to it full-time; to its trains that stop running at midnight, to the glumness of its inhabitants, to its startling lack of Sichuan food. Almost on cue a lot of racist shit starts happening. Maybe it was always there, maybe you've become more sensitive after all your time in NYC. White people pull up at traffic lights and scream at you with a hideous rage, like you nearly ran over their mothers. It's fucking scary. Before

you can figure out what the fuck is going on they flip you the bird and peel out. It happens again and again. Security follows you in stores and every time you step on Harvard property you're asked for ID. Three times, drunk white dudes try to pick fights with you in different parts of the city.

You take it all very personally. I hope someone drops a fucking bomb on this city, you rant. This is why no people of color want to live here. Why all my black and Latino students leave as soon as they can.

Elvis says nothing. He was born and raised in Jamaica Plain, knows that trying to defend Boston from uncool is like blocking a bullet with a slice of bread. Are you OK? he asks finally.

I'm dandy, you say. Mejor que nunca.

Except you're not. You've lost all the mutual friends you had in NYC (they went to her), your mother won't speak to you after what happened (she liked the fiancée better than she liked you), and you're feeling terribly guilty and terribly alone. You keep writing letters to her, waiting for the day that you can hand them to her. You also keep fucking everything that moves. Thanksgiving you end up having to spend in your apartment because you can't face your mom and the idea of other people's charity makes you furious. The ex, as you're now calling her, always cooked: a turkey, a chicken, a pernil. Set aside all the wings for you. That night you drink yourself into a stupor, spend two days recovering.

You figure that's as bad as it gets. You figure wrong. During finals a depression rolls over you, so profound you doubt there is a name for it. It feels like you're being slowly pincer apart, atom by atom.

You stop hitting the gym or going out for drinks; you stop shaving or washing your clothes; in fact, you stop doing almost everything. Your friends begin to worry about you, and they are not exactly the worrying types. I'm OK, you tell them, but with each passing week the depression darkens. You try to describe it. Like someone flew a plane into your soul. Like someone flew two planes into your soul. Elvis sits shivah with you in the apartment; he pats you on the shoulder, tells you to take it easy. Four years earlier Elvis had a Humvee blow up on him on a highway outside of Baghdad. The burning wreckage pinned him for what felt like a week, so he knows a little about pain. His back and buttocks and right arm so scarred up that even you, Mr. Hard Nose, can't look at them. Breathe, he tells you. You breathe nonstop, like a marathon runner, but it doesn't help. Your little letters become more and more pathetic. Please, you write. Please come back. You have dreams where she's talking to you like in the

old days—in that sweet Spanish of the Cibao, no sign of rage, of disappointment. And then you wake up.

You stop sleeping, and some night when you're drunk and alone you have a wacky impulse to open the window of your fifth-floor apartment and leap down to the street. If it wasn't for a couple of things you probably would have done it, too. But (a) you ain't the killing—yourself type; (b) your boy Elvis keeps a strong eye on you—he's over all the time, stands by the window as if he knows what you're thinking. And (c) you have this ridiculous hope that maybe one day she will forgive you.

She doesn't.

*Year 2*

You make it through both semesters, barely. It really is a long stretch of shit and then finally the madness begins to recede. It's like waking up from the worst fever of your life. You ain't your old self (har—har!) but you can stand near windows without being overcome by strange urges, and that's a start. Unfortunately, you've put on forty-five pounds. You don't know how it happened but it happened. Only one pair of your jeans fits anymore, and none of your suits. You put away all the old pictures of her, say good-bye to her Wonder Woman features. You go the barber, shave your head for the first time in forever and cut off your beard.

You done? Elvis asks.

I'm done.

A white grandma screams at you at a traffic light and you close your eyes until she goes away.

Find yourself another girl, Elvis advises. He's holding his daughter lightly. Clavo saca clavo.

Nothing sacas nothing, you reply. No one will ever be like her.

OK. But find yourself a girl anyway.

His daughter was born that February. If she had been a boy Elvis was going to name him Iraq, his wife told you.

I'm sure he was kidding.

She looked out to where he was working on his truck. I don't think so.

He puts his daughter in your arms. Find yourself a good Dominican girl, he says.

You hold the baby uncertainly. Your ex never wanted kids but toward the end she made you get a sperm test, just in case she decided last minute to change her mind. You put your lips against the baby's stomach and blow. Do they even exist?

You had one, didn't you?

That you did.

You clean up your act. You cut it out with all the old sucias, even the long-term Iranian girl you'd boned the entire time you were with the fiancée. You want to turn over a new leaf. Takes you a bit—after all, old sluts are the hardest habit to ditch—but you finally break clear and when you do you feel lighter. I should have done this years ago, you declare, and your girl Arlenny, who never ever messed with you (Thank God, she mutters) rolls her eyes. You wait, what, a week for the bad energy to dissipate and then you start dating. Like a normal person, you tell Elvis. Without any lies. Elvis says nothing, only smiles.

At first it's OK: you get numbers but nothing you would take home to the fam. But after the early rush, it all dries up. It ain't just a dry spell; it's fucking Arrakeen. You're out all the time but no one seems to be biting. Not even the chicks who swear they love Latin guys, and one girl, when you tell her you are Dominican, actually says, Hell no and runs full-tilt toward the door. Seriously? you say. You begin to wonder if there is some secret mark on your forehead. If some of these bitches know.

Be patient, Elvis urges. He's working for this ghetto—ass landlord and starts taking you with him on collection day. It turns out you're awesome backup. Deadbeats catch one peep of your dismal grill and cough up their debts with a quickness.

One month, two month, three month and then some hope. Her name is Noemi, Dominican from Bani—in Massachusetts it seems all the domos are from Bani—and you meet at Sofia's in the last months before it closes, fucking up the Latino community of New England forever. She ain't half your ex but she ain't bad either. She's a nurse, and when Elvis complains about his back, she starts listing all the shit it might be. She's a big girl and got skin like you wouldn't believe and best of all she doesn't privar at all; actually seems nice. She smiles often and whenever she's nervous she says, Tell me something. Minuses: she's always working and she has a four-year-old named Justin. She shows you pictures; kid looks like he'll be dropping an album if she's not careful. She had him with a banilejo who had four other kids with four other women. And you thought this guy was a good idea for what reason? you say. I was stupid, she admits. Where did you meet him? Same place I met you, she says. Out.

Normally that would be a no-go, but Noemi is not only nice, she's also kinda fly. One of those hot moms and you're excited for the first time in over a year.

Even standing next to her while a hostess looks for menus gives you an erection.

Sunday is her one day off—the Five—Baby Father watches Justin that day, or better said, he and his new girlfriend watch Justin that day. You and Noemi fall into a little pattern: on Saturday you take her out to dinner—she doesn't eat anything remotely adventurous, so it's always Italian—and then she stays the night.

How sweet was that toto? Elvis asks after the first sleepover.

Not sweet at all, because Noemi doesn't give it to you! Three Saturdays in a row she sleeps over, and three Saturdays in a row nada. A little kissing, a little feeling up, but nothing beyond that. She brings her own pillow, one of those expensive foam ones, and her own toothbrush, and she takes it all with her Sunday morning. Kisses you at the door as she leaves; it all feels too chaste to you, too lacking in promise.

No toto? Elvis looks a little shocked.

No toto, you confirm. What am I, in sixth grade?

You know you should be patient. You know she's just testing your ass. She's probably had a lot of bad experiences with the hit—and—run types. Case in point—Justin's dad. But it galls you that she gave it up to some thug with no job, no education, no nothing, but she's making you jump through hoops of fire. In fact, it infuriates you.

Are we going to see each other? she asks on week four, and you almost say yes but then your idiocy gets the best of you.

It depends, you say.

On what? She is instantly guarded and that adds to your irritation. Where was that guard when she let the banilejo fuck her without a condom?

On whether you're planning to give me ass anytime soon.

Oh classiness. You know as soon as you say it that you just buried yourself.

Noemi is silent. Then she says: Let me get off this phone before I say something you won't like.

This is your last chance, but instead of begging for mercy you bark: Fine.

Within an hour she has deleted you from Facebook. You send one exploratory text to her but it is never answered.

Years later you will see her in Dudley Square but she will pretend not to recognize you, and you won't force the issue.

Nicely done, Elvis says. Bravo.

You two are watching his daughter knock around the playground near Columbia Terrace. He tries to be reassuring. She had a kid. That probably wasn't for you.

Probably not.

Even these little breakups suck because they send you right back to thinking about the ex. Right back into the depression. This time you spend six months wallowing in it before you come back to the world.

After you pull yourself back together you tell Elvis: I think I need a break from the bitches.

What are you going to do?

Focus on me for a while.

That's a good idea, says his wife. Besides it only happens when you're not looking for it.

That's what everybody claims. Easier to say that than This shit sucks.

This shit sucks, Elvis says. Does that help?

Not really.

On the walk home a Jeep roars past; the driver calls you a fucking towelhead. One of the ex—sucas publishes a poem about you online. It's called "El Puto."  
*Year 3*

You take your break. You try to get back to your work, to your writing. You start three novels: one about a pelotero, one about a narco and one about a bachatero—all of them suck pipe. You get serious about classes and for your health you take up running. You used to run in the old days and you figure you need something to keep you out of your head. You must have needed it bad, because once you get into the swing of it you start running four five six times a week. It's your new addiction. You run in the morning and you run late at night when there's no one on the paths next to the Charles. You run so hard that your heart feels like it's going to seize. When winter rolls in, there's a part of you that fears you'll fold—Boston winters are on some terrorism shit—but you need the activity more than anything so you keep at it even as the trees are stripped of their foliage and the paths empty out and the frost reaches into your bones. Soon it's only you and a couple of other lunatics. Your body changes, of course. You lose all that drinking and smoking chub and your legs look like they belong to someone else. Every time you think about the ex, every time the loneliness rears up in you like a seething, burning continent, you tie on your shoes and hit the paths and that helps; it really does.

By winter's end you've gotten to know all the morning regulars and there's even this one girl who inspires in you some hope. You pass each other a couple of times a week and she's a pleasure to watch, a gazelle really—what economy, what gait, and what an amazing fucking cuerpazo. She has Latin features but your radar has been off a while and she could just as likely be a morena as anything. She always smiles at you as you pass. You consider flopping in front of her—My leg! My leg!—but that seems incredibly cursí. You keep hoping you'll bump into her around town.

The running is going splendid and then six months in you feel a pain in your right foot. Along the inside arch, a burning that doesn't subside after a few days' rest. Soon you're hobbling even when you're not running. You drop in on emergency care and the RN pushes with his thumb, watches you writhe, and announces you have plantar fasciitis.

You have no idea what that is. When can I run again?

He gives you a pamphlet. Sometimes it takes a month. Sometimes six months. Sometimes a year. He pauses. Sometimes longer.

That makes you so sad you go home and lie in bed in the dark. You're afraid. I don't want to go back down the hole, you tell Elvis. Then don't, he says. Like a hardhead you keep trying to run but the pain sharpens. Finally, you give up. You put away the shoes. You sleep in. When you see other people hitting the paths, you turn away. You find yourself crying in front of sporting goods stores. Out of nowhere you call the ex, but of course she doesn't pick up. The fact that she hasn't changed her number gives you some strange hope, even though you've heard she's dating somebody. Word on the street is that the dude is super good to her.

Elvis encourages you to try yoga, the half—Bikram kind they teach in Central Square. Mad fucking ho's in there, he says. I'm talking ho's by the ton. While you're not exactly feeling the ho's right now, you don't want to lose all the conditioning you've built up, so you give it a shot. The namaste bullshit you could do without, but you fall into it and soon you're pulling vinyasas with the best of them. Elvis was certainly right. There are mad ho's, all with their asses in the air, but none of them catch your eye. One miniature blanquita does try to chat you up. She seems impressed that of all the guys in class you alone never take off your shirt, but you skitter away from her cornpoke grin. What the hell are you going to do with a blanquita?

Bone the shit out of her, Elvis offers.

Bust a nut in her mouth, your boy Darnell seconds.

Give her a chance, Arlenny proposes.

But you don't do any of it. At the end of the sessions you move away quickly to wipe down your mat and she takes the hint. She doesn't mess with you again, though sometimes during practice she watches you with longing.

You actually become pretty obsessed with yoga and soon you're taking your mat with you wherever you go. You no longer have fantasies that the ex will be waiting for you in front of your apartment, though every now and then you still call her and let the phone ring to the in—box.

You finally start work on your eighties apocalypse novel—"finally starting" means you write one paragraph—and in a flush of confidence you start messing with this young morena from the Harvard Law School that you meet at the Enormous Room. She's half your age, one of those super geniuses who finished undergrad when she was nineteen and is seriously lovely. Elvis and Darnell approve. Aces, they say. Arlenny demurs. She's really young, no? Yes, she's really young and you fuck a whole lot and during the act the two of you cling to each other for dear life but afterward you peel away like you're ashamed of yourselves. Most of the time you suspect she feels sorry for you. She says she likes your mind, but considering that she's smarter than you, that seems doubtful. What she does appear to like is your body, can't keep her hands off it. I should get back to ballet, she says while undressing you. Then you'd lose your thick, you note, and she laughs. I know, that's the dilemma.

It's all going swell, going marvelous, and then in the middle of a sun salutation you feel a shift in your lower back and pau—it's like a sudden power failure. You lose all strength, have to lie down. Yes, urges the instructor, rest if you have to. When the class is over you need help from the little whitegirl to rise to your feet. Do you want me to take you somewhere? she asks but you shake your head. The walk back to your apartment is some Bataan—type shit. At the Plough and Stars you fall against a stop sign and call Elvis on your cell.

He arrives in a flash with a hottie in tow. She's a straight—up Cambridge Cape Verdean. The two of them look like they've just been fucking. Who's that? you ask and he shakes his head. Drags you into emergency care. By the time the doctor appears you're crabbed over like an old man.

It appears to be a ruptured disc, she announces.

Yay, you say.

You're in bed for a solid two weeks. Elvis brings you food and sits with you while you eat. He talks about the Cape Verdean girl. She's got like the perfect

pussy, he says. It's like putting your dick in a hot mango.

You listen for a bit and then you say: Just don't end up like me.

Elvis grins. Shit, no one could ever end up like you, Yuniore. You're a DR original.

His daughter throws your books onto the floor. You don't care. Maybe it will encourage her to read, you say.

So now it's your feet, your back, and your heart. You can't run, you can't do yoga. You try riding a bike, thinking you'll turn into an Armstrong, but it kills your back. So you stick to walking. You do it one hour each morning and one hour each night. There is no rush to the head, no tearing up your lungs, no massive shock to your system, but it's better than nothing.

A month later the law student leaves you for one of her classmates, tells you that it was great but she has to start being realistic. Translation: I got to stop fucking with old dudes. Later you see her with said classmate on the Yard. He's even lighter than you but he still looks unquestionably black. He's also like nine feet tall and put together like an anatomy primer. They are walking hand in hand and she looks so very happy that you try to find the space in your heart not to begrudge her. Two seconds later, security approaches you and asks for ID. The next day a whitekid on a bike throws a can of Diet Coke at you.

Classes start and by then the squares on your abdomen have been reabsorbed, like tiny islands in a rising sea of lard. You scan the incoming junior faculty for a possible, but there's nothing. You watch a lot of TV. Sometimes Elvis joins you since his wife doesn't allow him to smoke weed in the house. He's taken up yoga now, having seen what it did for you. Lots of ho's, too, he says, grinning. You want not to hate him.

What happened to the Cape Verdean girl?

What Cape Verdean girl? he says dryly.

You make little advances. You start doing push-ups and pull-ups and even some of your old yoga moves, but very carefully. You have dinner with a couple of girls. One of them is married and hot for days in the late-thirties Dominican middle-class woman sort of way. You can tell she's contemplating sleeping with you and the whole time you're eating your short ribs you feel like you're on the dock. In Santo Domingo I'd never be able to meet you like this, she says with great generosity. Almost all her conversations start with In Santo Domingo. She's doing a year at the business school and for how much she gushes about Boston you can tell she misses the DR, would never live anywhere else.

Boston is really racist, you offer by way of orientation.

She looks at you like you're crazy. Boston isn't racist, she says. She also scoffs at the idea of racism in Santo Domingo.

So Dominicans love Haitians now?

That's not about race. She pronounces every syllable. That's about nationality.

Of course you end up in bed and it ain't bad except for the fact that she never never comes and she spends a lot of time complaining about her husband. She takes, if you get my meaning, and soon you are squiring her around the city and beyond: to Salem on Halloween and one weekend to the Cape. No one ever pulls you over when you are with her or asks you for ID. Everywhere you two go she shoots fotos but never any of you. She writes her kids postcards while you're in bed.

At the end of the semester she returns home. My home, not your home, she says tetchily. She's always trying to prove you're not Dominican. If I'm not Dominican then no one is, you shoot back, but she laughs at that. Say that in Spanish, she challenges and of course you can't. Last day you drive her to the airport and there is no crushing Casablanca kiss, just a smile and a little gay-ass hug and her fake breasts push against you like something irrevocable. Write, you tell her, and she says, Por supuesto, and of course neither of you do. You eventually erase her contact info from your phone but not the pictures you took of her in bed while she was naked and asleep, never those.

*Year 4*

Wedding invitations from the ex-sucias start to arrive in the mail. You have no idea how to explain this berserkería. What the fuck, you say. You reach out to Arlenny for insight. She turns over the cards. I guess it's what Oates said: Revenge is living well, without you. Fuck Hall and Oates, Elvis says. These bitches think we're bitches. They think we're gonna give a shit about vaina like this. He peers at the invite. Is it me or does every Asian girl on the planet marry a white guy? Is it written on the genes or something?

That year your arms and legs begin to give you trouble, occasionally going numb, flickering in and out like a brownout back on the Island. It is a strange pins-and-needles feeling. What the fuck is this? you wonder. I hope I'm not dying. You're probably working out too hard, Elvis says. But I'm not really working out at all, you protest. Probably just stress, the nurse at emergency care tells you. You hope so, flexing your hands, worrying. You really do hope so.

March you fly out to the Bay to deliver a lecture, which does not go well; almost no one shows up beyond those who were forced to by their professors. Afterward you head alone to K-town and gorge on kalbi until you're ready to



burst. You drive around for a couple of hours, just to get a feel of the city. You have a couple of friends in town but you don't call them because you know they'll only want to talk to you about old times, about the ex. You have a sucia in town too and in the end you call her but when she hears your name she hangs up on your ass.

When you return to Boston the law student is waiting for you in the lobby of your building. You are surprised and excited and a little wary. What's up?

It's like bad television. You notice that she has lined up three suitcases in the foyer. And on closer inspection her ridiculously Persian-looking eyes are red from crying, her mascara freshly applied.

I'm pregnant, she says.

At first you don't register it. You joke: And?

You asshole. She starts crying. It's probably your stupid fucking kid.

There are surprises and there are surprises and then there is this.

You don't know what to say or how to act, so you bring her upstairs. You lug up the suitcases despite your back, despite your foot, despite your flickering arms. She says nothing, just hugs her pillow to her Howard sweater. She is a Southern girl with supremely straight posture and when she sits down you feel as if she's preparing to interview you. After serving her tea you ask: Are you keeping it?

Of course I'm keeping it.

What about Kimathi?

She doesn't get it. Who?

Your Kenyan. You can't bring yourself to say boyfriend.

He threw me out. He knows it's not his. She picks at something on her sweater. I'm going to unpack, OK? You nod and watch her. She is an exceptionally beautiful girl. You think of that old saying Show me a beautiful girl and I'll show you someone who is tired of fucking her. You doubt you would have ever tired of her, though.

But it could be his, right?

It's yours, OK? she cries. I know you don't want it to be yours but it's yours.

You are surprised at how hollowed out you feel. You don't know if you should show enthusiasm or support. You run your hand over the thinning stubble on your head.

I need to stay here, she tells you later, after the two of you fumble through an awkward fuck. I have nowhere to go. I can't go back to my family.

When you tell Elvis the whole story you expect him to flip out, to order you to kick her out. You fear his reaction because you know you don't have the

heart to kick her out.

But Elvis doesn't flip. He slaps you on the back, beams delightedly. That's great, cuz.

What do you mean, That's great?

You're going to be a father. You're going to have a son.

A son? What are you talking about? There's not even proof that it's mine.

Elvis is not listening. He's smiling at some inner thought. He checks to make sure the wife is not anywhere in earshot. Remember the last time we went to the DR?

Of course you do. Three years ago. Everybody had a blast except for you. You were in the middle of the great downturn, which meant you spent most of your time alone, floating on your back in the ocean or getting drunk at the bar or walking the beach in the early morning before anybody was up.

What about it?

Well, I got a girl pregnant while we were down there.

Are you fucking kidding me?

He nods.

Pregnant?

He nods again.

Did she have it?

He rummages through his cell phone. Shows you a picture of a perfect little boy with the most Dominican little face you ever done saw.

That's my son, Elvis says proudly. Elvis Xavier Junior.

Dude, are you fucking serious with this? If your wife finds—

He bristles. She ain't going to find out.

You sit on it for a bit. You're posted up behind his house, near Central Square. In summer these blocks are ill with activity but today you can actually hear a jay chivvying some other birds.

Babies are fucking expensive. Elvis punches you in the arm. So just get ready, buster, to be broke as a joke.

Back at the apartment the law student has taken over two of your closets and almost your entire sink and most crucially she has laid claim to the bed. She has put a pillow and a sheet on the couch. For you.

What, am I not allowed to share the bed with you?

I don't think it's good for me, she says. It would be too stressful. I don't want to miscarry.

Hard to argue against that. Your back doesn't take to the couch at all, so now you wake up in the morning in more pain than ever.

Only a bitch of color comes to Harvard to get pregnant. White women don't do that. Asian women don't do that. Only fucking black and Latina women. Why go to all the trouble to get into Harvard just to get knocked up? You could have stayed on the block and done that shit.

This is what you write in your journal. The next day when you return from classes the law student throws the notebook in your face. I fucking hate you, she wails. I hope it's not yours. I hope it is yours and it's born retarded.

How can you say that? you demand. How can you say something like that?

She walks to the kitchen and starts to pour herself a shot and you find yourself pulling the bottle out of her hand and pouring its contents into the sink. This is ridiculous, you say. More bad TV.

She doesn't speak to you again for two whole fucking weeks. You spend as much time as you can either at your office or over at Elvis's house. Whenever you enter a room she snaps shut her laptop. I'm not fucking snooping, you say. But she waits for you to move on before she returns to typing whatever she was typing.

You can't throw out your baby's mom, Elvis reminds you. It would fuck that kid up for life. Plus, it's bad karma. Just wait till the baby comes. She'll fucking straighten out.

A month passes, two months pass. You're afraid to tell anybody else, to share the—what? Good news? Arlenny you know would march right in and boot her ass out on the street. Your back is agony and the numbness in your arms is starting to become pretty steady. In the shower, the only place in the apartment you can be alone, you whisper to yourself: Hell, Netley. We're in Hell.

Later it will all come back to you as a terrible fever dream but at the time it moved so very slowly, felt so very concrete. You take her to her appointments. You help her with the vitamins and shit. You pay for almost everything. She is not speaking to her mother so all she has are two friends who are in the apartment almost as much as you are. They are all part of the Biracial Identity Crisis Support Group and look at you with little warmth. You wait for her to melt, but she keeps her distance. Some days while she is sleeping and you are trying to work you allow yourself the indulgence of wondering what kind of child you will have. Whether it will be a boy or a girl, smart or withdrawn. Like you or like her.

Have you thought up any names? Elvis's wife asks.

Not yet.

Taina for a girl, she suggests. And Elvis for a boy. She throws a taunting glance at her husband and laughs.

I like my name, Elvis says. I would give it to a boy.

Over my dead body, his wife says. And besides, this oven is closed for business.

At night while you're trying to sleep you see the glow of her computer through the open door of the bedroom, hear her fingers on the keyboard.

Do you need anything?

I'm fine, thank you.

You come to the door a few times and watch her, wanting to be called in, but she always glares and asks you, What the fuck do you want?

Just checking.

Five month, six month, seventh month. You are in class teaching Intro to Fiction when you get a text from one of her girlfriends saying she has gone into labor, six weeks early. All sorts of terrible fears race around inside of you. You keep trying her cell phone but she doesn't answer. You call Elvis but he doesn't answer either, so you drive over to the hospital by yourself.

Are you the father? the woman at the desk asks.

I am, you say diffidently.

You are led around the corridors and finally given some scrubs and told to wash your hands and given instructions where you should stand and warned about the procedure but as soon as you walk into the birthing room the law student shrieks: I don't want him in here. I don't want him in here. He's not the father.

You didn't think anything could hurt so bad. Her two girlfriends rush at you but you have already exited. You saw her thin ashy legs and the doctor's back and little else. You're glad you didn't see anything more. You would have felt like you'd violated her safety or something. You take off the scrubs; you wait around for a bit and then you realize what you're doing and finally you drive home.

You don't hear from her but from her girlfriend, the same one who texted you about the labor. I'll come pick up her bags, ok? When she arrives, she glances around the apartment warily. You're not going to go psycho on me, are you?

No, I'm not. After a pause you demand: Why would you say that? I've never hurt a woman in my life. Then you realize how you sound—like a dude who hurts women all the time. Everything goes back into the three suitcases and then you help her wrestle them down to her SUV.

You must be relieved, she says.

You don't answer.

And that's the end of it. Later you hear that the Kenyan visited her in the hospital, and when he saw the baby a teary reconciliation occurred, all was forgiven.

That was your mistake, Elvis said. You should have had a baby with that ex of yours. Then she wouldn't have left you.

She would have left you, Arlenny says. Believe it.

The rest of the semester ends up being a super-duper clusterfuck. Lowest evaluations in your six years as a professor. Your only student of color for that semester writes: He claims that we don't know anything but doesn't show us any way to address these deficiencies. One night you call your ex and when the voice mail clicks on you say: We should have had a kid. And then you hang up, ashamed. Why did you say that? you ask yourself. Now she'll definitely never speak to you again.

I don't think the phone call is the problem, Arlenny says.

Check it out. Elvis produces a picture of Elvis Jr. holding a bat. This kid is going to be a monster.

On winter break you fly to the DR with Elvis. What the hell else are you going to do? You ain't got shit going on, outside of waving your arms around every time they go numb.

Elvis is beyond excited. He has three suitcases of shit for the boy, including his first glove, his first ball, his first Bosox jersey. About eighty kilos of clothes and shit for the baby mama. Hid them all in your apartment, too. You are at his house when he bids his wife and mother-in-law and daughter goodbye. His daughter doesn't seem to understand what's happening but when the door shuts she lets out a wail that coils about you like constantine wire. Elvis stays cool as fuck. This used to be me, you're thinking. Me me me.

Of course you look for her on the flight. You can't help yourself.

You assume that the baby mama will live somewhere poor like Capotillo or Los Alcarrizos but you didn't imagine she would live in the Nadalands. You've been to the Nadalands a couple of times before; shit, your family came up out of those spaces. Squatter chawls where there are no roads, no lights, no running water, no grid, no anything, where everybody's slapdash house is on top of everybody else's, where it's all mud and shanties and motos and grind and thin smiling motherfuckers everywhere without end, like falling off the rim of civilization. You have to leave the rental jipeta on the last bit of paved road and jump on the back of motoconchos with all the luggage balanced on your backs.

Nobody stares because those ain't real loads you're carrying: You've seen a single moto carry a family of five and their pig.

You finally pull up to a tiny little house and out comes Baby Mama—cue happy homecoming. You wish you could say you remember Baby Mama from that long-ago trip, but you do not. She is tall and very thick, exactly how Elvis always likes them. She is no older than twenty—one, twenty-two, with an irresistible Georgina Duluc smile, and when she sees you she gives you a huge abrazo. So the padrino finally decides to visit, she declaims in one of those loud ronca campesina voices. You also meet her mother, her grandmother, her brother, her sister, her three uncles. Seems like everybody is missing teeth.

Elvis picks up the boy. Mi hijo, he sings. Mi hijo.

The boy starts crying.

Baby Mama's place is barely two rooms, one bed, one chair, a little table, a single bulb overhead. More mosquitoes than a refugee camp. Raw sewage in the back. You look at Elvis like what the fuck. The few family fotos hanging on the walls are water-stained. When it rains—Baby Mama lifts up her hands—everything goes.

Don't worry, Elvis says, I'm moving them out this month, if I can get the loot together.

The happy couple leaves you with the family and Elvis Jr. while they visit various negocios to settle accounts and to pick up some necessities. Baby Mama also wants to show off Elvis, natch.

You sit on a plastic chair in front of the house with the kid in your lap. The neighbors admire you with cheerful avidity. A domino game breaks out and you team up with Baby Mama's brooding brother. Takes him less than five seconds to talk you into ordering a couple of grandes and a bottle of Brugal from the nearby colmado. Also three boxes of cigarettes, a tube of salami, and some cough syrup for a neighbor lady with a congested daughter. Ta muy mal, she says. Of course everybody has a sister or a prima they want you to meet. Que tan mas buena que el Diablo, they guarantee. You all barely finish the first bottle of romo before some of the sisters and primas actually start coming around. They look rough but you got to give it to them for trying. You invite them all to sit down, order more beer and some bad pica pollo.

Just let me know which one you like, a neighbor whispers, and I'll make it happen.

Elvis Jr. watches you with considerable gravitas. He is a piercingly cute carajito. He has all these mosquito bites on his legs and an old scab on his head no

one can explain to you. You are suddenly overcome with the urge to cover him with your arms, with your whole body.

Later, Elvis Sr. fills you in on the Plan. I'll bring him over to the States in a few years. I'll tell the wife he was an accident, a one-time thing when I was drunk and I didn't find out about it until now.

And that's going to work?

It will work out, he says testily.

Bro, your wife ain't going to buy that.

And what the fuck do you know? Elvis says. It ain't like your shit ever works.

Can't argue with that. By this point your arms are killing you so you pick up the boy in order to put circulation back in them. You look into his eyes. He looks into yours. He seems preternaturally sapient. MIT-bound, you say, while you nuzzle his peppercorn hair. He starts to bawl then and you put him down, watch him run around a while.

That's more or less when you know.

The second story of the house is unfinished, rebar poking out of the cinderblock like horrible gnarled follicles, and you and Elvis stand up there and drink beers and stare out beyond the edge of the city, beyond the vast radio dish antennas in the distance, out toward the mountains of the Cibao, the Cordillera Central, where your father was born and where your ex's whole family is from. It's breathtaking.

He's not yours, you tell Elvis.

What are you talking about?

The boy is not yours.

Don't be a jerk. That kid looks just like me.

Elvis. You put your hand on his arm. You look straight into the center of his eyes. Cut the crap.

A long silence. But he looks like me.

Bro, he so doesn't look like you.

The next day you two load up the boy and drive back into the city, back into Gazcue. You literally have to beat the family off to keep them from coming with you. Before you go one of the uncles pulls you aside. You really should bring these people a refrigerator. Then the brother pulls you aside. And a TV. And then the mother pulls you aside. A hot comb too.

Traffic back into the center is Gaza Strip crazy and there seems to be a crash every five hundred meters and Elvis keeps threatening to turn around. You

ignore him. You stare at the slurry of broken concrete, the sellers with all the crap of the earth slung over their shoulders, the dust-covered palms. The boy holds on to you tightly. There is no significance in this, you tell yourself. It's a Moro-type reflex, nothing more.

Don't make me do this, Yuniator, Elvis pleads.

You insist. You have to, E. You know you can't live a lie. It won't be good for the boy, it won't be good for you. Don't you think it's better to know?

But I always wanted a boy, he says. My whole life that's all I wanted. When I got in that shit in Iraq I kept thinking, Please God let me live just long enough to have a son, please, and then you can kill me dead right after. And look, He gave him to me, didn't He? He gave him to me.

The clinic is in one of those houses they built in the International Style during the time of Trujillo. The two of you stand at the front desk. You are holding the boy's hand. The boy is staring at you with lapidary intensity. The mud is waiting. The mosquito bites are waiting. The Nada is waiting.

Go on, you tell Elvis.

In all honesty you figure he won't do it, that this is where it will end. He'll take the boy and turn around and go back to the jipeta. But he carries the little guy into a room where they swab both their mouths and it's done.

You ask: How long will it take for the results?

Four weeks, the technician tells you.

That long?

She shrugs. Welcome to Santo Domingo.

*Year 5*

You figure that's the last you'll hear about it, that no matter what, the results will change nothing. But four weeks after the trip, Elvis informs you that the test is negative. Fuck, he says bitterly, fuck fuck fuck. And then he cuts off all contact with the kid and the mother. Changes his cell phone number and e-mail account. I told the bitch not to call me again. There is some shit that can't be forgiven.

Of course you feel terrible. You think about the way the boy looked at you. Let me have her number at least, you say. You figure you can throw her a little cash every month but he won't have it. Fuck that lying bitch.

You reckon he must have known, somewhere inside, maybe even wanted you to blow it all up, but you let it be, don't explore it. He's going to yoga five times a week now, is in the best shape of his life, while you on the other hand have to buy bigger jeans again. When you walk into Elvis's now, his daughter

rushes you, calls you Tío Junji. It's your Korean name, Elvis teases.

With him it's like nothing happened. You wish you could be as phlegmatic.

Do you ever think about them?

He shakes his head. Never will either.

The numbness in the arms and legs increases. You return to your doctors and they ship you over to a neurologist who sends you out for an MRI. Looks like you have stenosis all down your spine, the doctor reports, impressed.

Is it bad?

It isn't great. Did you used to do a lot of heavy manual labor?

Besides delivering pool tables, you mean?

That would do it. The doctor squints at the MRI. Let's try some physical therapy. If that doesn't work we'll talk about other options.

Like?

He steeples his fingers contemplatively. Surgery.

From there what little life you got goes south. A student complains to the school that you curse too much. You have to have a sit-down with the dean, who more or less tells you to watch your shit. You get pulled over by the cops three weekends in a row. One time they sit you out on the curb and you watch as all the other whips sail past, passengers ogling you as they go. On the T you swear you peep her in the rush-hour mix and for a second your knees buckle but it turns out to be just another Latina *mujerón* in a tailored suit.

Of course you dream about her. You are in New Zealand or in Santo Domingo or improbably back in college, in the dorms. You want her to say your name, to touch you, but she doesn't. She just shakes her head.

Ya.

You want to move on, to exorcise shit, so you find a new apartment on the other side of the square that has a view of Harvard skyline. All those amazing steeples, including your favorite, the gray dagger of the Old Cambridge Baptist Church. In the first days of your tenancy an eagle lands in the dead tree right outside your fifth-story window. Looks you in the eye. This seems to you like a good sign.

A month later the law student sends you an invitation to her wedding in Kenya. There's a foto and the two of them are dressed in what you assume is traditional Kenyan jumpoffs. She looks very thin, and she's wearing a lot of makeup. You expect a note, some mention of what you did

for her, but there is nothing. Even the address was typed on a computer.

Maybe it's a mistake, you say.

It wasn't a mistake, Arlenny assures you.

Elvis tears the invite up, throws it out the truck window. Fuck that bitch. Fuck all bitches.

You manage to save a tiny piece of the foto. It's of her hand.

You work harder than you've ever worked at everything—the teaching, your physical therapy, your regular therapy, your reading, your walking. You keep waiting for the heaviness to leave you. You keep waiting for the moment you never think about the ex again. It doesn't come.

You ask everybody you know: How long does it usually take to get over it?

There are many formulas. One year for every year you dated. Two years for every year you dated. It's just a matter of willpower: The day you decide it's over, it's over. You never get over it.

One night that winter you go out with all the boys to a ghetto—ass Latin club in Mattapan Square. Murder—fucking—pan. Outside it's close to zero, but inside it's so hot that everybody's stripped down to their T-shirts and the funk is as thick as a fro. There's a girl who keeps bumping into you. You say to her *Pero mi amor, ya*. And she says: *Ya yourself*. She's Dominican and lithe and super tall. I could never date anyone as short as you, she informs you very early on in your conversations. But she gives you her number at the end of the night. All evening, Elvis sits at the bar quietly, drinking shot after shot of Rémy. The week before, he took a quick solo trip to the DR, a ghost recon. Didn't tell you about it until after. He tried looking for the mom and Elvis Jr. but they had moved and no one knew where they were. None of the numbers he had for her worked. I hope they turn up, he says.

I hope so, too.

You take the longest walks. Every ten minutes you drop and do squats or push-ups. It's not running, but it raises your heart rate, better than nothing. Afterward you are in so much nerve pain that you can barely move.

Some nights you have *Neuromancer* dreams where you see the ex and the boy and another figure, familiar, waving at you in the distance. Somewhere, very close, the laugh that wasn't laughter.

And finally, when you feel like you can do so without blowing into burning atoms, you open a folder you have kept hidden under your bed. The *Doomsday Book*. Copies of all the e-mails and fotos from the cheating days, the ones the ex

found and compiled and mailed to you a month after she ended it. Dear Yuniors, for your next book. Probably the last time she wrote your name.

You read the whole thing cover to cover (yes, she put covers on it). You are surprised at what a fucking chickenshit coward you are. It kills you to admit it but it's true. You are astounded by the depths of your mendacity. When you finish the Book a second time you say the truth: You did the right thing, negra. You did the right thing.

She's right; this would make a killer book, Elvis says. The two of you have been pulled over by a cop and are waiting for Officer Dickhead to finish running your license. Elvis holds up one of the fotos.

She's Colombian, you say.

He whistles. Que viva Colombia. Hands you back the Book. You really should write the cheater's guide to love.

You think?

I do.

It takes a while. You see the tall girl. You go to more doctors. You celebrate Arlenny's Ph.D. defense. And then one June night you scribble the ex's name and: The half-life of love is forever.

You bust out a couple more things. Then you put your head down.

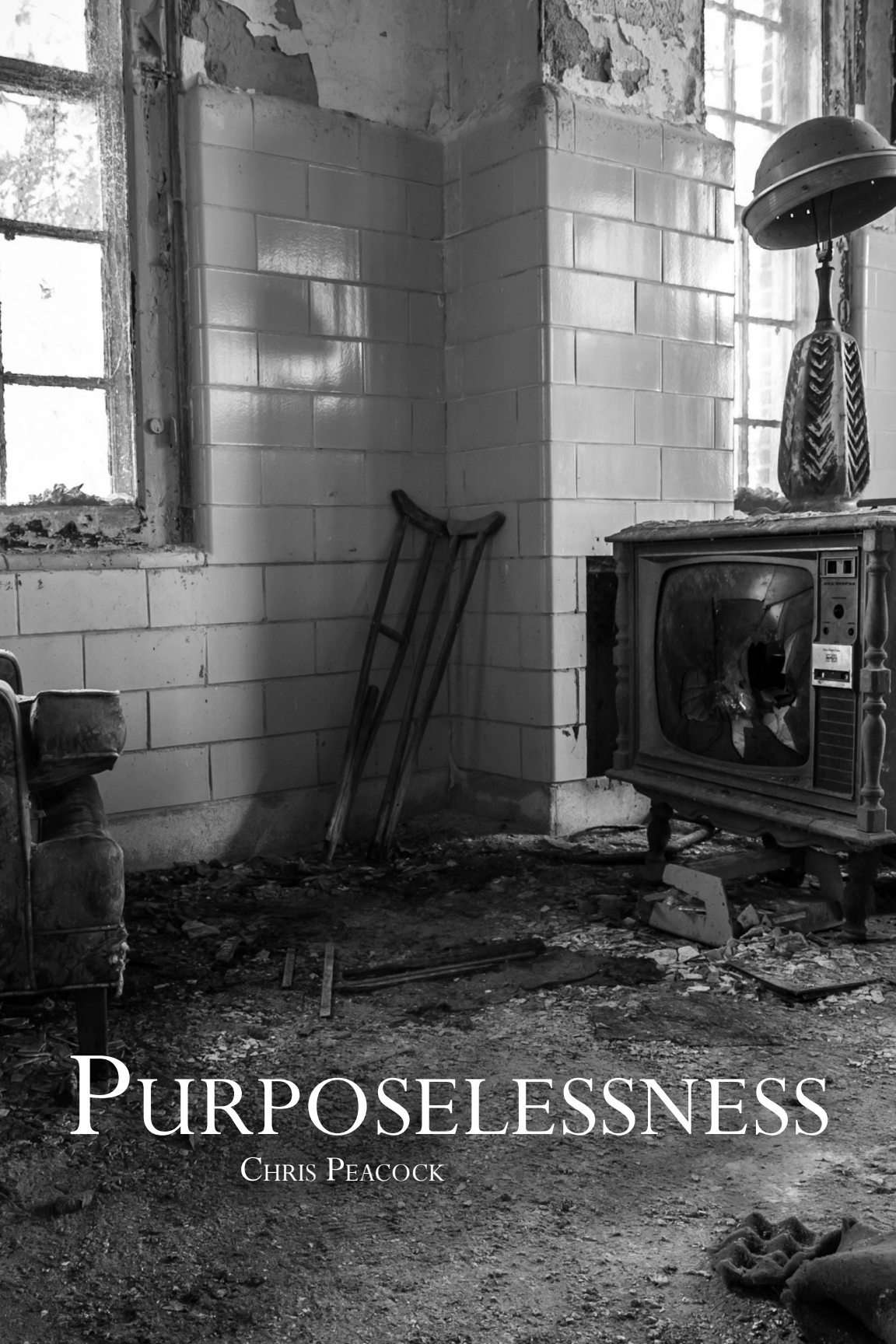
The next day you look at the new pages. For once you don't want to burn them or give up writing forever.

It's a start, you say to the room.

That's about it. In the months that follow you bend to the work, because it feels like hope, like grace—and because you know in your lying cheater's heart that sometimes a start is all we ever get.



*“These double exposure style photographic collages build portraits through shards of interlocking imagery and clever compositions.”*



# PURPOSELESSNESS

CHRIS PEACOCK

I'm the daughter whose father had never kept his hands  
To himself, and now I lay atop hospital beds.  
My mom is sick of smoking minerals, they call it rocks  
I thought her constant tampering with "drugs" was bound to stop.  
If my boyfriend kept me off his mind, he's bound to tick  
Just as much as what's inside of me, it's bound to kick  
I found the purpose in my life to be as dead as me  
And still I've yet to pass this tender age of but 13

I'm the boy whose mother, slaughtered by the neighbors here  
Our country battles in a fight I couldn't think as clear  
But still I tag along, I'm sure it's made for me  
The preacher told us of the virgins waiting, count to three  
I had the slightest clue the pressure of the vest I wore  
But with my lack of knowledge I thought best to not implore  
After that he said to pull the pin, praises to God  
I didn't know that Muslims practiced suicide at all

I'm the man to sit behind a desk and plot the camps  
How ruthless scouts of mine do out with such a peaceful plan  
The one's grew starry eyed, as fire's grew in height  
And when I burned them to their ashes, smiled with just delight  
I separated men and women, children all the same  
And in replace of letters, put numbers to their worthless names  
I lead my people to believing every word I spoke  
Behind that podium's exactly where that country broke

Why not just take a chance, and spread the message heard  
But I forgot that hope was gone before I'd say the word.



# REUNION

DREW A. BLANC

The last time I saw my father was in Grand Central Station. I was going from my grandmother's in the Adirondacks to a cottage on the Cape that my mother had rented, and I wrote my father that I would be in New York between trains for an hour and a half, and asked if we could have lunch together. His secretary wrote to say that he would meet me at the information booth at noon, and at twelve o'clock sharp I saw him coming through the crowd.

He was a stranger to me — my mother divorced him three years ago and I hadn't been with him since — but as soon as I saw him I felt that he was my father, my flesh and blood, my future and my doom. I knew that when I was grown I would be something like him; I would have to plan my campaigns within his limitations. He was a big, good-looking man, and I was terribly happy to see him again. He struck me on the back and shook my hand. "Hi, Charlie," he said, "Hi, boy. I'd like to take you up to my club, but it's in the Sixties, and if you have to catch an early train I guess we'd better get something to eat around here." He put his arm around me, and I smelled my father the way my mother sniffs a rose. It was a rich compound of whiskey and after shave lotion, shoe polish, woolens, and the rankness of a mature male. I hoped that someone would see us together. I wished that we could be photographed. I wanted some record of our having been together.

We went out of the station and up a side street to a restaurant. It was still early, and the place was empty. The bartender was quarreling with a delivery boy, and there was one very old waiter in a red coat down by the kitchen floor. We sat down and my father hailed the waiter in a loud voice.

"Kellner!" he shouted. "Garçon! Cameriere! You!"

His boisterousness in the empty restaurant seemed out of place.

"Could we have a little service here?" he shouted. "Chop—chop." Then he clapped his hands. This caught the waiter's attention, and he shuffled over to our table.

"Were you clapping your hands at me?" he asked.

"Calm down, calm down, Sommelier," my father said. "If it isn't too much to ask of you, if it wouldn't be too much above and beyond the call of duty, we would like a couple of Beefeater Gibsons."

"I don't like to be clapped at," the waiter said.

"I should have brought my whistle," my father said. "I have a whistle that is audible only to the ears of old waiters. Now, take out your little pad and your little pencil and see if you can get this straight: two Beefeater Gibsons. Repeat



after me: two Beefeater Gibsons.”

“I think you’d better go somewhere else,” the waiter said quietly.

“That,” said my father, “is one of the most brilliant suggestions I have ever heard. C’mon, Charlie, let’s get the hell out of here.”

I followed my father out of that restaurant and into another. He was not so boisterous this time. Our drinks came, and he cross questioned me about the baseball season. He then struck the edge of his empty glass with his knife and began shouting again.

“Garcon! Kellner! Cameriere! You! Could we trouble you to bring us two more of the same?”

“How old is the boy?”

“That is none of your God damned business.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” the waiter said, “but I won’t serve the boy another drink.”

“Well, I have some news for you,” my father said. “I have some very interesting news for you. This doesn’t happen to be the only restaurant in New York. They’ve opened another on the corner. C’mon, Charlie.”

He paid the bill, and I followed him out of that restaurant into another. Here the waiters wore pink jackets like hunting coats, and there was a lot of horse tack on the walls. We sat down, and my father began to shout again.

“Master of the hounds! Tallyhoo and all that sort of thing. We’d like a little something in the way of a stirrup cup. Namely, two Bibson Geefeaters.”

“Two Bibson Geefeaters?” the waiter asked, smiling.

“You know damned well what I want,” my father said angrily. “I want two Beefeater Gibsons, and make it snappy. Things have changed in jolly old England. So my friend the duke tells me. Let’s see what England can produce in the way of a cocktail.”

“This isn’t England,” the waiter said.

“Don’t argue with me,” my father said. “Just do as you’re told.”

“I just thought you might like to know where you are,” the waiter said.

“If there is one thing I cannot tolerate,” my father said, “it is an impudent domestic. C’mon, Charlie.”

The fourth place we went to was Italian.

“Per favore, possiamo avere due cocktail americani. Subito.”

The waiter left us and spoke with the captain, who came over to our table and said, “I’m sorry, sir, but this table is reserved.”

“All right,” my father said. “Get us another table.”

“All the tables are reserved,” the captain said.

“I get it,” my father said. “You don’t desire our patronage. Is that it? Well, the hell with you. Vada all’ inferno. Let’s go, Charlie.”

“I have to get my train,” I said.

“I’m sorry, sonny,” my father said. “I’m terribly sorry.” He put his arm around me and pressed me against him. “I’ll walk you back to the station. If there had only been time to go up to my club.”

“That’s all right, Daddy,” I said.

“I’ll get you a paper,” he said. “I’ll get you a paper to read on the train.”

Then he went up to a newsstand and said, “Kind sir, will you be good enough to favor me with one of your God damned, no good, ten cent afternoon papers?” The clerk turned away from him and stared at a magazine cover. “Is it asking too much, kind sir,” my father said, “is it asking too much for you to sell me one of your disgusting specimens of yellow journalism?”

“I have to go, Daddy,” I said. “It’s late.”

“Now, just wait a second, sonny,” he said. “Just wait a second. I want to get a rise out of this chap.”

“Goodbye, Daddy,” I said, and I went down the stairs and got my train, and that was the last time I saw my father.



# MONARCH

ANNE TENNA

For a solid hour, Kiki had been listening to the creaks and groans of her house at rest, resisting the impulse to leave her bed and climb into the wicker rocker in the nursery. This wasn't the first night she had promised Keith she'd stay in bed long enough to fall asleep. It was the first night she really meant to keep it, if she could. Keith's anxiety about her sleepless nights had been building to the point of him suggesting, while sautéing eggplant and tomatoes for his dinner, that she should consult with one of his colleagues – to perhaps, just possibly, consider medication, in the short term. Kiki knew if she could stay in bed for an entire night, whether or not she actually slept, it would relieve the pressure.

For the last twenty minutes, she'd been following his prescription – breathing deeply, abdominally, until her breathing became rhythmic and focused and deep, as he'd promised it would. Her fists, and then her jaw, unclenched. Her muscles and her mind relaxed as she silently repeated her mantra: let go let go let go let go. . . Soon, behind eyelids shut like blinds, slipping into the vast blackness, she visualized freedom and flight. But just as she pictured herself – a winged creature – lifting off into un-limitless sky, she banged into resistance – like a pane of glass, a window closing in front of her. She sat up.

Was Keith asleep? He was lying on his side, his back to her, on the far side of the bed. Keith liked to fall asleep with his legs draped heavily over hers, and what used to feel comforting now felt like a trap. Lately, she got into bed after him, keeping to the edge of her side of the bed. If he rolled toward her she told him it was too hot, and he retreated. Now, leaning across the gulf between them she felt the slow beat of his breath beneath the sheet, and saw that his eyes were closed. She considered waiting, just to be sure – she preferred to avoid a fight. All she wanted was peace. As a test, she lifted the sheet off her feet – he didn't stir. Good. Her sleeplessness was wearing him out. She doubted he would wake before his alarm went off, and if she returned to bed by then he wouldn't realize she'd been gone.

Across the hardwood floor Kiki tiptoed, barefoot, exiting the room, quietly closing the bedroom door behind her. Crossing the narrow hallway, she was surprised to find the door to the nursery closed tightly – she always left it open. When she turned the knob and pushed – the door stuck. She felt the dull pain of her teeth clenching, her jaw tightening. When they converted his meditation

room, Keith had layered too many coats of paint on the door and it had never opened properly. She pushed harder, and this time the door swung open. Moonlight shining on the branches of the budding magnolia blinked through the blinds hanging in front of a partially opened window. She paused for a moment in the silence, twisting her hair into a knot at the base of her neck. The motion of the door swinging open had set a flurry of butterflies to flight on the mobile Keith had tacked to the ceiling above the changing table. Kiki watched the butterflies cast ghostly shadows on the pale blue wall.

The mobile was Keith's idea, Kiki's creation. She had fallen in love with a butterfly mobile she saw in a Pottery Barn catalogue in the waiting room of the clinic the morning of her embryo transfer procedure. Making sure no one was watching, she ripped the page out of the catalogue, folded it, and placing it in the pocket of her jeans made a silent wish – a promise – to order one for the nursery if the procedure was a success. Weeks later, when she went online to order it, the mobile was sold out. Kiki and Keith had been shopping furnishings online together all that morning. A fierce snow and ice storm had blown in, and Keith, refusing to risk a car accident on slippery roads, insisted they shop from home.

"It's a bad omen, isn't it?" Kiki asked, her eyes flashing. "First the storm, now –"

"Don't be silly – that's crazy. You can make one. Why don't you? You're good at stuff like that. C'mon. It'll be fun, I promise," he said, taking her hand. She followed him upstairs.

All afternoon, in the snowy, gray light, while Keith prepped the walls and baseboards of his meditation room for painting, Kiki sat on a nest of floor pillows stenciling butterflies on cardstock, cutting them out, and stringing them with fishing line from a macramé ring she'd cut loose from a plant holder.

"What do you think?" she asked, holding the ring, making the butterflies dance.

"Perfect!" he said. "Where should we hang it?"

A chill blew through the blinds, and Kiki shivered in her t-shirt and sweat pants. Had Keith opened the window? When, and why? It was strange to think he'd been in the nursery without her there. Had he been meditating – in the nursery? It hadn't occurred to her that he might have resumed his practice, as if the room, unoccupied, reverted to its original purpose. As long as she'd lived with him, Keith had ritually opened a window before sitting in the center of this room, crossing his ankles, placing his hands on his knees, opening his palms, and closing his eyes.

She had taken a hot bath last night before getting into bed, to appease him – the first in many days. Could it have been then? She felt a dizzying stab of rage rise from her belly to back of her throat, and had to resist the urge to pick up the rocker and heave it across the room. Instead, she shoved the chair against the changing table, to steady it, stood on the seat cushion and reaching as high as she could, pulled the mobile loose with a jerk of her hand. She crossed the room, pulled up the blind, pushed out the screen, held her fist out the window, and let go.

Kiki heard the metallic chip of the cardinals outside the window a moment or so before she heard Keith's voice from the doorway. Her legs and hips ached from sleeping, curled up, on the carpet without a blanket. Her back was to the door. Without opening her eyes, she sensed his forced cheerfulness – masking concern, probably shock, alarm, even.

"Morning!" There was a pause, then, "Honey? It's morning." She wished he would be quiet. She wished he would kneel down beside her, stroke her hair, and let her be in the stillness.

"Couldn't sleep last night?" he asked, still standing in the doorway. "Wow. You've been busy. Jesus, where'd you put everything? Kiki?"

"The attic."

"How the hell did you get the crib through this door?" What does it matter, she wondered. "Kiki?"

"Piece by piece."

"Here," he said, and she felt a thin wave of heat as he knelt and placed a steaming mug near her hand. "You could've asked," he said, retreating to the doorway. "If you'd asked, I would have said leave it. Leave the room the way it is. 'Til we're ready –"

"I was ready."

"I mean to try, again. I mean, what's the point of leaving it empty?" It was no longer shock or concern or alarm his voice was masking, or trying to, it was anger. She heard him inhale, deeply, hold his breath, then sigh, loudly.

"I brought you some tea. It's time to get up." She didn't move. She was trying to focus on breathing, abdominally, but her breath rose quick and shallow from her breastbone. "Kiki, you promised."

"Yes...but..."

"What?"

"Promises...break."

“Not today. I wish you’d drink your tea—”

“And wishes aren’t granted. . .”

“KiKi, please. Get up.”

“Not today.”

“That’s what you said yesterday, and the day before that, and—”

“Just make the call.” Did she have to beg?

“No. I won’t call. People are sympathetic. But, they have their limits.” Yes, there are limits.

“I mean, they expect —”

“What do they expect, Keith?”

“Movement. A gradual return, that’s all, to some semblance of . . . No one expects you to put it behind you. But you can’t let it take over your life, either. People are worried about you. Your mother calls all day long. You don’t answer the phone.”

“Tell her to stop.” She sensed movement. He had stepped a few steps into the room, and for a moment, she hoped he would sit beside her. But he seemed to be keeping a safe distance, near the window.

“I talked to Joanne yesterday. She didn’t ask when you’re coming back —”

“Good.”

“She asked if you’re coming back.”

Kiki waited a moment before asking, “What’d you tell her?”

“That you promised — today.” Kiki wondered if he was fabricating the conversation, but, anyway, what did it matter? The back of her throat burned. “She’s not trying to pressure you, but the auction’s coming and the gallery’s nowhere near ready —” Right. No pressure. “She thinks it’s her fault. She’s afraid you’re avoiding her. Because she’s . . . showing.” Kiki made a guttural sound that was either a groan or a laugh.

“C’mon, Kiki. You can do this. You love your job. You don’t want to lose it.” She heard him lift the blind and felt the morning sunlight hit the room like an explosion. “Listen! The birds are singing. Spring’s here!” Kiki covered her ears with her hands, and when he spoke she heard the crack in his composure. “Okay. You’re not the only one, you know, who’s struggling here,” he said, loudly. “What if — what if I just gave up? Stopped going to work? Abandoned all my patients — everyone who needs me?” She turned toward him, looked up, and their eyes met. She touched the floor beside her with her palm of her hand, and his eyes darted away.

“That’s what you want? You won’t be satisfied until you drag me down to your —” “I have to drag you?”

“—Level of grief?”

“What do you know about my level of grief?” She spat, rolling over, turning her back on him.

“You know what I think? I’m not giving in to despair. ‘Cause, there’s always hope, Kiki. Hope is a living, breathing thing.”

“Kill it.”

“You can’t kill it! Hope is a . . . it’s . . . it’s an energy, a boundless, infinite energy. And, it can rise above loss, Kiki. It’s a force that can carry you, if you let it. You have to let it. That’s why I’m up. Dressed. Moving. Going through the motions. I’m grieving, but I’m also hoping,” he said, and, after a moment, “I’m wishing, you’d come.”

“Don’t.”

“A half day. Just try — see how you feel. I’ll make you breakfast. Go to the gallery. Have lunch with your mother. You might feel better, you know? Connecting? Letting somebody in? Like me. I miss you,” he said, and then, softly, “Do you miss me?”

“Desperately,” she whispered, but he couldn’t hear or read her lips.

“Lots of people miss you. We’re all waiting for you to come back —”

“Stop waiting.”

“Damn it, Kiki! You’re not the only one who — don’t think I don’t understand!”

“We have plenty of —”

“— illusions?”

“— choices! We’ll just keep trying.”

“We tried. . . and we tried. . . and we tried. . . and we . . . failed.”

“We didn’t fail, Kiki.”

“Okay. I failed.”

“You can’t think like that—”

“God failed.”

“Stop it! We were able to conceive! Three times. More, if you count the multiples.” She did. She counted them. “The process failed. But, we’re not defeated. We have resources, right? We said we’d try everything — anything. We just have to let go of . . . our expectations. We have to be creative — imagine a new way.”

“I’m barren.”

“Nobody thinks like that anymore.”

She did. She thought like that, at night, alone, in the rocker. She thought about the fact that she was turning forty next month, and she thought about her college years, her close calls, those inconvenient times when she prayed don't let me be pregnant, and how she felt blessed when her prayer was answered, like God was granting her a favor.

"We can try again," he said, "when the time is right."

"Time's up."

"When you want something as much as we do, there's always hope. Okay? Okay, Kiki? You're trying to get me to just give up, but I'm not. I'm not gonna give up!" She heard him push the window all the way open, and, after a moment, cry, "Look! Kiki! Do you see that? It's a sign! A sign from above!" She sat up, keeping her back to him.

"A butterfly! Right through our window!"

"Get rid of it."

"Look, Kiki! What magic!"

"Stop."

"A monarch, of all beautiful things. . ." He was still behind her and a breeze through the window blew a chill down her spine. "You can tell, you know how? Orange wings, white dots, yes, but the black lines have to be just so. Other butterflies pretend they're monarchs, to trick predators into thinking they're poisonous too. But this one –this is the real thing. I'll show you. Come see." Kiki's back stiffened, her throat closed.

"Imagine, the odds, finding its way, through our window, at this very moment."

"You can't make me go with you," she said, but he wasn't listening.

"Right when we need it the most. That's how it works, Kiki. You know, we could raise monarch butterflies." Again, she felt a stab of rage slicing the back of her throat. She stood up, and turning, saw his hands, cupped gently around something unseen, his arms reaching toward her.

"I want what I've got coming to me," she said, wildly, stepping towards him.

"We could raise them right here in this very room."

"Every poisonous morsel. . ."

"All you need is milk weed, for the larva, the right light, temperature, and room for flight. . ."

"And I will have it."

"It's possible!"

She took another step toward him. "Let it go."

"Ah, you know the legend?"

She pointed to the window. "Let it go!"

"Yes! If anyone desires a wish to come true, they must capture a butterfly and whisper the wish to it." Keith bent his moist lips to his cupped hands.

"Don't you dare!" she grabbed at his hand, but he stepped back, and, dodging her, whispered into his hands before she could stop him, then stretched his cupped hands toward the window.

"Since they make not a sound they can't tell the wish to anyone but the Great Spirit –"

She slapped desperately at his hands. "Stop it, or I swear I'll –"

"So, by making the wish – get out of my way, Kiki! – and releasing the butterfly, it will be taken to the heavens and – you can't stop me, Kiki! – the wish will be taken to the heavens and –" he gasped, as Kiki pried open his hands, and before he could stop her, pressed her hands into his, mashing the monarch, again and again, into his open palms. Keith stared, his mouth open in shock, as Kiki slowly, deliberately, stuffed the lifeless creature into her mouth, and when she finished devouring it, licked her hands.

". . . granted," Keith whispered, finishing his sentence, the word tumbling out of his mouth like something broken.

Kiki watched Keith sink to the carpet on his knees, then fall sideways into a fetal position. She went to the window, closed and locked it. She let the blind drop, and, twisting the slats shut, sealed the room in darkness. She knelt on the floor beside him, and lay down, pressing her breast against his back, letting her arm dangle across his chest. Draping her leg over his, she began rocking, slowly, back and forth, and she kept rocking and until they were both asleep.



# EL SUEÑO DE LA RAZÓN

EILEEN ULICK

Above the sleeping artist, yawning  
Skull-faced bats and man-owls stir.  
They whirl and unwind in jittery darkness:  
The sleep of reason begets monsters.

What sings reason to sleep?  
Loss and terror, loneliness and grief.  
What ripe words do the mad reap?  
Night lies, lullabies, needling ballads:

If light had hands, my love,  
It would choke and kill us;  
If light gleamed like wheat,  
It would never fill us;

If light knew good doctors  
You'd die from a mad dog's bite;  
If light wore an ermine coat,  
You'd die of cold on a winter night.

# WHO'S IRISH?

MAY O'NAYS

In China, people say mixed children are supposed to be smart, and definitely my granddaughter Sophie is smart. But Sophie is wild, Sophie is not like my daughter Natalie, or like me. I am work hard my whole life, and fierce besides. My husband always used to say he is afraid of me, and in our restaurant, busboys and cooks all afraid of me too. Even the gang members come for protection money, they try to talk to my husband. When I am there, they stay away. If they come by mistake, they pretend they are come to eat. They hide behind the menu, they order a lot of food. They talk about their mothers. Oh, my mother have some arthritis, need to take herbal medicine, they say. Oh, my mother getting old, her hair all white now.

I say, Your mother's hair used to be white, but since she dye it, it become black again. Why don't you go home once in a while and take a look? I tell them, Confucius say a filial son knows what color his mother's hair is.

My daughter is fierce too, she is vice president in the bank now. Her new house is big enough for everybody to have their own room, including me. But Sophie take after Natalie's husband's family, their name is Shea. Irish. I always thought Irish people are like Chinese people, work so hard on the railroad, but now I know why the Chinese beat the Irish. Of course, not all Irish are like the Shea family, of course not. My daughter tell me I should not say Irish this, Irish that.

How do you like it when people say the Chinese this, the Chinese that? she say.

You know, the British call the Irish heathen, just like they call the Chinese, she say.

You think the Opium War was bad, how would you like to live right next door to the British? she say.

And that is that. My daughter have a funny habit when she win an argument, she take a sip of something and look away, so the other person is not embarrassed. So I am not embarrassed. I do not call anybody anything either. I just happen to mention about the Shea family, an interesting fact: four brothers in the family, and not one of them work. The mother, Bess, have a job before she got sick, she was executive secretary in a big company. She is handle everything for a big shot, you would be surprised how complicated her job is, not just type this, type that. Now she is a nice woman with a clean house. But her boys, every one of them is on welfare, or so-called severance pay, or so-called disability pay. Something. They say they cannot find work, this is not the economy of the fifties, but I say, Even the black people doing better these days, some of them

live so fancy, you'd be surprised. Why the Shea family have so much trouble? They are white people, they speak English. When I come to this country, I have no money and do not speak English. But my husband and I own our restaurant before he die. Free and clear, no mortgage. Of course, I understand I am just lucky, come from a country where the food is popular all over the world. I understand it is not the Shea family's fault they come from a country where everything is boiled.

Still, I say.

She's right, we should broaden our horizons, say one brother, Jim, at Thanksgiving. Forget about the car business. Think about egg rolls.

Pad thai, say another brother, Mike. I'm going to make my fortune in pad thai. It's going to be the new pizza.

I say, You people too picky about what you sell. Selling egg rolls not good enough for you, but at least my husband and I can say, We made it. What can you say? Tell me. What can you say?

Everybody chew their tough turkey.

I especially cannot understand my daughter's husband John, who has no job but cannot take care of Sophie either. Because he is a man, he say, and that's the end of the sentence.

Plain boiled food, plain boiled thinking. Even his name is plain boiled: John. Maybe because I grew up with black bean sauce and hoisin sauce and garlic sauce, I always feel something is missing when my son-in-law talk.

But, okay: so my son-in-law can be man, I am baby-sitter. Six hours a day, same as the old sitter, crazy Amy, who quit. This is not so easy, now that I am sixty-eight, Chinese age almost seventy. Still, I try. In China, daughter take care of mother. Here it is the other way around. Mother help daughter, mother ask, Anything else I can do? Otherwise daughter complain mother is not supportive. I tell daughter, We do not have this word in Chinese, supportive. But my daughter too busy to listen, she has to go to meeting, she has to write memo while her husband go to the gym to be a man. My daughter say otherwise he will be depressed. Seems like all his life he has this trouble, depression.

No one wants to hire someone who is depressed, she say. It is important for him to keep his spirits up.

Beautiful wife, beautiful daughter, beautiful house, oven can clean itself automatically. No money left over, because only one income, but lucky enough, got the baby-sitter for free. If John lived in China, he would be very happy. But

he is not happy. Even at the gym things go wrong. One day, he pull a muscle. Another day, weight room too crowded. Always something.

Until finally, hooray, he has a job. Then he feel pressure.

I need to concentrate, he say. I need to focus.

He is going to work for insurance company. Salesman job. A paycheck, he say, and at least he will wear clothes instead of gym shorts. My daughter buy him some special candy bars from the health-food store. They say THINK! on them, and are supposed to help John think.

John is a good-looking boy, you have to say that, especially now that he shave so you can see his face.

I am an old man in a young man's game, say John.

I will need a new suit, say John.

This time I am not going to shoot myself in the foot, say John.

Good, I say.

She means to be supportive, my daughter say. Don't start the send her back to China thing, because we can't.

Sophie is three years old American age, but already I see her nice Chinese side swallowed up by her wild Shea side. She looks like mostly Chinese. Beautiful black hair, beautiful black eyes. Nose perfect size, not so flat looks like something fell down, not so large looks like some big deal got stuck in wrong face. Everything just right, only her skin is a brown surprise to John's family. So brown, they say. Even John say it. She never goes in the sun, still she is that color, he say. Brown. They say, Nothing the matter with brown. They are just surprised. So brown. Nattie is not that brown, they say. They say, It seems like Sophie should be a color in between Nattie and John. Seems funny, a girl named Sophie Shea be brown. But she is brown, maybe her name should be Sophie Brown. She never go in the sun, still she is that color, they say. Nothing the matter with brown. They are just surprised.

The Shea family talk is like this sometimes, going around and around like a Christmas-tree train.

Maybe John is not her father, I say one day, to stop the train. And sure enough, train wreck. None of the brothers ever say the word brown to me again.

Instead, John's mother, Bess, say, I hope you are not offended.

She say, I did my best on those boys. But raising four boys with no father is no picnic.



You have a beautiful family, I say.  
I'm getting old, she say.  
You deserve a rest, I say. Too many boys make you old.  
I never had a daughter, she say. You have a daughter.  
I have a daughter, I say. Chinese people don't think a daughter is so great,  
but you're right. I have a daughter.  
I was never against the marriage, you know, she say. I never thought John  
was marrying down. I always thought Nattie was just as good as white.  
I was never against the marriage either, I say. I just wonder if they look  
at the whole problem.  
Of course you pointed out the problem, you are a mother, she say. And now we  
both have a granddaughter. A little brown granddaughter, she is so precious to me.  
I laugh. A little brown granddaughter, I say. To tell you the truth, I don't  
know how she came out so brown.  
We laugh some more. These days Bess need a walker to walk. She take so  
many pills, she need two glasses of water to get them all down. Her favorite TV  
show is about bloopers, and she love her bird feeder. All day long, she can watch  
that bird feeder, like a cat.  
I can't wait for her to grow up, Bess say. I could use some female company.  
Too many boys, I say.  
Boys are fine, she say. But they do surround you after a while.  
You should take a break, come live with us, I say. Lots of girls at our house.  
Be careful what you offer, say Bess with a wink. Where I come from, people  
mean for you to move in when they say a thing like that.

Nothing the matter with Sophie's outside, that's the truth. It is inside that she is  
like not any Chinese girl I ever see. We go to the park, and this is what she does. She  
stand up in the stroller. She take off all her clothes and throw them in the fountain.

Sophie! I say. Stop!  
But she just laugh like a crazy person. Before I take over as baby-sitter,  
Sophie has that crazy-person sitter, Amy the guitar player. My daughter  
thought this Amy very creative—another word we do not talk about in China. In  
China, we talk about whether we have difficulty or no difficulty. We talk about  
whether life is bitter or not bitter. In America, all day long, people talk about  
creative. Never mind that I cannot even look at this Amy, with her shirt so short

that her belly button showing. This Amy think Sophie should love her body. So  
when Sophie take off her diaper, Amy laugh. When Sophie run around naked, Amy  
say she wouldn't want to wear a diaper either. When Sophie go shu—shu in her lap,  
Amy laugh and say there are no germs in pee. When Sophie take off her shoes, Amy  
say bare feet is best, even the pediatrician say so. That is why Sophie now walk around  
with no shoes like a beggar child. Also why Sophie love to take off her clothes.

Turn around! say the boys in the park. Let's see that ass!  
Of course, Sophie does not understand. Sophie clap her hands, I am the only  
one to say, No! This is not a game.

It has nothing to do with John's family, my daughter say. Amy was  
too permissive, that's all.

But I think if Sophie was not wild inside, she would not take off her shoes  
and clothes to begin with.

You never take off your clothes when you were little, I say. All my Chinese  
friends had babies, I never saw one of them act wild like that.

Look, my daughter say. I have a big presentation tomorrow.  
John and my daughter agree Sophie is a problem, but they don't know what to do.  
You spank her, she'll stop, I say another day.  
But they say, Oh no.

In America, parents not supposed to spank the child.  
It gives them low self-esteem, my daughter say. And that leads to problems  
later, as I happen to know.

My daughter never have big presentation the next day when the  
subject of spanking come up.

I don't want you to touch Sophie, she say. No spanking, period.  
Don't tell me what to do, I say.  
I'm not telling you what to do, say my daughter. I'm telling you how I feel.  
I am not your servant, I say. Don't you dare talk to me like that.

My daughter have another funny habit when she lose an argument.  
She spread out all her fingers and look at them, as if she like to make sure  
they are still there.

My daughter is fierce like me, but she and John think it is better to explain  
to Sophie that clothes are a good idea. This is not so hard in the cold weather. In  
the warm weather, it is very hard.

Use your words, my daughter say. That's what we tell Sophie. How about if  
you set a good example?

As if good example mean anything to Sophie. I am so fierce, the gang members who used to come to the restaurant all afraid of me, but Sophie is not afraid.

I say, Sophie, if you take off your clothes, no snack.

I say, Sophie, if you take off your clothes, no lunch.

I say, Sophie, if you take off your clothes, no park.

Pretty soon we are stay home all day, and by the end of six hours she still did not have one thing to eat. You never saw a child stubborn like that.

I'm hungry! she cry when my daughter come home.

What's the matter, doesn't your grandmother feed you? My daughter laugh.

No! Sophie say. She doesn't feed me anything!

My daughter laugh again. Here you go, she say.

She say to John, Sophie must be growing.

Growing like a weed, I say.

Still Sophie take off her clothes, until one day I spank her. Not too hard, but she cry and cry, and when I tell her if she doesn't put her clothes back on I'll spank her again, she put her clothes back on. Then I tell her she is good girl, and give her some food to eat. The next day we go to the park and, like a nice Chinese girl, she does not take off her clothes.

She stop taking off her clothes, I report. Finally!

How did you do it? my daughter ask.

After twenty—eight years experience with you, I guess I learn something, I say.

It must have been a phase, John say, and his voice is suddenly like an expert.

His voice is like an expert about everything these days, now that he carry a leather briefcase, and wear shiny shoes, and can go shopping for a new car. On the company, he say. The company will pay for it, but he will be able to drive it whenever he want.

A free car, he say. How do you like that?

It's good to see you in the saddle again, my daughter say. Some of your family patterns are scary.

At least I don't drink, he say. He say, And I'm not the only one with scary family patterns.

That's for sure, say my daughter.

Everyone is happy. Even I am happy, because there is more trouble with Sophie, but now I think I can help her Chinese side fight against her wild side. I teach her to eat food with fork or spoon or chopsticks, she cannot just grab into the middle

of a bowl of noodles. I teach her not to play with garbage cans. Sometimes I spank her, but not too often, and not too hard.

Still, there are problems. Sophie like to climb everything. If there is a railing, she is never next to it. Always she is on top of it. Also, Sophie like to hit the mummies of her friends. She learn this from her playground best friend, Sinbad, who is four. Sinbad wear army clothes every day and like to ambush his mommy. He is the one who dug a big hole under the play structure, a foxhole he call it, all by himself. Very hardworking. Now he wait in the foxhole with a shovel full of wet sand. When his mommy come, he throw it right at her.

Oh, it's all right, his mommy say. You can't get rid of war games, it's part of their imaginative play. All the boys go through it.

Also, he like to kick his mommy, and one day he tell Sophie to kick his mommy too.

I wish this story is not true.

Kick her, kick her! Sinbad say.

Sophie kick her. A little kick, as if she just so happened was swinging her little leg and didn't realize that big mommy leg was in the way. Still I spank Sophie and make Sophie say sorry, and what does the mommy say?

Really, it's all right, she say. It didn't hurt.

After that, Sophie learn she can attack mummies in the playground, and some will say, Stop, but others will say, Oh, she didn't mean it, especially if they realize Sophie will be punished.

This is how, one day, bigger trouble come. The bigger trouble start when Sophie hide in the foxhole with that shovel full of sand. She wait, and when I come look for her, she throw it at me. All over my nice clean clothes.

Did you ever see a Chinese girl act this way?

Sophie! I say. Come out of there, say you're sorry.

But she does not come out. Instead, she laugh. Naaah, naah—na, naaa—naaa, she say.

I am not exaggerate: millions of children in China, not one act like this.

Sophie! I say. Now! Come out now!

But she know she is in big trouble. She know if she come out, what will happen next. So she does not come out. I am sixty—eight, Chinese age almost seventy, how can I crawl under there to catch her? Impossible. So I yell, yell, yell, and what happen? Nothing. A Chinese mother would help, but American

mothers, they look at you, they shake their head, they go home. And, of course, a Chinese child would give up, but not Sophie.

I hate you! she yell. I hate you, Meanie!

Meanie is my new name these days.

Long time this goes on, long long time. The foxhole is deep, you cannot see too much, you don't know where is the bottom. You cannot hear too much either. If she does not yell, you cannot even know she is still there or not. After a while, getting cold out, getting dark out. No one left in the playground, only us.

Sophie, I say. How did you become stubborn like this? I am go home without you now.

I try to use a stick, chase her out of there, and once or twice I hit her, but still she does not come out. So finally I leave. I go outside the gate.

Bye—bye! I say. I'm go home now.

But still she does not come out and does not come out. Now it is dinnertime, the sky is black. I think I should maybe go get help, but how can I leave a little girl by herself in the playground? A bad man could come. A rat could come. I go back in to see what is happen to Sophie. What if she have a shovel and is making a tunnel to escape?

Sophie! I say.

No answer.

Sophie!

I don't know if she is alive. I don't know if she is fall asleep down there. If she is crying, I cannot hear her.

So I take the stick and poke.

Sophie! I say. I promise I no hit you. If you come out, I give you a lollipop.

No answer. By now I worried. What to do, what to do, what to do? I poke some more, even harder, so that I am poking and poking when my daughter and John suddenly appear.

What are you doing? What is going on? say my daughter.

Put down that stick! say my daughter.

You are crazy! say my daughter.

John wiggle under the structure, into the foxhole, to rescue Sophie.

She fell asleep, say John the expert. She's okay. That is one big hole.

Now Sophie is crying and crying.

Sophie, my daughter say, hugging her. Are you okay, peanut? Are you okay?

She's just scared, say John.

Are you okay? I say too. I don't know what happen, I say.

She's okay, say John. He is not like my daughter, full of questions. He is full of answers until we get home and can see by the lamplight.

Will you look at her? he yell then. What the hell happened?

Bruises all over her brown skin, and a swollen—up eye.

You are crazy! say my daughter. Look at what you did! You are crazy!

I try very hard, I say.

How could you use a stick? I told you to use your words!

She is hard to handle, I say.

She's three years old! You cannot use a stick! say my daughter.

She is not like any Chinese girl I ever saw, I say.

I brush some sand off my clothes. Sophie's clothes are dirty too, but at least she has her clothes on.

Has she done this before? ask my daughter. Has she hit you before?

She hits me all the time, Sophie say, eating ice cream.

Your family, say John.

Believe me, say my daughter.

A daughter I have, a beautiful daughter. I took care of her when she could not hold her head up. I took care of her before she could argue with me, when she was a little girl with two pigtails, one of them always crooked. I took care of her when we have to escape from China, I took care of her when suddenly we live in a country with cars everywhere, if you are not careful your little girl get run over. When my husband die, I promise him I will keep the family together, even though it was just two of us, hardly a family at all.

But now my daughter take me around to look at apartments. After all, I can cook, I can clean, there's no reason I cannot live by myself, all I need is a telephone. Of course, she is sorry. Sometimes she cry, I am the one to say everything will be okay. She say she have no choice, she doesn't want to end up divorced. I say divorce is terrible, I don't know who invented this terrible idea. Instead of live with a telephone, though, surprise, I come to live with Bess. Imagine that. Bess make an offer and, sure enough, where she come from, people mean for you to move in when they say things like that. A crazy idea, go to live with someone else's family, but she like to have some female company, not like my daughter, who does not believe in company. These days when my daughter visit, she does not bring Sophie. Bess say we should give Nattie time, we will see

Sophie again soon. But seems like my daughter have more presentation than ever before, every time she come she have to leave.

I have a family to support, she say, and her voice is heavy, as if soaking wet. I have a young daughter and a depressed husband and no one to turn to.

When she say no one to turn to, she mean me.

These days my beautiful daughter is so tired she can just sit there in a chair and fall asleep. John lost his job again, already, but still they rather hire a baby-sitter than ask me to help, even they can't afford it. Of course, the new baby-sitter is much younger, can run around. I don't know if Sophie these days is wild or not wild. She call me Meanie, but she like to kiss me too, sometimes. I remember that every time I see a child on TV. Sophie like to grab my hair, a fistful in each hand, and then kiss me smack on the nose. I never see any other child kiss that way.

The satellite TV has so many channels, more channels than I can count, including a Chinese channel from the mainland and a Chinese channel from Taiwan, but most of the time I watch bloopers with Bess. Also, I watch the bird feeder—so many, many kinds of birds come. The Shea sons hang around all the time, asking when will I go home, but Bess tell them, Get lost.

She's a permanent resident, say Bess. She isn't going anywhere.

Then she wink at me, and switch the channel with the remote control.

Of course, I shouldn't say Irish this, Irish that, especially now I am become honorary Irish myself, according to Bess. Me! Who's Irish? I say, and she laugh. All the same, if I could mention one thing about some of the Irish, not all of them of course, I like to mention this: Their talk just stick. I don't know how Bess Shea learn to use her words, but sometimes I hear what she say a long time later. Permanent resident. Not going anywhere. Over and over I hear it, the voice of Bess.



*“The surreal nature of these images gives me license to explore metaphor and situations of heightened reality. I can be expressive, playful, shocking or literal.”*



# 32 YEAR-OLD DAY TRIPPER

GORDEN SHAUERS



I'm thirty-two and she's eighteen, and... every time I say that to myself, it just always sounds so boring.

I'm not yet thirty-three, and she's still eighteen... that'll do.

The two of us are simply friends; nothing more, nothing less. I have a wife, and she has no less than six boyfriends. On weekdays she goes out with these six boyfriends, and one Sunday a month she goes out with me. The other Sundays she watches TV at home. She's as cute as a walrus when she's watching TV.

She was born in 1963, the same year President Kennedy was shot and killed. And the first time I asked a girl out on a date. And the popular song at the time was... Cliff Richard's "Summer Holiday"?

Well, whatever.

At any rate, that's the sort of year she was born into.

That I would be going on dates with a girl born that year would have been inconceivable then. Even now it feels impossible. Like going to the other side of the moon to have a smoke.

The general consensus of our peers is that "Young girls are boring, man!" Nevertheless, these very same guys date young girls too, all the time. So do you think they eventually discover young girls that aren't boring? Nah, it doesn't mean that at all. It's actually the boringness of the girls that attracts them. They're just playing a complicated game, a game they honestly enjoy. A game where they wash their faces with buckets full of the young girls' boredom water, while they don't let their lady friends have a single drop.

At least, that's how it seems to me.

In truth, nine girls out of ten are boring things. However, girls don't realize that. Girls are young, beautiful, and full of curiosity. The boringness of their own selves is completely unrelated to the things that young girls are thinking about.

Yeesh.

I have nothing to criticize them for, and again, no reason to dislike them. On the contrary, I like girls. Girls make me remember the times when I was a boring young man. That is, how should I put it, quite wonderful.

"Hey, do you think you'd ever want to be eighteen again?" she asked me.

"No way," I replied. "I don't wanna go back." It looked like she didn't quite get my answer.

"Don't wanna go back... really?"

“Of course.”

“Why?”

“Cause I’m fine the way I am now.”

She thought about this for some time while resting her chin in her hands at the table, and while she pondered she spun a clinking spoon in her coffee cup. “I don’t believe you.”

“You better believe it.”

“But isn’t being young wonderful?”

“Probably.”

“So why is it better now?”

“Because once is enough.”

“It’s not enough for me.”

“But you’re still eighteen.”

“Hmm.”

I caught the attention of the waiter and asked for a second beer. Outside it was raining, and from the window you could see Yokohama Port.

“Hey, what did you think about when you were eighteen?”

“Sleeping with girls.”

“What else?”

“That’s it.”

She giggled after taking a sip of coffee. “So, did it turn out well?”

“There were things that turned out well and things that didn’t turn out so well. Of course, there were more things that didn’t turn out well, I guess.”

“How many girls did you sleep with?”

“I’m not counting.”

“Really?”

“I don’t wanna count.”

“If I were a guy I’d definitely count. Isn’t it fun?”

There are times when it seems to me that it might not be so bad to be eighteen again. However, when I try to think of what the first thing I’d do if I was eighteen again, I can’t come up with a single idea.

Or maybe I’ll end up dating charming thirty–two year old women. That wouldn’t be so bad.

“Do you ever think you’d want to be eighteen again?” I’ll ask.

“Hmm, let me see.” She’ll grin and pretend to think about it. “Nope. Doubt it.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

“I don’t get it,” I’ll say. “Everyone says that being young is a wonderful thing.”

“Yeah, it is wonderful.”

“Then why don’t you want to?”

“You’ll understand when you’re older.”

Of course at thirty–two, if I skip even a week of running, my stomach flab starts getting conspicuous. I can’t be eighteen again. That’s obvious.

After I finish my morning run, I always drink a can of vegetable juice, lie on my side and put on “Day Tripper” by the Beatles.

“Dayyyy–ay–ay tripper!”

When listening to that song, I start feeling like I’m sitting on a train. Telephone poles, train stations, tunnels, bridges, cows, horses, smoke stacks, garbage, steadily they all pass by, one after the other. Scenery that never changed, no matter where I was. Though in the old days, it seemed like the scenery was incredibly beautiful.

Only the person sitting next to me would change. This time, the one sitting next to me is the eighteen year old girl. I’m in the window seat, she in the aisle seat.

“Would you like to change seats?” I’ll say.

“Thanks,” she says. “You’re too kind.”

It’s not a matter of kindness, I say with a bitter laugh. It’s just that I’m much more used to boredom than you.

A 32 year-old day tripper sick of counting the telephone poles.

# A GIFT REJECTED

RICHARD LIPPS



**K**aren's not fat anymore. When did that happen? Was she fat last week? I couldn't remember, but about half of her was missing. I perched on the edge of the tub keeping her company while she got prettied up for her rehearsal. She'd been chosen to sing a soprano solo in "Silver Bells." I didn't even know she was in the choir until she told me about her solo. I can't imagine having the nerve to sing in front of hundreds of people. I'd probably pee my pants.

I watched her dot in her contact lenses like an expert. Her long black hair, straight and fine, fanned across her V-shaped back; her clear face reflected back at me, so smooth and white, it reminded me of Grandma's fragile porcelain pitcher. She dabbed Shalimar on her graceful neck with the tip of her long white finger, and I gave my stubby fingers a dirty look. I'm dark, short, and sturdy like Mom. Once three or four years ago when I was still a little kid, Karen pointed out that I was built just like Laura Ingalls Wilder. That made me feel better.

I liked the way Karen's royal-blue floor-length satin robe rustled as she moved, the robe she'd bought on sale at an expensive department store downtown. Dad had given her money for school clothes and she'd come home instead with this robe and gold slippers. He was furious.

When Dad gets mad, it feels like the dictionary has exploded in your face: words, words, words, all carefully and precisely e-nun-ci-ated (one of his favorites). He used words on Karen like "illogical" and "incomprehensible," practically yelling, his face getting redder and redder. He pushed and pushed, trying to force her to admit she was wrong, but she refused. I'm always amazed at how stubborn Karen can be when she's under attack from Dad's fire hose blast of words. She's the only one in the family who can stand up to him, including Mom.

"Your truth is the only truth you recognize," Karen argued. She sounded strong, but I could tell from her face that she was about to cry. "My logic is just as good as yours."

Karen wouldn't take the robe back, and Dad said he wouldn't give her any more money. She said she didn't want any. I saw Mom try to slip her a twenty-dollar bill for shoes, but Karen pushed it away. When I shop, I look for the cheapest, plainest, most practical clothes I can find.

"Dad prowls through the house like a red-eyed grizzly in April," Karen complained to me. "He hates me. He and Mom have rejected me and criticized me all my life." Karen often said stuff like that to me. "Nothing I do is good enough for them. They're cold and angry and punitive." She had my sympathy,

but I wondered what Mom and Dad would answer back in their defense. I think they'd deny it, especially Mom. Of course, I'll never know because they don't talk to me the way Karen does.

I puzzled over all these arguments and accusations as I watched Karen outline her lips in red. Mom hardly ever wears makeup and I don't know how Karen learned, but obviously, she's a pro. With her tiny brushes and pots of color she turned herself into some kind of drop-dead gorgeous movie star. "You coming to my concert?" she asked, blotting her lips on a square of toilet paper.

"Sure," I said, "if Mom or Dad'll take me. Aren't you nervous?"

"I'm scared to death."

We smiled at each other. I think Karen's the most honest person in our family, even more honest than Dad.

I pinched off two shiny green needles and crushed them between my fingers. I love that sharp, strong scent. Our Christmas tree stood more than six feet high with thick branches all around—no gaps anywhere. What a prize! The twins and I helped Dad pick it out and get it all set up in its red and green metal stand. I felt satisfied as I stepped back to admire it, bits of bark and sap sticky on my fingers. Mom talked about a family tree—decorating party, but Dad said, "Nope. I've done my duty. You kids decorate it. I'm taking your mother out for dinner and a movie."

When Mom hesitated, he said, "If you don't go with me, I'll find some gorgeous blonde who'd like my attention."

She said, "Oh. Well, in that case . . ." and got her coat. I figure it's only right that they should spend some time together, but it seems like we never do anything much as a family. It's either the kids and Mom, or Dad and Mom, but never all of us together. I guess that's because the only company Dad enjoys is Mom's. I don't understand why, and it hurts my feelings. He must think we're boring.

After Mom and Dad left, Karen and I got to work, first untangling the strings of lights and wrapping them around the tree and then, when Karen was finally satisfied, the fun part—hanging the bulbs.

Peter lay on the couch, throwing tinsel at the tree.

"Come on, Peter," I begged, "won't you help?"

"I'm doing the tinsel," he said with a sly grin, glancing sideways at Karen.

I think he might have been trying to make her mad. Or maybe he was just having fun his own way. The twins saw what Peter was doing, and they started throwing tinsel, too. Karen frowned at all three of them but didn't say anything.

"Come on, guys, do it right," I pleaded. I wanted the tree to look nice, but mostly I didn't want Karen to get upset.

"Hey! This is the best tinsel job you'll see anywhere," Peter said, wadding up a glob and lobbing it into my hair. I pounced on him and gave his ear a fake tweak.

"Stop it! Stop it! You're hurting me," he howled.

I knew he was only kidding. "Say 'uncle'" I demanded, twisting a little harder.

He grabbed my wrist and forced me to my knees. "Uncle," he groaned, stuffing tinsel into my mouth. I landed my elbow in his ribs and he let me scramble away. "You've killed me," he moaned, clutching his ribs. "I'm telling Mom and Dad when they get home."

"You'd better not," I threatened, "or you'll find yourself with a fat lip."

"Oh no, please, not that," he said with a fake whimper and fired another wad of tinsel at me.

Laughing, I glanced over at Karen. Her eyes burned bitter, sort of hollow and sad. She turned away and went back to hanging bulbs. She and Peter don't horse around much. When they fight, it's always for real. Karen has a small white scar above her eye where Peter hit her with a rock, and Peter has a dark spot between his shoulder blades where Karen stabbed him with a pencil. Dad has spanked them more than once for fighting, so they usually only fight when he isn't around. I don't understand why Peter "despises" Karen (her word for it) or why Karen drives him crazy with her constant criticizing.

When I saw that hollow look in Karen's eyes, I shivered. I didn't feel like decorating the tree anymore.

My taste buds sat up and barked with joy at every bite of Mom's good cooking. I'd already buttered my second helping of roasted potatoes and heaped more baked apples and pork onto my plate when I asked, "When's your concert, Karen?"

"Next Wednesday night. It starts at seven. You're all invited to come if you want to. I don't want you to feel obligated. If you don't want to come, don't." She stared around the table at us all, her head erect.

"Well now, sweetheart," said Dad, "do you really mean that?" He reached for the chipped plate of carrot sticks and picked off a handful. "Wouldn't you like us to come for your sake?"

"I don't want you to come just for me."

"Of course we will," said Mom.

"Only if you really want to," Karen insisted.



“If you want us to come for your sake, we’ll come,” Dad said. “But let’s be honest, Ellen. A high school choir isn’t what I’d choose to hear. We’d only go because Karen wanted us to go.”

As Dad spoke, I cringed.

“Then stay home,” Karen said. She abruptly left the table with most of her dinner still on her plate.

A fierce wind howled. I felt the house shake as a winter storm struck with fury.

Dad and Karen were fighting in the kitchen. I huddled on the couch, trapped in the living room. I wished I could run away, but it was freezing outside and an icy wind rattled the windows. I couldn’t escape without my coat, but it was hanging in the utility room, just beyond the kitchen. No way was I going to walk through the kitchen.

I didn’t hear how the fight started. Maybe Dad had been on the prowl and Karen had gotten in his way. The fight was a bad one, though, and I had this horrible feeling it would end in disaster for Karen. She was standing up to him, as usual. Too honest to hide her feelings, too brave to shrink from his anger, too outspoken for her own good.

Now Karen was yelling between sobs and frantic catches of breath, “You’re selfish and tyrannical. Why do you think you’re always right? Why do things always have to be your way?”

I shriveled. I knew she’d gone too far. How did she dare face him, his thin lips pulled tightly together, his blazing eyes? He really did look like a red-eyed grizzly bear.

“I’m the boss in this house. I’ll not have you talking like that to me. As long as you live in my house you’ll do as I say.”

“That’s just it,” Karen answered back, trembling, pacing around the kitchen, her face on fire. “We always have to do it your way or we’re out. You think you’re always right, like you’re the only one in this family who counts. We have to agree or we’re out. Well, I won’t agree with you. You’re the one who’s wrong. You can’t see things any other way because you don’t want to.”

Dad grabbed a kitchen chair and shoved it against the wall. “You’ve stepped over the line, young lady. I’m not going to have it.” As he spoke, he was unbuckling his belt.

I tried to shrink to nothing. I heard a hysterical sob catch in Karen’s throat.

I stared at those long white fingers pulling the leather belt from its loops, and I

shook all over, sick. I froze, the kitchen chair shoved against the wall in full view.

“Pull down your pants,” Dad commanded.

Neither of them said another word. Dad arranged himself on the chair and pulled Karen across his lap. She was so big she didn’t fit. Dad had to squirm and wrestle to get her positioned right. Then he struck her with his belt again and again.

The stinging cracks made me tremble. I squeezed my eyes shut and wanted to put my hands over my ears, but I couldn’t move. I wasn’t strong like Karen. I’d do anything to avoid being hit like that. Inside, I felt like a whimpering dog crawling on its belly. I thought I might throw up.

Karen broke the silence with an inhuman bellow. I shot up and bolted out the front door.

On Christmas Eve we sang “Jingle Bells” and other Christmas songs with Dad at the piano, had cookies and hot chocolate, and went to bed. Finally, I thought as I shivered under my blankets, we actually managed to do something together as a family. We kids never believed in Santa Claus—Dad insisted on the truth right from the beginning—but I was still excited about what felt like the magic of Christmas.

In the middle of the night, an uneasy feeling woke me up. I rolled over to check the glowing dial on Karen’s alarm clock: nearly three o’clock. My eyes searched for a lump in Karen’s bed. No lump! It felt like a claw grabbed my throat; my heart somersaulted in my chest. Where was she? I’d worried lately that something might be wrong with Karen, but I hadn’t told anybody because I couldn’t say exactly why I felt that way, and I certainly didn’t want to get her in trouble. But at odd moments that sad, hollow look in her eyes scared me. Sometimes, I was tempted to go right up to those eyes and say, “Who is that in there? Is that you, Karen?” I worried that the answer might be “No.”

She’s probably just in the bathroom, I told myself, but I got out of bed cautiously. Maybe she’s sleepwalking or filling the stockings. I felt my way down the dark hall to the bathroom. The door was cracked open, and I gave it a nudge. Yes, I could see Karen in the glow of the nightlight, on her knees in front of the toilet making a gagging noise. Then she vomited. I put my hand over my mouth at the sound. Poor Karen! Sick on Christmas Eve. How awful.

I stood without twitching. I didn’t know whether to speak to her or not. I had the feeling that maybe she’d want to vomit in private. Finally, I decided to go back to bed. When Karen came in I’d sit up so she’d know I was awake. We could talk if she wanted to without her knowing that I’d seen her throw up.

I tiptoed back to the bedroom to wait. I waited for what seemed like a long time but by the clock was only about fifteen minutes, but she never came. Again, I was choked with some kind of dread or fear. I decided that maybe I should check on her. Maybe she was so sick she'd fainted or something. But no, when I peeked into the bathroom, no Karen. I inched down the hall, heading to the kitchen and living room.

Halfway through the kitchen, I knew somebody was in the living room. Something moved in the dark. My eyes strained to make out a shape, sweat prickling along my hairline.

Suddenly, the Christmas tree lights blinked on, and I could see Karen clearly, sitting on the floor in her nightgown, her back to me. With her legs curled under her, she looked small, like a little child. She began quietly opening gifts. As she worked, the tree lights reflected off the silver and red foil wrapping paper scattered on the floor, making the whole scene seem eerie and unreal. She was making a soft high-pitched sound, and I realized she was humming bits of her solo, the solo nobody in the family went to hear.

I didn't know whether to speak to her or not. I wasn't even sure she was actually awake.

Finally, I sneaked back to bed. I lay in the dark until Karen came. I sat up, but she didn't say anything to me. After awhile, I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

In the morning, I padded into the kitchen to find something to eat while I waited for everybody else to get up. When I threw away my orange peels, a bit of pink in the trash caught my eye. I shoved aside some garbage and uncovered a crushed pink bakery box, the kind cakes and donuts come in. The kind we never have at our house. Where had it come from? Why was it hidden in the trash? I had no idea.

"This year I get to play Santa Claus," Karen announced. She was dressed in her royal-blue satin robe and gold slippers, her hair brushed silky smooth, with just a touch of makeup on. Even though I'm her sister, I have to say, she looked beautiful.

"I think it's Peter's turn, though, isn't it?" said Mom gently. I could tell that she didn't want a fight to start. Peter shrugged. Apparently, he didn't care.

"I got to pass out gifts last year," I said, trying to support Karen's dibs. I studied the gifts under the tree, all wrapped exactly the way they'd been before Karen unwrapped them in the night. I searched Karen's face, but I couldn't find any clues in her eyes. She seemed totally normal, too, not at all sick.

"Well, does it make any difference as long as the job gets done?" said Dad. "Why don't I do it?"

I knew Karen felt stomped on by the way her face fell. "Can you say 'Ho, ho, ho,' Dad?" I asked, eager for everybody to be happy.

"I'm the best ho, ho, ho—er you ever heard, my wild-haired piglet."

As soon as Dad finished passing out all the gifts, everybody dug in.

"Open your gift from me," Karen urged. "I can't wait for you to see it." She placed the package in my hands, her eyes sparkling.

I wanted to rip the package open as fast as I could, but I made myself ease the red bow off and tuck it into Mom's bow box and then remove and fold the wrapping paper neatly so we could use it again next year. When I finally opened the box, I found snuggled inside a luxurious lemon-yellow sweater, just like the kind the popular girls in my class wore, just like the kind I'd wished a million times I could have and never dreamed of asking for.

"I made it for you myself," Karen said. She looked hugely pleased with herself, and if I'd made something even half that great, I would have been crowing to the world.

Her gift was so generous, for a moment I couldn't even speak. "Thank you," I finally managed to say. "I love it. It's perfect. Beautiful. How did you know?" I buried my face in the soft mohair.

Karen clapped her hands and laughed like a little child. "So, you like it?"

"I love it."

"Is the color all right? I think it shows off your complexion."

"It's perfect."

"You never even suspected, did you?"

"No. Never." How I wished I'd bought her more than a box of stationery and a pair of gloves.

Mom and Dad unwrapped a large heavy box, their gift from Karen. Karen cuddled up in her satin robe and watched them. All the gifts to her lay beside her, still wrapped. I suppose she wasn't in any hurry to open them because she already knew what was inside.

"Can you guess what it is?" Karen said, her purr so loud I could almost hear it.

"No," said Mom. "I can't imagine."

Dad cut the heavy strapping tape and pried off the lid. He dug through the shredded packing paper.

"Careful," Karen said, "they're breakable."

He held up a delicate white dinner plate edged in gold. Mom gasped.

"It's a complete set," Karen said. "There's even a meat platter and a soup tureen."

"But Karen," Mom protested, "this is fine bone china. You can't afford to give us a gift like this."

"I don't want you to save it for special occasions. I want you to use it every day and feel special. It's a setting for ten so you can have company, too. That band's real gold."

"But," Mom protested again, "bone china is fragile and expensive. It's not for every day."

Karen brushed away Mom's protests with a happy wave of her hand. "Dad, this gift's for both of you, not just Mom. I tried to pick a pattern that could be masculine or feminine. Unwrap some more. I want you to see the cups. The handles are gold."

By this time, Peter and the twins had stopped opening their gifts and sat perfectly still, watching. Everybody was quiet.

"I think we'd best not," said Dad, his lips thin and tight, his face stern. "These dishes must have cost several hundred dollars. You can't give a gift like this, sweetie. You mustn't."

"Our old dishes are good enough," Mom said. "I appreciate what you've done, though. Maybe we could each keep a cup and saucer or something."

"Nope. Send these back," said Dad. His hands shook as he wrapped the plate in its heavy gray cardboard and placed it back into the box.

I could tell he was mad, but I couldn't understand why.



*"Crucially, I can reveal character through places and symbols. I can reveal drama and conflict through composition, symbolism and juxtaposition."*

# OVER THE HALF HIDDEN SWARM OF TREES

PETER FITZWELL



Perhaps there was little else. Color exceeded the eye  
Fissures through the floor where the sky  
shone. We were two fields stripped grey down to tresses,  
old tree-tops

Beyond you, water, a crane grasped entire, where white planes brushed the  
snow sun You might call it death You might cut  
then through the meadow as it recedes, grows lighter before dazzling

I was told it is the way love moves the way kitchen lamplight meets  
a yellow edge. Each love remains undone, talking as your arms listened, hands  
pressed upon the table.



# ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTEEN DAYS

OLIVER KLOZOV

No part in the killing? He knew this was a lie. A lie so fat and revolting he waited for the quiet time when everyone was snoring and shouting in their sleep, smelling of cheap wine and farts and then he went into the bathroom, leant against the door to hold it closed and he hit himself. The chest first and then he worked up to where it hurt. He did not hit himself where they might see the bruises. He hit himself against the side of his head, the skull hidden beneath his heavy hair. He hit himself on his arms. Even in summer he wore a long-sleeved shirt, the same shirt he was wearing now. He washed it in the bathroom and put it over the radiator to dry in winter and in the sun in summer. Even if the shirt was still wet he wore it so he had the whole length of the arm to hit and no one could see. The stomach was good but he did not hit there too often because he could not stop the noise that came out of his mouth and they would hear him. The social workers, the outreach workers, trying do good with their soup and their narrow beds and their questions for which there were no answers, they would hear him. They did not allow locks on the bathroom door, they came to check all the rooms once an hour but a man could kill himself many times in an hour. He would not kill himself. That would be too easy. That would not be enough. He had seen what happened and if he died what he had seen meant nothing.

More coffee. Enough for one more coffee. Tomorrow he would go without. Tomorrow was never a day worth waiting for. Tomorrow he could walk into the road and wait for a car and he could turn and walk into it. Then you would see a dead man and maybe you would wonder who he was. Maybe you would open the inside pocket of his jacket and you would see her photograph.

He would not cry. He was strong. He had no tears left. He wondered why his heart still beat. So he could walk the streets until the doors of the shelter opened? He had walked enough. He had walked from his city to this city, walking even on the deck of the great ship that ferried him across the ocean. Only his feet knew exactly how many days it took him. He did not tell people which city he came from. If he did they would think he was one of them. He was not one of them. He was an ordinary citizen. He took no part in the killing.

—Can I get you something else?

—Yes. One more, he said. —Thank you, he added, but she was already gone, the espresso machine hissing in the dark.

She's young. Too young, he thought, watching her as she returned and placed the small white cup carefully on the table. He saw that she bit her fingernails and it touched him, this sore detail of her life. He should go away and not infect her with his madness, this too young waitress. She should be at home or at school she should be anywhere else other than near him. He should not be here. He should stay on his bed in the shelter but it was not allowed so he walked the streets and drank one coffee a day until they opened the doors. He tried to find a place where there were no people but he could not because the streets and cafés were never empty in a city where there was no war.

He could not sit here and enjoy a coffee while his people suffered. He would give his coffee money to the drunk on the corner of College and Bathurst. He would never sit here again. But first he would finish this cup. He did not want the girl to think he did not enjoy it.

He stared at the street at the people at the cars at the Pizza TakeOut on the other side. He did not notice when a woman sat at the table next to him. He was thinking this was his last coffee. He was thinking he had found a better way to punish himself. Bruises were nothing. Pain was nothing. But no more coffee? He smiled to himself and then he felt her and turned his head.

He could not believe her. She was more beautiful than Jasmina. No one was more beautiful than Jasmina, but this woman was. She smiled. No woman smiled at him. He did not count the prostitutes at Lansdowne and Bloor. They did not smile at him, they smiled at the money he did not have.

He did not want this woman, this beautiful woman, to smile. She was erasing Jasmina's smile. He stared at her although he knew this was not correct, not correct to look at a woman this way but he could not take his eyes off her. Stop, he thought, but still he could not turn away so he forced the face of Jasmina to replace the face of this woman with her white teeth and her pale gold hair and her blue eyes and her clear skin. The image of Jasmina and this woman became one and the woman was still smiling, her eyes were brown, her hair was brown, she bled from her head into her hacked-off fringe which stuck up in tufts and blood filled the rims of her eyes and still she looked at him while he was held down, made to watch and he thought, They are such stupid men, do they think I cannot watch my wife die? And Jasmina still smiled, her lip torn in two, her cheekbone showing through the blood, her front teeth smashed from her mouth but he knew her too well not to know she was saying, I love you I love you I love you, and then he was weeping and the woman with the gold hair had put her

hand on his arm.

—Are you all right? she asked, her voice like water, like the Drina when she's quiet.

—I'm sorry, he said.

—What are you sorry about?

—I have disturbed you.

—I am not disturbed, I'm fine. I cry all the time, she said.

He looked at her. He did not believe this woman had reason to cry. He was certain there was not a mark on this beautiful woman's body. What has she to cry about?

—The coffee is good here, he said. Such a stupid thing to say, he thought.

She laughed, her hand still on his forearm. She did not know there was a fresh bruise underneath. It hurt him and he was glad but then she took her hand away and waved to the waitress.

—Can we have, what are you having? she asked him.

—Please, no.

—Let me buy you a coffee.

His face flushed. He turned away. He could not let her see. He wanted to hit the table with his fist. He should be buying the coffee. He should be buying her "The Wedding of Smailagi Meho", a Gusle, poetry and music for this beautiful woman but he had spent his ration for the day. The rest was hidden in the lining of his suitcase in the locker at Union station. He should go there now, he should get the money but she'd be gone and he could not let her go and then he heard Jasmina's voice saying, I love you I love you I love you, and he thought he would vomit right there on the table.

—I'll have a cappuccino, the woman said, —and whatever he had, get him another.

The waitress is truly young, maybe fourteen, the woman thought, maybe her heart has not been crushed, not yet, maybe not ever and she will stay unbroken, maybe she will never see what I have seen and then the woman turned and saw the man, his fist uncurling.

—You are not from here, she said.

—No, he said, staring out the window. No, I am not from here.

—I'm not from here either, she said and she smiled because she saw him smiling, just a little. She thought of stars and outer space and she thought, I have never come from anywhere on this Earth not really, and she hoped he would not ask for details of where from not here she has come because it was not a story she

wanted to go into again.

–I'm from Venus, he said and they both burst out laughing, not looking at each other, looking across the road at the Pizza TakeOut, and she said,

–Well, me too, actually.

–It's hot there isn't it.

–I miss that heat.

–So why are you here?

–My ship got lost.

–Ah, that, he said. It happens.

–And you?

–I thought I'd have holiday.

–Not much of a place for a holiday.

–I expected something else.

They sat in silence for a while and then he said,

–But the coffee is good.

–Isn't Venusian coffee the pits? She could not finish the sentence without laughter in her voice and he turned to look at her and she saw a smile so ruined she was going to cry but she didn't, she touched her hair.

–You are beautiful, he said, not smiling anymore.

–Well the catalogue had a good choice. This one was on special.

He didn't get it and then he did and he threw his head back and laughed out loud, his thick black hair flapping up, his eyes squeezing shut. She saw laugh lines. This is a man who knew happiness, she thought, and then her stomach closed in, a fishing line of tears pulling up the back of her throat, and she said to herself, No, do not look back, do not look. The tears still pulled up and one drop fell to the corner of her mouth. She tasted salt. I am a pillar, she thought, I am nothing but salt and I will crumble right now but she did not for the young waitress was putting her cappuccino on the table.

–We have great apple cake, the girl said, brushing her damp strawberry hair out of her face. Freckles sprinkled on her skin like kisses, the woman thought, and she turned to the man who was watching her closely but then he looked away, embarrassed to be caught looking but she didn't mind, not at all. She had not felt beautiful for a long time.

–I'd love a slice but only if you share it with me, she said to him, and he could not answer. He had not eaten cake since Fo.

She saw his big hands knotting into each other, fingers curling and pressing,

black hair peeping out from underneath his white, not so white, shirtsleeves, the threadbare cuff.

–Let's have two slices, I'm hungry and I don't want to eat alone, she said.

And then she saw his hands redden as if a great burning filled his body and she thought, I've done the wrong thing, but it was too late, the girl had gone, her sandals tapping lightly on the wooden floor.

The woman felt the man's heat as if it were her own and she took it inside her because she was cold, always cold. She felt his breathing as if it were her own and she took a breath, his breath, and then she pulled way. It's not allowed, not allowed, she thought.

The woman sipped at her cappuccino. She pretended the milk froth was cinnamon—dusted but the part of her tongue which told her it was cinnamon and not chocolate did not function anymore. She could only taste salt, only her own salt, even her blood tasted of salt. She'd bitten into the flesh of her cheek, she'd bitten until it didn't hurt, she'd bitten until her body released no fluid, made no mark. Her skin refused to bear any visible sign of suffering. She looked shining and bright but it was a lie and a good lie because when she looked in the mirror she saw herself until she looked into her eyes and then she saw there was no one there at all. She should not be here talking to a stranger, taking his warmth, his breath, melting into his pain for it seemed a deeper one than hers and it would make her forget. Forgetting was not allowed. She was the one who bargained. She must pay up. Please, let him live, I'll do anything, she had bargained. Anything. Days crumpling into nights into days into months, she pleaded until Tom was out of ICU, off the critical list, back home, and then death said pay up and she did, for death took no prisoners. Maybe we should spend some time apart, he had said, holding her hand, and she knew he meant forever and she let him go and that forever was now, spiralling endlessly and the only hand she held was death's, his bones shards of glass splintering into her and she must leave before she touched this man again and made his wounds bleed.

–I'll never get used to the food here, the man said. The woman did not understand at first, did not hear, but then she did and it was as if he was talking to her through a wall of water. I can't swim, she thought, looking at him but he looked away, pulling down the sleeve of his jacket trying to cover his shirt and she pretended not to notice.

—Food goes in but you'd hardly know, she said.

—No nourishment, better to eat cardboard, he said, pointing to the young man coming out of the Pizza TakeOut holding a square box. —He should eat the box, not the pizza, it would do him more good.

She laughed and he was glad he made her laugh but then he was not for he heard something in her voice and it was not laughter.

—I could eat all day but I'm still hungry, she said. I'd do anything for a good Venusian stew. One of those sulphur dioxide ones, you know?

He looked at her and smiled and then he saw how thin she was and he had to hold up the corners his mouth as if he had not seen. He was surprised he had not seen. It was a thing he should have noticed in a beautiful woman. She was thinner than even Jasmina at the end and Jasmina had not eaten for a week.

The woman's thinness pulled him. His eyes followed the line of her neck down to the little pool between her collarbones. He pretended he was looking past her. He let his eyes glaze and blink but in fact he was looking through the filmy fabric of her blouse and he saw the bones of her chest as if he had x-ray vision and then he looked away because he had seen the white lace of her brassiere, he had seen the soft curve of her breast and he could not stop the other image, the one that stuck to him no matter how hard he punched himself, the image of Jasmina's breast lying on the concrete.

Jasmina saw him look, she held his eyes while they took her, she held his eyes while they entered her body. She held his eyes while she died and he could do nothing. They did not let him die when Jasmina died, her fading eyes telling him, It's all right it's all right. He was tied by foot and by hands and by chest, coarse ropes raking into his bare flesh. The ropes did not slice deep enough so he tugged at them until he bled. He tried to hit the back of his head against the wall they had set him against, but they did not let him, they pulled him away so all he could do was slump forward and try to smash his forehead into the ground and then they dragged him to the fence and tied him with wire for which he was grateful as it cut deeper than the rope but still he could not kill himself.

They did not let him cover her eyes with his kisses, no, they did not. They did not let him touch her, not one last touch. They took him away when the flies had darkened her body and they did not kill him. This he did not understand, until he did. Killing would be too kind, and they are not kind these men, they are not human and perhaps this is what it meant to be human, this unfathomable

violence that had eaten up his country like a forest fire. Like the plague, only the disease was man itself.

—It's good, the woman said, taking a bite of cake but he did not answer. He was staring at the red tablecloth and she wondered if he was not well, maybe she had chosen to sit by an insane person, this first time she had allowed herself out and already it was too long, she must get back to her room, she must get back to an enclosed space. She must get back to the telephone, Tom might have called, she should never have left her room, she should go now, and she stood up, looking for the waitress.

—You are leaving, he said, his voice falling softly upon her, like someone holding her and she had not been held, not since.

She could not remember being held by Tom after he got out of hospital. She could only remember lying in his cot, listening to the sounds of other almost-dying men in beds nearby, men also bleeding from the inside out. The night nurse had allowed her to lie next to him, helped her in, holding the tubes away so she would not pull them out. She whispered, I love you I love you I love you, into Tom's ear, hoping he would hear her, hoping he would feel her warmth, hoping he would hold her but he could not, he was thick with morphine, asleep in his own bleeding world and there was only the cardiac monitor to keep her company, a blue wave in the neon night.

—I must go, she said, and sat back down.

—Do you have far to go? he asked, his eyes on her ankles, such beautiful ankles, so fragile, so delicate. She should not be walking on those ankles, he thought, she should be carried home. She is not well, she is not well.

—I can't go back until my ship's navigation is fixed, so no, not so far today, she said, standing up again, brushing crumbs off her skirt.

—It's not really day anymore, he said, looking into the fading street.

—No, it's not.

—At home, he said, the days are so very long.

She looked at him, confused, and then she smiled. He could see in her face she did not know this and he felt proud that he knew something about Venus. That her days lasted one hundred and seventeen Earth days, and he thought to tell her but he did not.

—It's too late, I must go. Her voice was small, he could see the throb of her heartbeat in the vein at the side of her temple. Her skin was so thin she was transparent.



–I must get back before it's dark, she said, and thought, just go, fast as you can, go where it's safe, safer, but it's not safe at all, except the walls of her room would keep her in, without them she might leak right out of her skin. Maybe he called, maybe he called this time and then she told herself she was mad. Tom had not called for weeks, why would he call now? But still he might and if he did she'd have missed him, eating cake and drinking cappuccino with a man who was not him, not him at all, not even close.

–Let me walk you there, he said, standing up, his chair legs screeching against the floor. She was surprised at how short he was, she had expected a tall man from the width of his shoulders.

–No, no, it's fine, really, I'm fine, but he knew she was not. Her hand trembled as she paid the bill, she dropped coins on the floor, she bumped her head into the edge of the table as she tried to pick them up, the young waitress saying,

–Don't worry, I'll do that.

–I must go, she said, turning to him, wanting to tell him something more, wanting to put her head for a moment on those broad shoulders, wanting to tell him she's sorry she's such a mess, she's sorry she can't ask him to tell his story for she knows he has one, it bruises her like the tip of a knife. He had lived through a horror she is sure but she cannot not meet him there for there are some horrors that cannot be met.

–I will walk you, he said, pulling his jacket down at the back, feeling for crumples, patting them down, adjusting his shirt collar. He did not wear a tie, he wished he had, he has one, he thought to keep it fresh for, for what? It should have been for this day, for this woman who has shown him kindness but it was too late now, it lay silent in tissue paper underneath the letters Jasmina wrote when she was sixteen, when they fell in love and were not allowed to marry because she was Muslim and he was not, so they wrote in secret to each other until they ran away to Sarajevo and then to Foča, away to safety they thought, and it was, and then it was not, not safe at all. If he had followed his parents' wishes she would not be dead. I killed her, he thought, and he caught the thought in mid-air, keeping it for later when he could hide in the bathroom and hit himself with it. He concealed the thought in his fist because the woman was leaving and she must not go alone at night.

She walks fast for someone so tiny, he thought. I don't walk fast enough, she thought, but she was glad for his company, or was she, she didn't know anymore, all she could hear was the emptiness inside her, the room she must go to, the

long night ahead with no one, no one at all, not even herself for company. They turned a corner into a soft and leafy street and then she slowed and stopped.

–Here it is, she said, standing outside a white house, a beautiful white house, he thought, fitting for such a beautiful woman.

–This is yours? he asked. It is very fine.

–Oh, no, she said, I just rent a room there, that one, she pointed to the second floor, to a window half hidden by a slender birch tree.

–Just temporary, you know, until I get the navigation working, she said, wanting to get inside, not wanting to.

–Maybe I can help, he said. I'm an engineer, and then he blinked, wondering why he had said that, no one knew this here, he kept it secret that he was a skilled man, a man once important in his country, a man who had worked for the government until he realized what they wanted him to do so he had walked out and planted yellow onions with Jasmina instead.

–Oh, that's all right, I'll get it figured, she said and for a moment she felt lighter, she believed herself, yes she would get it figured, it would be all right, one day, and then the moment flitted away like a moth and she was hollow again. It was time to go inside and listen to the sound of nothing so she turned to him and looked him in the eyes, this was the least she could do for this kind man, this man who made her laugh, this man who took her pain away for a few minutes, longer minutes than she could remember.

He thought she was going to kiss him and he stepped back, he could not let her do that, it was not allowed, to kiss a woman ever again so he put his hand over hers and held it a moment hoping to make it warm but it stayed as cold as ice and he gently let it go and nodded towards her door, his eyes saying, Go, please go, and she did, turning once at the door, and then she was gone.

He stood on the sidewalk in the darkness. He waited. He thought she had lied to him about her room because the window did not light up. She is afraid of me, he thought, but then he saw something flicker in the window. A candle, she had placed a candle on the windowsill. He could see her move about in the room, like an angel he thought, and then she stood by the window looking out and he wondered if she could see him standing in the dark and then she raised her hand and he raised his, placing his other hand on his chest above his heart and he thought she did the same but he couldn't tell for sure and then she closed the curtains but still he could see her through them, she stood as straight as the white birch rustling in the rising breeze and he waited, watching over her,

watching until she blew the candle out and still he waited, just in case, just in case she needed him, but there was no more movement, nothing, and it was fully night, Venus twinkling low in the blue–black sky and he turned towards her, using her light to navigate his way to the shelter.